

**ADULT ESL: CURRENT COMMUNICATIVE APPROACHES**

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## Abstract

Adult English learners comprise a large segment of the population that enrolls in education programs in Canada. There has been an increased need for education programs that will meet the increased demand for English as a second language (ESL) instruction. The foci of this project are an examination of adult English language learners and the current ESL instructional methods employed. This project first provides an overview of adult ESL and adult learners, the principles of adult learning theory and second language acquisition theory, and implications for learning and teaching. Next, the project provides an historical background of the search for a language teaching methodology leading to a focus and exploration of contemporary communicative approaches to language teaching appropriate for adult ESL learners. Lastly, a discussion of the post-methods era is considered with an emphasis on formulating an informed, eclectic approach.

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## Introduction

### Background and Rationale to the Project

My interest in this topic began while I was working with ESL learners at the college level. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience of working with them; however, I was lacking in my knowledge and understanding of effective teaching approaches in current adult ESL instruction. In order to obtain a better understanding of current language teaching approaches, I required the information and knowledge to be able to make informed and educated choices in regards to the learning needs of adult ESL learners. Essentially, I desired to learn which methods proved to be most effective so that I might become a more successful teacher. Thus, I am doing this project for very personal and practical reasons, but also for other prospective second language teachers who wish to learn more about various current adult ESL teaching approaches, so that they too can learn to make educated, informed choices in relation to their teaching.

## Adult English Language Learners

### Adult ESL and Adult ESL Learners

Adult English as a second language (ESL) is the term used to describe English language instruction for adults who do not speak English; it is also used to describe the various types of instructional programs or services for adult ESL learners (National Center for ESL Literacy Education [NCLE], 2001). “Unlike general adult education, adult ESL instruction targets English language and literacy proficiency needs rather than broader educational needs” (NCLE, 2001, What Is ESL? section, para. 7). Instructional programs or services vary in scope and content. Some programs, especially for recent immigrants, emphasize survival or life skills in the curriculum and focus on oral proficiency (NCLE, 2001). “Others stress vocational or work-related topics, citizenship and civics education, [basic and] family literacy, or academic or GED preparation” (NCLE, 2001, What Types of ESL Programs Are There for Adults? section, para. 2). Instructional programs serve a variety of adult learners: some may be highly-educated, credentialed learners, other learners may not be educated or even literate in their native languages, and other adult learners fall between the two categories (NCLE, 2001). “Classes are provided by local educational agencies, community colleges, local businesses and unions, community-based organizations, volunteer groups, churches, and for-profit language schools” (NCLE, 2001, What Types of ESL Programs Are There for Adults? section, para. 3).

Adult ESL learners want to improve their lives as individuals and family and community members. Participants in adult ESL classes give a number of reasons for enrolling in classes: “to improve general English language competence; to address

personal, family, or social needs; to meet work demands or pursue better employment; or to further their education” (National Center for Education Statistics, 1995; Skilton-Sylvester & Carlo, 1998, as cited in NCLE, 2003, p. 8). Most adult ESL students are immigrants who are learning English and learning about Canadian culture at the same time.

Although many adult ESL students often share similar characteristics, each one is a unique individual, and as a result, they may be very different from each other. Differences among learners include variations in native language, socio-economic status, age, educational background, work histories, degree of literacy, cultural practices, ethnicity, goals, immigration status, length of time in Canada, and personal experiences and characteristics (NCLE, 2003). Robinson and Selman (1996) point out that “students’ personal characteristics involve their physical and emotional well-being, as well as their language-learning ability, styles and strategies” (p. 11). All of these factors can affect their learning in the classroom. For example, if learners have had little or no formal education, they may lack the necessary skills and abilities to participate actively in classroom activities and will probably need to acquire basic learning skills.

