
There is nothing so practical as a good theory *

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Abstract

Many teachers feel that the 'theoretical' component of their teaching courses or books on teaching has been useless to them, and that they have profited a lot more from 'practical' tips and ideas. I would like to argue that the kind of theory they have found useless are what I would call 'bad' theory: theory that doesn't translate into practice. A good theory generates an enormous amount of practice. A practical idea, in contrast, is only one classroom tip, which may work well when used, but is limited because it only applies to itself; once you've done it, you have no further to go. In other words, practical tips are of limited practical use: but the practical use of a good theory may be infinite (hence the title of this article). This paper begins by giving some preliminary definitions of 'theory' and 'practice' and then amplifies on and illustrates the claim 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory' by examples drawn from the author's teaching experience.

What is 'practical input'?

'Practical' guidelines are ones that give you things to do about defined, specific situations: classes, individuals, materials or procedures.

Here are some examples:

- If you break a piece of chalk before using it, it won't squeak on the blackboard.
- Prepare your lessons the night before; if you prepare them earlier, you'll probably have to redo them the night before anyway.
- Use green pens to correct students' work rather than red.
- 'Jigsaw listening' is a way of organising student interaction. The students are put into groups, where each group learns about one component of the 'target' story or informative discourse. They then regroup so that each new group has at least one member from each of the original groups. They share their knowledge to reconstruct the complete story or information.

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- Give group-work instructions to students before actually dividing them into groups, not after.
- Don't 'tell' your class grammatical rules; elicit them from the students themselves.
- Don't smile till Chanuka.

A 'good' tip is one which is clearly applicable in practice and which you think will be helpful in solving a specific problem. A bad one, conversely, is one you don't see how to apply and/or you don't think it would solve anything anyway.

Whether or not you consider the examples given above 'good' or 'bad' tips, they are all arguably the kind of thing that is meant by the teachers who say 'we want practice, not theory'. They are immediately translatable into action, and could easily become automatic routines.

But they are 'dead ends'. Once you have broken your chalk to get the noiseless blackboard writing, that's it, there is nothing further to be learnt from the chalk-breaking tip. Once you have decided to use green pens, there is nothing further to be learnt. Neither of these helps you with any other aspect of your teaching than the particular act they relate to. And the same sort of thing is true for the others.

This is because they typically give you no reasons for doing them. They are 'surface' routines, based on successful past experience perhaps, but not building in any cause-and-effect reasoning or background generalities which might explain why such routines are productive – because such background generalities are, of course, theoretical.

One result of this lack of underlying rationale is that the teacher has no criteria by which to judge which of two or more practical alternatives is preferable for them in a particular situation. How, for example, will a teacher decide, if the textbook says to use 'jigsaw' organisation for a discussion activity whether in fact this would be most productive in this particular class, or whether it might be better to do the activity as a full class debate, or as group or pair work? If the teacher has never discussed in class the various kinds of organisation and their various advantages and disadvantages in principle (and as soon as you say 'principle' you are into theory) – then they will probably not even be aware of alternatives, let alone be able to judge between them, and will just do what the textbook says or what they have seen others do.

Linked to this is another negative result of the lack of underlying rationale: the disempowering of the trainees. If they are simply given tips and not encouraged to discuss the whys and wherefores, advantages and disadvantages in general – then they are being denied the right to rethink, criticise and adapt. They can only accept

or reject: and, being in the position of new entrants into the profession, they are likely to accept. Basing a course on practical input alone is the best way to disempower the teacher as a professional, and turn them into no more than an obedient functionary or technician.

So practical ‘tips’ are very limited in their contribution to good practice because they are ‘dead ends’, because they provide no criteria for choosing between alternatives and because they disempower the beginning professional. A fourth problem is that each such ‘practical tip’ only covers a minute fraction of what teaching involves. You’d need a million ‘tips’ like this to cover all eventualities of teaching, and even then you’d miss some. It’s just inefficient to try to teach or learn a teacher’s job through practicalities alone.

The job of theories is essentially to solve these problems: to state ideas in such a way that the teacher isn’t then stuck in a dead end but their feet set on a road which leads to innumerable further destinations; to enable informed and thoughtful choice between options; to empower the professional; to enable efficient and effective learning of language pedagogy.

What is theory?

A theory is a general statement about a set of concrete phenomena (practice). It may be either descriptive or explanatory. Descriptive theory makes complex phenomena understandable by defining their component parts. For example, ‘a nuclear family is composed of a mother, a father and children’.

An explanation makes complex phenomena understandable by not only naming their components but also by showing how these components relate to one another in a rule-governed way, and introduces an element of causality. A family, for example, according to classic Marxist theory, is essentially an economic unit: people marry, have children and live together because this helps to ensure their economic survival in a capitalist society. The ‘nuclear family’ example is a theoretical description; the Marxist proposition (whether or not you agree with it!) is explanatory proposition, nearer to what most people would understand by the word ‘theory’.

