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**ROUGHLY &
FINELY-TUNED
INPUT IN
LANGUAGE
TEACHING**

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ROUGHLY AND FINELY TUNED INPUT IN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

From my own experience of learning and teaching languages in foreign countries, there is no doubt in my mind that contemporary theories of language and language education have reached the classroom. This is clearly demonstrated by an emphasis on communicative methods as opposed to formal grammatical teaching methods. The question is, how has this element of communication entered the classroom, and what sort of an impact does this have on classroom teaching methods? It is important for us first to examine briefly the primary methodologies which have affected teaching.

The greatest influence to language learning before the 1960s in the field of first language acquisition was the behaviourist approach. This concept emphasised learning through habit-formation based on a model of imitation, reinforcement and repetition where the student is asked to imitate, is reinforced by positive response and is thus encouraged to repeat the same action in real life. This can be compared to a laboratory rat who learns to press on a bar to get food, and is a clearly limited model for a teaching methodology. It has, however, been highly influential and still can be sensed in the attitude of teachers today. This 'behaviourist' theory posits that language is a 'form of behaviour', and is most clearly expressed in Skinner's work Verbal Behaviour (Skinner, 1957). The next important theoretical development that was to affect both contemporary linguistics and language education theories for years to come was introduced by Noam Chomsky. In 1959, Chomsky published a criticism of Skinner's work, which has become justifiably famous (Chomsky, 1959). In this work, he stated that language was not simple a "form of behaviour", but on the contrary "an intricate rule-based system" in which occurs naturally according to predetermined patterns (Harmer, 1991). Chomsky's rather extreme standpoint on the system-based nature of language learning was to have a great impact on the language teaching world, and Chomsky is still used as an important reference point from which later developments have been able to occur. These theoretical conceptions normally extended to Chomsky have been aptly titled 'cognitivism', and an important development for language education grows directly from Chomsky's work as expressed in the work of Hymes. He proposed a concept of 'communicative competence'

in reaction to Chomsky, and according to Widdowson “it is customary to present it as an improvement in that it covers aspects of language other than the narrowly grammatical. It accounts for the fact that knowing how to use a language involves more than knowing how to compose correct sentences” (Widdowson 1989). Hymes’ ‘communicative competence’ was to certainly affect contemporary language teaching methodologies, and can be defined as “the capabilities of a person [. . .] dependent upon both *knowledge* and [ability for] *use*.” (Hymes, 1972). These conceptions of a communicative competence as opposed to a grammatical competence were to find further and deeper expression in the work of Krashen, whose “Input Hypothesis” has arguably been one of the most influential of all language theories to the practical expression of the teaching of grammar to second language students (Krashen 1984). Krashen’s theories are important in that they present a contrast between language ‘acquisition’ and ‘learning’ in which language ‘learning’ is seen as being learning *about* a language and language ‘acquisition’ as the actual internalising of grammatical concepts. Krashen’s theories involved a new communicative emphasis based on the ‘natural’ acquisition of language, one which encouraged the internalisation of grammar occurring as a natural process as compared to the drilling of grammatical concepts which have been proved largely ineffective. These theories were to prove very important to language teaching in general, although it is important to demonstrate that the fact that teachers are now aware of this perspective does not mean they have to devote themselves completely to Krashen’s theories. His ideas can be easily used in combination with other methodologies to help individual students to acquire a language. The fact that the teacher now has these choices is perhaps the most important development.

Firstly, a closer discussion of Krashen’s theory and methodology. According to Harmer (1991, ch. 4) Krashen “saw successful acquisition as being very bound up with the nature of language *input* which the students receive.” This input should not only contain language that the students already ‘know’, but also elements that they have not previously seen. This attitude can be compared to the acquisition of L1 by children: parents speak in a language that is simplified, but obviously higher than the student’s level which begins of course as a blank slate. In this way, acquisition is seen to occur as a natural process in the individual and is recognised as being connected to unconscious structures existing in the brain, ready to acquire language following certain predetermined structures (influenced by Chomsky’s ‘cognitivism’). Krashen called this use of language ‘rough tuning’, and a marked contrast is presented to more traditional methods of grammar teaching where students receive *finely-tuned input* to learn clearly set out grammatical concepts. According to Harmer, finely-tuned input is “language which has been very precisely selected to be at exactly the students’ level” and “can be taken to

mean that language which we select for conscious learning and teaching.” (Harmer, 1991, ch. 4). Roughly-tuned input, in contrast, is based on the concept of natural ‘acquisition’, helping the students to unconsciously obtain an understanding of the language. These ideas were certainly to have an affect on contemporary language teaching, beginning with new ‘task-based learning methods’ in which students were never in fact ‘taught’ grammar but where it was simply assumed that the students would be able to naturally acquire the language through the performing of tasks that had no necessary relation to ‘language teaching.’ Teaching methods which were strongly influenced by such ideas of language acquisition have resulted in creation of new teaching methods. In Bangalore in Southern India, N.S. Prabhu, believing that students were “just as likely to learn structures if they were thinking of something else as they were if they were only concentrating on the structures themselves” is responsible for creating a revolutionary task-based learning method (Harmer, 1991).