Learner populations served in adult ESL classes are diverse. No class is a simple homogeneous group in any sense. It is not uncommon to find refugees, immigrants, farmers, the elderly, single women, married men with dependent families, people learning to read for the first time, and university-bound students all in the same adult ESL classroom (NCLE, 2003).

The students in an adult class are usually working people. Students with work experience may possess education, training, and skills that will benefit them in their

learning. Others may be unemployed and they may be in search of further education and training to prepare themselves for the job market. Students who have no work history may need to consider job training as well as learning English. Alternatively, those who haven't worked and don't plan to will most likely be uninterested in work-related themes presented in a class setting (Robinson & Selman, 1996).

The range of age, competencies, and learning goals of the students can affect the learners' participation and progress in class. The ages of ESL adult students in a class may range widely from eighteen to sixty-five (Heaton, 1979). This factor can affect not only their interests, priorities, and learning goals but also the speed at which they learn. According to Robinson and Selman (1996), "students' competencies are affected by their exposure to English and formal language-learning opportunities as well as their aptitude for language-learning" (p. 11).

Adult ESL learners face many personal challenges. Often, when people move to a new country or region, they may find themselves unprepared to handle simple everyday tasks because of the language barrier. When simple tasks suddenly become difficult or impossible because of the language or cultural barriers they encounter, their self-confidence and self-esteem may suffer (Robinson & Selman, 1996). Other personal challenges include the "lack of a job; inability to land a job equal in status to the one held in their country of origin; lack of the personal support systems provided by family and friends; and responsibility for an extended family" (Robinson & Selman, 1996, p. 8).

In adult ESL classes, factors affecting class attendance for many students make the idea of being able to progress in an orderly manner challenging. Because of job transfers, family responsibilities, or a return home, some students may drop out midway



through a course or at the end of a semester (Heaton, 1979). Furthermore, motivation to learn and attend class regularly may be difficult for those students who may not have chosen to leave their home country or attend language classes (Robinson & Selman, 1996). Often the result is that the student class list will change from the beginning of the course till the end (Heaton, 1979).

Adult ESL learners face a variety of personal and cultural factors in adjusting to a new homeland. As Heaton writes, “The [complexity and] variety of students’ needs demand the utmost of the teacher’s understanding of our immigrant subcultures as well as the maximum resourcefulness in using appropriate methods for dealing with a variety of learning [situations]” (1979, p. 279).

### Culture and Adult Language Learning

Culture and language are closely related. According to Robinson and Selman (1996), “[culture] includes assumptions and expectations about attitudes and behavior and affects the content or meaning we choose and the way we express it” (p. 15). The difficulties and challenges intrinsic in learning a new language and settling into a new country can be compounded by cultural differences that adult learners do not understand (Robinson & Selman, 1996). In short, “learning a new language involves learning about (but not necessarily wholeheartedly embracing) new ways of thinking, feeling, and expressing” (Florez & Burt, 2001, What Do Instructors Need to Know about Culture and Working with Multicultural Groups? section, para.1). As a result, this process can exert incredible pressure and anxiety on adults who have a clearly developed sense of self in their own native language and culture (Florez & Burt, 2001). Ullman (1997) suggests that

because immigrants are, to varying degrees and not always consciously, re-configuring their views of themselves in relation to a new social context, they may at times be ambivalent, confused, or even hostile to the process of adapting to a new culture. (as cited in Florez & Burt, 2001, What Do Instructors Need to Know about Culture and Working with Multicultural Groups? section, para. 1)

Because culture is closely tied to language, variances in adult ESL learners’ educational experiences and differences in cultural factors can affect classroom dynamics. For example, many adult ESL learners are more familiar with teacher-centred classrooms in contrast to a more learner-centred ESL classroom. They may not be used to participating actively in class. It may take time for learners to become comfortable in a classroom environment where their participation is expected and encouraged (NCLE,