The first is often encapsulated in a single noun phrase (‘nuclear family’ or in our own field, ‘language acquisition’, ‘teacher development’); the second is normally expressed as a sentence which makes a claim as to these concepts (the Marxist theory of families, as expressed above; or, perhaps nearer home, Kashen’s Input hypothesis). However, the point should be made that the use of descriptive theoretical concepts, even without contextualising them within a proposition, often actually does make a statement. Where such concepts are an objective definition of a very common observable phenomenon like ‘the nuclear family’ they may be non-controversial, and pass without comment, their propositional quality not obvious. However,

others may imply a belief on the part of the speaker. Such concepts may be either positive or negative. Compare the use of the term ‘broken home’ with that of ‘one-parent family’ to refer to what is in the real world in fact the same thing: an implicit evaluative statement is being made about a real-world phenomenon.

To apply this idea nearer home: in our field of ELT, a term such as ‘language practice’ is no longer merely an objective term referring to certain types of classroom activity: it carries with it implications of audiolingualism, or the presentation-practice-production paradigm, or, more recently, skill-based language learning. So the word would rarely be used by proponents of a task-based or other very communicative methodology, except perhaps in order to criticise the concept it represents. Anyone who refers frequently to ‘language practice’ in their professional discourse (such as myself!) is making a statement about how they believe languages are taught and learned. We might call such theories embedded in terminology ‘implicit’: they aren’t stated explicitly, but the listener may justifiably infer them from the way they are used by the speaker.

The second kind of theory I mentioned earlier, the explanatory, might, in contrast, be called ‘explicit’. It suggests causal or other relationships between phenomena, it lays out hypothetical patterns or ‘laws’. It is usually expressed frankly in a proposition, which can often be restated as a predictive ‘if ...then’ sentence covering a wide area of experience. Since this is what people in our field usually mean when they talk about ‘theories’, I shall focus on this definition from now on.

Here are some examples from our own field. Again, you may or may not agree with them.

1. The Input Hypothesis (Krashen 1985): if you provide learners with plenty of comprehensible input at a level just above their present knowledge of the language, they will acquire the language better than if they are made to speak or write in production-oriented activities.
2. The Natural Order Hypothesis (Pienemann, 1989) : there is a Natural Order of acquisition of grammatical structures; learners acquire them in this natural order, regardless of teaching. So if you teach a ‘later’ structure too early, it will not be acquired.
3. Skill theory: procedural knowledge is achieved through automatization of declarative knowledge. In other words, you will learn the language well if you get plenty of opportunities to automatize language items and structures through practising what you have been taught as rules.
4. Much/ many (grammar): *How much?* is used to ask about the quantity of an uncountable, singular noun; *How many?* to ask about the quantity of a countable, plural noun.

5. Task-based discussions (Ur, 1981): When you talk in real life, you have some purpose in doing so (to convince, advise, problem-solve, etc.); so oral activities based on tasks that involve such purposes produce more talking than ones based on topics.
6. An optimal environment for communicative language learning is provided by tasks, where the language learning task is defined as ‘one of a set of differentiated, sequencable, problem-posing activities involving learners and teachers in some joint selection from a range of varied cognitive and communicative procedures applied to existing and new knowledge in the collective exploration and pursuance of foreseen or emergent goals within a social milieu’ (Candlin, 1987).
7. The younger the better (Popular): Young children learn languages best: the older you get the worse you are at learning new languages.

These theories express an attempt by their author to make sense of a set of observable phenomena, in a way that accords with their own opinions. Note that nobody is completely objective in so doing. Theories aren’t created as a result of experiment or observation; on the contrary, as Popper (1963) noted, you can’t actually observe or experiment effectively at all unless you have some kind of hypothesis, however rudimentary, to start with. The function of experiment, reflection and observation is to test, criticise and refine or reformulate such hypotheses so they get nearer and nearer the truth.

What is a ‘good’ theory of this type?

There are various criteria for ‘good’ theory in the literature; the list below is derived from my own understanding of three main sources (Popper, 1963; Huberman and Miles, 1994; Swan, 1994).

Plausibility: it appears to accord with data / experience. Some people would substitute the simpler term ‘truth’ here; but truth is very difficult, if not impossible, to establish conclusively, so I would rather content myself with verisimilitude, or ‘plausibility’. It’s true as far as we can judge from observation, experience, common sense and rational argument. But tomorrow someone may come and produce evidence that casts doubt on it. For example, Krashen’s input hypothesis has an intuitive plausibility, and he can quote research that supports it. However, other scholars have produced evidence that it isn’t true, or that it is at best an over-simplification (Spada, 1997).

