

Language teaching and the postmethod era: A critical view of current ELT theory

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Swan, Michael (2012). *Thinking about language teaching: Selected articles 1982-2011*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 230 pages, ISBN 978 0 19 4424813

Overview

Thinking about language teaching is a selection of Michael Swan's articles that were published between 1982 and 2011. The articles provide insight into the issues Swan has considered most debatable in ELT in the past thirty years. The importance of grammar teaching and a critical view towards the Communicative Approach are among the main topics that the book covers. The issues are discussed in both serious and light-hearted tones, as the theoretical papers in the first part are followed by satirical pieces in the second.

Language teaching has gone through considerable changes over the last three decades. Among these changes are a skeptical view of methods and the welcome of the 'postmethod era', along with a broad acceptance of the Communicative Approach in academic circles. However, Swan finds these tendencies rather dogmatic that lack proper theoretical underpinnings and which focus on issues that are not central to language teaching, resulting in the neglect and distrust of valuable methods in ELT. Swan proposes a renewed interest in how language items could be best taught and how language teaching could be seen as it is, i.e. the teaching of a language (p. 57).

Content and analysis

The book contains two parts: in the first one pedagogic and academic articles are presented in a chronological order, while in the second one satirical pieces can be read. In front of each article, Swan wrote a brief note explaining both what triggered him to write the article and what responses the article received. These summaries provide a chance for the author to comment on his own work, occasionally even apologizing for a polemic tone (p.1). Indeed, the first two articles entitled *A critical look at the Communicative Approach* (I and II) introduce strong arguments against the Communicative Approach (cited in this reviews' Overview), which received a riposte *Against dogma: a reply to Michael Swan* from Henry Widdowson in the subsequent issue of the same journal. A merit of the present selection is that this riposte is included as well, providing a chance for the reader to obtain a more balanced view of the topic.

The following articles among the pedagogic and academic ones, although colourful in topics, continue to illustrate Swan's stance that was made clear in the first two articles. In *Language teaching is teaching language*, Swan argues for rehabilitating instruction and the selection of clear and language related goals for effective teaching. He does so by contrasting prominent topics of debate such as instruction versus natural acquisition and learner independence, task-based syllabus versus lexical syllabus, or in short, teaching versus doing, product versus process. In *Teaching grammar – does grammar teaching work?* Swan questions the notion advocated by pioneers of the communicative approach that declarative knowledge of grammar does not build into procedural knowledge. Then, he provides guidelines for practicing teachers to teach grammar effectively. In *We do need methods*, Swan provides an account on how the pendulum swung from the period of the proliferation of methods in ELT to the postmethod era, which – in the author's words– is a "complex centrifugal muddle" (p.165). Swan claims that many of the issues that are currently discussed in ELT tend to be peripheral to language teaching itself, including learner characteristics, autonomy, teacher cognition, societal needs and self-fulfillment, just to quote a few. In his conclusion, the author makes a "plea for common sense" (p.178), listing in nine points how, provided the chance, he would and would not want to learn Hungarian. Among the points are a need to be taught grammar even before intermediate level, a reluctance to negotiate meaning with fellow beginners about grammar, and little interest in seeking self-fulfillment during the lessons.

Besides the theoretical studies, some papers cater practical ideas for teaching, for instance *The textbook: bridge or wall?* or *Using texts constructively*. Behind both articles lies a desire to have more cost-effective work in classrooms making good use of texts, however unsuitable course book texts might be. Swan proposes ideas for intensive input-output work, where a clear purpose of the tasks makes maximum use of the language conveyed through the texts, as opposed to having activities and a lot of 'doing' but unclear aims.

In subsequent articles, Swan continues to value recent tenets and examine those tenets' pedagogical implications as well. In *History is not what happened: the case of contrastive analysis. A follow-up to Claire Kramsch's review of Linguistics across Cultures*, Swan refutes arguments against contrastive analysis and points at the relevance of investigating cross-language influence on language learning. Thereby, he rehabilitates the examination of similarities and differences between the mother tongue and the foreign language when it comes to learning grammar. In *Talking sense about learning strategies*, Swan critically quotes current lists of learning strategies and argues against excessive strategy training. He questions for instance whether teaching compensatory strategies in reading makes more sense than actually teaching more vocabulary. Another interesting piece is *Where is the language going?* written in 1985, which "anticipated later discussions of English as a Lingua Franca" (p.36) and made some modest predictions about the future of English language, most of which seem to have come true.

In part II, short satirical pieces are collected. For instance, one may read Pauline's letter *Notes from the broom cupboard* about the not so ordinary lives of English teachers, or *The use of sensory deprivation in foreign language teaching* as a the latest method in EFL. In *Trajectories of identity construction*, an experiment is demonstrated where the 'dynamic-topological', the 'narrative-identity' and the 'integrated-constructional' groups are measured against each other, with, to the researchers' surprise, the control group doing the best in language related skills. *PIGTESOL 2007*, an imaginary account of a teachers' conference with topics such as 'Put that

empty bottle into communicative use!’ or ‘ZZZ-pros and cons’ may as well entertain us. These articles, however, as Swan puts it in the foreword to part II, are intended also to point to “the fair amount of nonsense around in our profession” and “highlighting the weaknesses of a ridiculous line of thought more effectively than rational confrontation” (p.202).

Overall

Michael Swan’s *Thinking about language teaching: Selected articles 1982-2011* can be interesting for those who know some of Swan’s work, for instance his widely used grammar books, and would like to see the person and his thoughts behind the rules. Also, practicing language teachers and researchers alike can benefit from the book, as Swan’s articles are easy to digest, theory never loses contact with pedagogy yet theory is discussed savvily, with a respectably comfortable navigation among doctrines. However, the articles’ contents become rather predictable after a while, as apart from Widdowson’s brief response, there is not much reevaluation or refutation of prior views on Swan’s side. Still, in the ‘postmethod era’ we are living today, such a massive antidote might be sobering.