2001). Resistance may also be encountered when students are expected to develop goals and work in groups with other learners. In addition, adult ESL learners may resist the life-skill educational programs that are prevalent in many adult ESL programs (Florez & Burt, 2001). “Coming from cultures where learning is a high-status, academic endeavor, they may expect a more academically oriented environment” (Hardman, 1999, as cited in Florez & Burt, 2001, How Do the Principles of Adult Learning Apply to Adult English Language Learners? section, para. 4). Also, adult ESL students may be used to responding quite differently to a teacher in the classroom. “In some cultures, teachers have an elevated status as authority figures and the holders of knowledge” (Robinson & Selman, 1996, p. 9). When presented with a question, students customarily stand to respond. Furthermore, some adult ESL learners may be unfamiliar and uncomfortable with classroom situations that involve men and women of diverse cultures, languages, age, and socio-economic status. This complex mix of learners, however, can provide positive opportunities for sharing and learning (NCLE, 2001).

Promoting cultural understanding, cultural tolerance, and cross-cultural communication in a safe, comfortable environment is very important. Devoting class time to discussing cultural differences, in an atmosphere of mutual respect, is crucial in helping both students and teachers navigate their way in a new language and culture. Students and teachers can become more culturally sensitive by familiarizing themselves with other cultures in order to better understand different perspectives and expectations both inside and outside the classroom.

### Principles of Adult Learning Theory and Implications for Learning and Teaching

The field of adult learning was pioneered by Malcolm Knowles (1984, as cited in Lieb, 1991; Spencer, 1998). His principles of adult learning are applicable to planning instruction for adult English language learners. When working with adult ESL learners, teachers should reflect on how Knowles' adult learner characteristics are filtered through culture, language, and experience (Florez & Burt, 2001). The following is a summary of the principles of adult learning with implications for learning and teaching:

- Adults tend to be autonomous and self-directed in their learning. By allowing adult learners the freedom to direct themselves in their own learning, meaningful learning can occur. Instructors must actively engage adult students in the learning process by involving learners and learner input in planning and selecting topics, language, and materials (Lieb, 1991). Teachers can help guide “participants to their own knowledge rather than supplying them with facts” (Lieb, 1991, Adults as Learners section, para. 2). Opportunities for meaningful learning can happen when students are able to work on projects that reflect their interests and assume responsibility for presentations and group leadership (Lieb, 1991).
- Adults have reservoirs of experience that can serve as a rich resource for learning. Instructors must acknowledge, draw, and build upon the wealth of life experiences, knowledge, and language that adult participants bring to the classroom. In doing so, teachers can help to connect learning and make it relevant to the topic being studied (Lieb, 1991). By inviting adult ESL learners to share their knowledge, expertise, and experiences with others in the class, they are able to generate the language they have already developed and continue to build on

that knowledge base (Holt, 1995).

- Adults' readiness to learn is usually associated with the need to know or do something or a transition point in their life (Draper, 1998; Sipe, 2001; Tice, 1997; Titmus, 1999, as cited in Kerka, 2002; Imel, 1989). Adult learners are motivated to seek out a learning experience mainly because they have a practical use for the knowledge or skill being acquired (Zemke & Zemke, 1984). Lieb writes that "they may not be interested in knowledge for its own sake" (1991, Adults as Learners section, para. 6). Adult learners will sometimes seek out learning experiences in order to deal with specific life-changing events, for example, obtaining a new job, losing a loved one, or moving to a new city (Zemke & Zemke, 1984).
- Adults tend to be goal-oriented (Lieb, 1991). Instructors should begin with an assessment of learners' needs and goals (NCLE, 2003). "Needs assessment assures learners a voice in their instruction and keeps content relevant to their lives and goals" (Brod, 1999; Shank & Terrill, 1997, as cited in Florez & Terrill, 2003, What Are Effective Practices in the Literacy Class? section, para. 3). Also, teachers become aware of the skills learners bring to class and which ones they think should be worked on (Brod, 1999; Shank & Terrill, 1997, as cited in Florez & Terrill, 2003). Teachers can show adult learners how a class will help them attain their goals by having an organized educational program with clearly defined goals and course objectives. Encouraging students to fill out a personal goals sheet will also help them focus on their learning journey (Lieb, 1991).
- Adult orientation to learning is problem-centred rather than subject-centred (Imel,