The question for the teacher of today is the practicality of the expression of task-based ‘roughly-tuned’ input methods. Harmer (1991), in his work on the practice of English language teaching, recognises the important of Krashen’s input theory and its impact on teaching methods, but at the same time questions it because of the ambiguity of the sort of impact task-based learning has in the classroom: If two people are exposed to the same roughly-tuned input how will we know which of the students are going ‘acquire’ it? Can it actually be proved that grammatical concepts ‘learnt’ through finely-tuned input are not eventually ‘acquired’ in any case after repetition or practise? Would it not be more economical to use the contrasting conceptions of finely-tuned and roughly-tuned input in combination so that the students have a more clearly streamed syllabus? Harmer goes on to ask an important question “Is our teaching cost-effective?” (Harmer 1991, ch. 4). The contemporary teacher who has limited resources and often overcrowded classrooms, does not have any time to waste on the ambiguous use of roughly-tuned texts that may be interpreted by every different student in a different way (forming in the end limited learning coherence and unsatisfied syllabus requirements). He suggests that for practical use in the classroom communicative tasks and situations “can satisfactorily exist side by side with work which concentrates on conscious learning where new language is being introduced and practised.” This is of course a logical conclusion, and we are thus presented with a model of language learning in which the teacher is free to adopt a mixture of roughly-tuned texts with more traditional grammatical material. In this way, the roughly-tuned texts can be used by the teacher to demonstrate grammar which has already been represented using finely-tuned material in so that an economy of student time and effort can be used.

Fortunately, there has been methodological progress in this regard, developments that have had an impact on classroom teaching in which communicative activities play a role. Harmer is helpful in making some practical distinctions. According to Harmer, classroom activities can be divided into two broad categories: “those that give students language *input*, and those which encourage them to produce language *output*.” (Harmer, 1991, ch. 4). Language output can be divided into two further categories, *practice* in which students are asked to use new items of language in different contexts: activities are designed which promote the use of specific language or tasks, and *communicative output*, which refers to activities in which students use language as a vehicle for communication. Here the *task* performed is of utmost importance as compared to the practice of grammatical structures suggested in the first example of output. This way of looking at output can be compared to the finely and roughly-tuned concept of language *input*, because the former is based on acquisition and the latter on learning (drilling). Littlewood (1981), with his language teaching model adopting both *pre-communicative* activities which isolate specific elements of knowledge or skill, and *communicative* activities, where the learner has to activate and integrate his pre-communicative knowledge, proposes a model which can be directly compared to Harmer’s. Here we are presented with a model in which both *roughly* and *finely tuned* input can be adopted for the teaching of language in the classroom, suggesting streams of thought affecting contemporary English language teaching. This brings us finally to Harmer’s *balanced activities approach* (Harmer, 1991, ch. 4). Such an approach “sees the job of the teacher as that of ensuring that students get a variety of activities which foster acquisition and which foster learning.” According to Harmer, communication activities involved with roughly-tuned input would “tend to predominate over controlled language presentation and practise output”, but should not by any means exclude more traditional uses of *finely-tuned* material. This balanced activities approach seems to me the most practical of all suggested for the contemporary teacher.

It is clear, then, that the teacher of today would have the tendency to adopt teaching methods using both the *finely-tuned* and *roughly-tuned* teaching model. Through my own experience, of learning foreign languages in a classroom situation, the more informed the teacher the greater the presence of roughly-tuned exercises to help the students to naturally acquire the grammatical concepts presented in the more theoretical side of the lesson. In my opinion, the degree to which *roughly-tuned* activities should take precedence over the more *finely-tuned* depends to a great degree on factors relating to the students: the students determine in any case what they are going to make of teaching material, and the amount of contrasting ‘teaching situations’ are simply uncountable. There is, however, no doubt that the practicality of the inclusion of the two contrasting types of exercises has been well and truly accepted into general use in the classroom.

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