Simplicity and parsimony: it explains the phenomena in the simplest way possible, avoiding complicated ramifications. The ‘younger is better’ theory, though it

may be deficient from other points of view, is admirably simple. Complicated theories, by their very nature, cannot be reproduced in the list above: but one example might be the theory of 'linguistic imperialism' proposed by Phillipson in his book of that name (1992).

Explicitness: it can be stated in clear and comprehensible terms. This is important because if a theory can't be clearly communicated to others it can't benefit anyone else or be tested out in different circumstances. And if it can only be stated incomprehensibly, then it can't be communicated. Most of the examples above accord with this criterion; no. 6 is an example of one that doesn't.

Comprehensiveness and demarcation: it's clear what it applies to and what it doesn't. A general theory which sometimes applies and sometimes doesn't is no good to anyone unless we know exactly where, when and why it applies, or doesn't. The 'Natural Order' hypothesis for example is pretty useless because nobody has proposed and validated a thorough summary of the 'natural order' of all the grammatical structures. We don't know which structures it applies to when, nor do we know under what circumstances it might not apply.

Explanatory, predictive and generative power: it clearly applies to observable phenomena, so can be used to explain what's going on, predict what'll happen next or provide a basis for innovation. This is the crucial 'usefulness' criterion which makes a theory 'practical'. For example, the 'how much/how many' rule is useful in teaching grammar; I have found my 'task-based discussions' theory very useful in devising discussion activities.

Testability, falsifiability, modifiability: you can try it out; and if your results show it's wrong (at least in your context) then you can reject it; or if you need to change it, you can. For example, the Natural Order hypothesis is virtually impossible for a practising teacher to test out, so it isn't a good theory from this point of view; whereas my 'task-based discussions' theory I have been able to try out lots of times, and as a result developed further my understanding of its implications and limitations.

Rod Ellis (1997, p. 103) adds the aspect of 'aesthetic appeal' which is an additional 'bonus' for a theory, but not, I think, essential. It means that a theory is appealing because it sounds nice, is expressed in pleasing and compelling metaphor. Vygotsky's 'zone of proximal development' might be an example of this, with its neat spatial metaphor to express an aspect of cognitive development.

So what are the 'best' theories?

Arguably, the best theories for trainees are the ones they work out for themselves. But they shouldn't have to reinvent the wheel all the time, it would take far

too long: why shouldn't they get benefit from what other teachers have discovered before them? But they must, at some point, try out these 'external input' theories for themselves; otherwise they remain what Whitehead (1929) famously called 'inert ideas'.

The bad theories are the ones our trainees hear about in courses but don't or can't apply to their own practice. This may be the theory's fault: it's simply, in itself, a bad one, by one or more of the criteria described above. Or it may be the trainees' fault: they don't understand it, or can't be bothered to make the effort to work out how to apply it. It may be the fault of circumstances – the courses are so designed that trainees have no access to classrooms or other contexts for trying things out. Or it may be our, the trainers' fault: we aren't making the theory-practice link clear enough, not providing opportunities, even in our own sessions, of clarifying the implications.

The place of practical tips

I am not denying that you need to learn lots of practical tips. This is occasionally because some are simply not 'covered' by theory – they are isolated bits of practice which you just need to know in themselves (for example the 'break the chalk' one). But it is mainly, I believe, because practical techniques are the 'way in' to the understanding of theoretical concepts and propositions that in their turn will generate thousands more practical techniques.

Good theory expresses itself in a wealth of practical techniques, and can only be learned and understood through them. This is why the organisation of some University-based teacher-training courses is so inadequate for effective teacher learning. They give trainees theoretical courses in the University and then send them out to schools to gain 'practical experience'. But what the trainees need is the integration of theory and practice: when they are told, or create themselves, a theory, they need to have immediate opportunities to see how it works in practice or to try it out for themselves. When they perceive a practical technique that looks good and makes sense, they need time to work out why, and what the implications are for further practice.

For example look at the 'folk wisdom' teaching maxim 'Don't smile till Chanuka'. This looks like a surface, practical tip. In my experience, there is a lot of truth in it. But when you start discussing it with colleagues or reflecting on it yourself, you start appreciating the wealth of theory about teacher/student relationships and classroom management that underlies it. Through such appreciation you are enabled not only to reject or accept or adapt the original tip; you are also enabled also to enhance your classroom management in all sorts of other ways. So the tip itself has served as a 'way in' to understanding, learning and criticising the theory; and from there to the generation of further 'tips'.

So you could conclude that there is nothing so theory-oriented as a good practical tip; and conversely – to return to the title of this article - there is nothing so practical as a good theory.

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