1989). “[Adult learners] tend to prefer single concept, single-theory courses that focus heavily on the application of the concept to relevant problems” (Zemke & Zemke, 1984, Curriculum Design section, para.1). A practical application might include instructors presenting real-life problems to the class and asking students to share how they would respond to those situations if confronted with them (Sauve, 2000).

- Adults want to know why something needs to be learned and how it will be applicable to their lives (Florez & Burt, 2001). “Adults are *relevancy-oriented*. They must see a reason for learning something” (Lieb, 1991, Adults as Learners section, para. 5). Adults are practical and learning has to be applicable to their work or other responsibilities to be of value to them (Florez & Terrill, 2003). Teachers can incorporate content that is relevant and immediately usable to learners in their roles as individuals, family, and community members (NCLE, 2003).

## Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory

Second language acquisition (SLA) is the study of how second languages are learned and the factors that influence the process. In particular, second language acquisition theories address cognitive issues (how the brain processes information in general and language in particular), affective issues (how emotions factor into second language processing and learning), and linguistic issues (how learners interact with and internalize new language systems). (Florez & Burt, 2001, What Do Instructors Need to Know about Second Language Acquisition (SLA)? section, para. 2)

Teachers need to be cognizant of the complex interactions between cognitive, affective, and linguistic issues that influence adult ESL learners in order to effectively assist them in their learning (NCLE, 2001).

SLA researchers study how communicative competence develops in a second language. Researchers research how “*communicative competence*--the ability to interpret the underlying meaning of a message, understand cultural references, use strategies to keep communication from breaking down, and apply the rules of grammar--develops in a second language” (Savignon, 1997, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003, Introduction section, para.1). Researchers also study how non-linguistic factors such as age, anxiety, and motivation affect second language acquisition (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003).

Other areas of research focus on the role of interaction in SLA. For example, one area of research centres on how interaction--communication between individuals, especially as they negotiate meaning--contributes to second language acquisition (Ellis, 1999, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). “Empirical research with second

language learners supports the contention that engaging in language interactions facilitates second language development” (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003, What Is the Role of Interaction in SLA? section, para. 2). In addition, results from a study to determine how conversational interaction affects the acquisition of question formation show that interaction can increase the pace of acquisition (Mackey, 1999, as cited in Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). As well, studies on interaction are being conducted on task-based language learning and teaching, and focus on form (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003).

Unfortunately, not much research has been conducted on SLA with English language learners in adult education contexts (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003). More research needs to be done, but “evidence shows that learning a second language, especially as an adult, is not the same as learning one’s first language” (NCLE, 2001, Second Language Acquisition section, para. 1). The complexities of adult ESL instruction make research in this field challenging. Researching issues of culture, language, and education and tracking learner progress over time becomes very complex, especially when one considers the diverse and mobile learner populations and diverse learning contexts in adult ESL education. “However, knowing about the SLA research that has been conducted can be helpful to adult ESL teachers because the findings may be applicable to their populations and contexts” (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003, Introduction section, para. 2).

Since the mid- 1970s, Auerbach writes that “there has been a paradigm shift away from grammar-based and behavioural approaches (both of which are form-centered in orientation) toward meaning-centered approaches to ESL [instruction]” (1992, p. 14).



Language is no longer viewed only as a system of rules or behaviours that exist independently from their usage. Today, the notion of communicative competence suggests that while it is necessary to know the grammar of a language, it is also important to know the appropriate contextual usage of a language. Thus, both grammatical and socio-linguistic knowledge are achieved in the process of authentic, meaningful interaction in a variety of settings, with a range of purposes, and a diversity of participants (Auerbach, 1992). Auerbach states that “real communication, accompanied by appropriate feedback that subordinates form to the elaboration of meaning, is key for language learning” (1992, p. 14).

Providing contexts for communicative activity and learning to occur within is fundamental in a meaning-centred approach. Content-based instruction is one way for creating such a context. This approach integrates the learning of subject-matter content with the learning of a language. In short, linking cognitive development with language acquisition is the focus. “In addition, task or problem-oriented activities provide a context for authentic dialogue and purposeful language use” (Auerbach, 1992, p. 14). Further, cooperative learning by way of peer interaction provides students with further opportunities to use language in comparison with teacher-centred classroom settings (Auerbach, 1992).

Instructors can reflect on the following concepts of SLA in the classroom. They are drawn from theories of second language acquisition generally accepted as relevant for most second language learners (Brown, 2001; Krashen, 1981; Lightbrown, 2000, as cited in Florez & Burt, 2001, What Do Instructors Need to Know about Second Language Acquisition (SLA)? section):

- Meaningful interaction and natural communication in the target language are necessary for successful language acquisition. . . .
- Effective language use involves an automatic processing of language. . . .
- Language learners can monitor their speech for correctness when they have time to focus their attention on form and know the language rules involved. . . .
- Second language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to language that is at and slightly above their level of comprehension. . . .
- People have affective filters (created by a variety of factors such as motivation, self-confidence, or anxiety) that can support or disrupt acquisition of a second language. . . .
- There are “interlanguage” periods during which learners make systematic errors that are a natural part of language learning. . . .
- There is a silent period during which learners are absorbing the new language prior to producing it. . . .
- Second language acquisition theories are based on research that investigates specific questions with specific populations in defined circumstances.

paragraphs 3-10)

Research seems to support many practices that are presently being used in adult ESL instruction. Second language acquisition research can be practically applied to the classroom by “giving students the opportunity to interact with the teacher and with each other, planning instruction to include tasks that promote these opportunities, and teaching language forms and vocabulary in the context of meaningful learning activities” (Moss & Ross-Feldman, 2003, Conclusion section, para. 1).

Instructional Approaches, Techniques, and Strategies That Support Second Language Development in Adults

Providing instruction to adult ESL learners is a challenge. Like all learners, they bring diverse strengths and needs to the adult ESL classroom. “Teachers need to provide instruction that acknowledges and addresses these strengths and needs, engages learners in challenging and relevant topics, and provides them with tools they can use to meet their responsibilities and goals” (Florez & Terrill, 2003, Conclusion section, para.1). Many educators maintain that adult education is most effective and meaningful when approaches, techniques, and materials are appropriate for adults, it is related to learners’ real needs and interests, and it builds on their knowledge and life experiences (Holt, 1995; NCLE, 2001).

According to Robinson and Selman (1996), in the last twenty-five years, the main shift in teaching approaches has been in these directions: “communicative purposes are emphasized; the personal needs of the learners are the basis for selecting both content and process; [and] students learn the language that is used in the community” (p. 20). Hence, “adult ESL tends to be communicative, process-oriented, and lifeskills oriented” (NCLE, 2001, Instructional Approaches That Support Language Development in Adults section, para. 1). Adult ESL students need to learn, practice, and use the English language (Florez & Burt, 2001). In other words, language learning is about being able to communicate meaning.

There is no one best way and no single approach that suits all students in all situations. Many teachers use elements of various approaches to serve their teaching purposes and their students’ needs. Robinson and Selman (1996) point out that

as today's teachers take the initiative to conduct their own research into teaching and learning a second language and work together to develop curriculum, teaching material and techniques, it isn't unusual to find their approaches based on a combination of theoretical research and actual classroom experience. (p. 20)

By employing a variety of different approaches and techniques (e.g., competency-based, whole language, participatory, grammar-based, etc.), often in combination, ESL teachers can provide successful learning opportunities to adult ESL learners with diverse learning styles, needs, and goals (NCLE, 2003).

Many writers in the field offer various ideas for effective classroom practice.

Florez and Burt (2001) suggest the following:

1. Get to know your students and their needs. . . .
2. Use visuals to support your instruction. . . .
3. Model tasks before asking your learners to do them. . . .
4. Foster a safe classroom environment. . . .
5. Watch both your teacher talk and your writing. . . .
6. Use scaffolding techniques to support tasks. . . .
7. Bring authentic materials to the classroom. . . .
8. Don't overload learners. . . .
9. Balance variety and routine in your activities. . . .
10. Celebrate success. (What Instructional Approaches Support Second Language Development in Adults? section, paragraphs 3-7, 9-13)

Holt (1995) proposes the following techniques:

1. Build on the experiences and language of learners. . . .

2. Use learners as resources. . . .
3. Sequence activities in an order that moves from less challenging to more challenging, such as progressing from listening to speaking, reading, and writing skills. . . .
4. Build redundancy into curriculum content, providing repetition of topics. . . .
5. Combine enabling skills . . . with language experience and whole language approaches.
6. Combine life-skill reading competencies . . . with phonics, word recognition, word order, spacing words in a sentence, reading words in context, and reading comprehension.
7. Use cooperative learning activities that encourage interaction by providing learners with situations in which they must negotiate language with partners or group members to complete a task.
8. Include a variety of techniques to appeal to diverse learning styles.  
(Techniques for Working With Adults section, paragraphs 2-9)

Other considerations include:

- incorporate principles of adult learning, adult second language acquisition, and working with multicultural groups;
- employ a number of different approaches and techniques (e.g., competency-based, whole language, participatory, grammar-based, and skills-based approaches such as phonics), often in combination, that can provide successful learning opportunities to adults with different learning styles and preferences, diverse needs, various motivations and goals, and possible learning disabilities;

- begin with assessment of learners' needs and goals;
- acknowledge and draw upon learners' prior experiences and strengths;
- incorporate content that is relevant and immediately usable to learners in their roles as parents, citizens, workers, and life-long learners;
- involve learners and learner input in planning;
- include ongoing opportunities for assessment and evaluation; and
- provide courses of varied intensity and duration with flexible schedules to meet diverse learner needs. (Florez & Burt, 2001; National Center for ESL Literacy Education, 1998; TESOL, 2000; Van Duzer, 2002; Wrigley, Chisman, & Ewen, 1993; Wrigley & Guth, 1992, as cited in NCLE, 2003, p. 13).

## Approaches to Language Teaching

### The Search for a Language Teaching Methodology

In the century spanning the mid-1880s to the mid- 1980s, applied linguists and language practitioners were involved in what many pedagogical experts would call a search. “That search was for a single, ideal method, generalizable across widely varying audiences, that would successfully teach students in a foreign language in the classroom” (Brown, 2002, p. 9). As language teaching came into its own as a profession in the twentieth century, approaches to teaching language evolved dramatically, and there have been many varied interpretations of the best way or approach to teach a foreign language (Brown, 2000; Rodgers, 2001). The emergence of the concept of “methods” permeated language teaching (Rodgers, 2001). Rodgers (2001) writes that

the method concept in language teaching--the notion of a systematic set of teaching practices based on a particular theory of language and language learning --is a powerful one, and the quest for better methods was a preoccupation of teachers and applied linguists throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. (Background section, para. 1)

Many scholars have explored the development of language teaching over the past centuries. Some of the more prominent include: William F. Mackey (1965), Louis Kelly (1969), H. H. Stern (1983), Anthony Howatt (1984), H. Douglas Brown (2000), Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000), and Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers (2001). Kelly’s (1969) book, *25 Centuries of Language Teaching*, provides an extensive historical analysis of the evolution of methodology from the time of Ancient Greece to the present. Howatt (1984) documents the historical overview of changes of practice in language

teaching throughout history, bringing the chronology up through the Direct Method in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Interestingly, one of the most lasting legacies of the Direct Method has been the concept of “method” itself (Rodgers, 2001).

It is important to note that the events of the last century or so have not been similar everywhere. Stern remarks that “from an historical point of view, there are different strands of development according to countries, languages, and institutions” (1983, p. 97). For example, in Europe, the history of language teaching methodology is in many ways different from that of North America. There are even significant differences within Europe (Stern, 1983).

Historical accounts of the language teaching profession tend to describe a series of methods, each of which was more or less dismissed in due time as a new method took over (Brown, 2002). This development of methods tends to follow a cyclical nature. Albert Marckwardt (1972)

saw these “changing winds and shifting sands” as a cyclical pattern in which a new paradigm . . . of teaching methodology emerged about every quarter of a century, with each new method breaking from the old but at the same time taking with it some of the positive aspects of the previous paradigm.

(as cited in Brown, 2000, p. 13)

Grittner (1990) comments that “the more popular [methods] have tended to follow a cycle in which they are initially perceived as the solution to all problems, only to end the cycle being discredited in the face of mounting evidence of failure” (p. 14).

The evolution of language teaching methods illustrates that the most effective features in each method resurface at a later date, elaborated and refashioned, so that the



best part of the past remains and serves the purposes and needs of the present (Rivers, 1981). As a result, one observes rather infrequently any specific method in practice in its pure form, unless it has suddenly returned to meet the needs of the day, often with a new name. More often, one observes adaptations and combinations. Teachers tend to modify the method that is current to fit their own teaching style and particular situation (Rivers, 1981). “Old approaches return, but as their social and intellectual context are changed, they seem entirely new” (Kelly, 1969, p. 396). Kelly espouses an interesting viewpoint when he writes that “teachers, being cursed with the assumption that their discoveries are necessarily an improvement on what went on before, are reluctant to learn from history. Thus it is that they unwittingly rediscover old techniques by widely differing methods of research” (1969, p. 396).

The history of language teaching suggests at least three sources that produce the currents of methodological thought. For one thing, “they have been responses to changing demands on language education resulting from social, economic, political, or educational circumstances” (Stern, 1983, pp. 471-472). As Kelly (1969) writes, “Education is in constant movement to suit the needs of its milieu” (p. 396). Secondly, the methods have reflected the changes in language theories of the nature of language and language learning and in the form and direction of theory in the social sciences, specifically, linguistics, psychology, and sociology (Richards & Rodgers, 1986; Stern, 1983). Lastly, “most of the methods reflect [the] experience, intuitions, and opinions of practising [language] teachers” (Stern, 1983, p. 472). It is important to recognize the profound effects of these influences in order to better understand the changing currents of thought in language teaching methodology (Newton, 1979). Kelly (1969) and Howatt (1984) have

shown that many of the current issues we encounter in language teaching today are not especially new. “Today’s controversies reflect contemporary responses to questions that have been asked often throughout the history of language teaching” (Richards & Rodgers, 1986, p. 1).

Today, in the twenty-first century, we have moved away from a preoccupation with common teaching methods toward a more complex and complete view of language teaching methodology which embodies a multifaceted understanding of the teaching and learning processes involved (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Brown (2000) observes that “methods, as distinct, theoretically unified clusters of teaching practices presumably appropriate for a wide variety of audiences, are no longer the object of our search” (p. 169). Richards and Renandya (2002) suggest that “Brown traces this movement from a preoccupation with ‘methods’ to a focus on ‘pedagogy’” (p. 5). Brown writes that

the last few years of the twentieth century were characterized by an enlightened, dynamic approach to language teaching in which teachers and curriculum developers were searching for valid communicative, interactive techniques suitable for specified learners pursuing specific goals in specific contexts.

(2000, p. 169)

Hence, today, language teaching methodology is characterized as communicative language teaching. For adult ESL learners, the movement toward the communicative approach, with its various spin-off approaches (e.g., content-based instruction, task-based language teaching, cooperative language learning, etc.) seems to complement who they are as English language learners along with their specific learning needs and goals.

### 1980s and Beyond-Communicative Approaches

Communicative language teaching. Looking back over a century of foreign language teaching, one can observe the many language teaching methods and approaches as they came and went. As the field of second language pedagogy developed and matured, there have been “a number of reactions and counter-reactions in methods and approaches to language teaching” (Brown, 1987, p. 212). In the late 1970s and early 1980s, there was a shift in the language teaching profession “from a linguistic structure-centered approach to a Communicative Approach” (Widdowson, 1990, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 121). Stern (1983) points out that “from the mid-seventies the key concept that has epitomized the practical, theoretical, and research preoccupations in educational linguistics and language pedagogy is that of communication or communicative competence” (p. 111). In the 1980s, the concept of communicative competence and the language teaching methods from the 1950s to the 1980s merged to form more interactive views of language teaching, which collectively came to be recognized as communicative language teaching (CLT) (Rodgers, 2001; Stern, 1983).

Again, it should be noted that the gradual shift to a more communicative methodology obviously did not take place simultaneously throughout the world; rather, the various aspects of change have occurred at different times and in different contexts (McDonough & Shaw, 1993).

The origins of CLT are many, insofar as one language teaching methodology tends to affect the next (Galloway, 1993). Some maintain that the communicative approach was developed during the 1960s (“Brief History,” n.d.). For others, the communicative approach is in essence a manifestation of the 1970s; it was during this

decade that much debate took place, especially in the UK (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). Galloway writes that “interest in and development of communicative-style teaching mushroomed in the 1970s; authentic language use and classroom exchanges where students engaged in real communication with one another became quite popular” (1993, *Where Does Communicative Language Teaching Come From?* section, para.1). Toward the end of the seventies, it was apparent that many of the communicative, interactive techniques of the approach were here to stay (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). The communicative approach could also be said to be the result of educators and linguists in the 1980s having grown frustrated with the audiolingual and grammar-translation methods of second language instruction (Galloway, 1993; Richards & Schmidt, 2002). “In brief, they [felt that students] were at a loss to communicate in the culture of the language studied” (Galloway, 1993, *Where Does Communicative Language Teaching Come From?* section, para. 1). As a result, the focus “switched from the mechanical practice of language patterns associated with the Audiolingual method to activities that engaged the learner in more meaningful and authentic language use” (Bowen, 2004a, *Communicative Classroom* section, para.1).

There is a plethora of definitions, interpretations, and classroom applications in regards to communicative language teaching. References to the communicative nature of CLT are abundant in the literature today (Brown, 1987, 1994). From the earlier seminal works (Breen & Candlin, 1980; Savignon, 1983; Widdowson, 1978, as cited in Brown, 2000; see also Hymes, 1972) up to more recent journals and teacher education textbooks (Brown, 2000; Richard-Amato, 1996, as cited in Brown, 2000), there is quite an array of definitions and material on CLT. Generally speaking, communicative language teaching

is “an approach to foreign or second language teaching which emphasizes that the goal of language learning is communicative competence and which seeks to make meaningful communication and language use a focus of all classroom activities” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 90). As an approach, it is “a unified but broadly based theoretical position about the nature of language and of language learning and teaching” (Brown, 2000, p. 266). On the whole, “CLT does not teach about language; rather, it teaches language” (“Brief History,” n.d., Communicative Method section, para. 2). The following is a comprehensive summary of communicative language teaching:

CLT [is] a diverse set of principles that essentially stress the engagement of learners in authentic, meaningful, and fluent communication, usually through task-based activities that seek to maximize opportunities for the interpretation, expression, and negotiation of meaning in integrated language skills contexts; and that facilitate inductive or discovery learning of the grammatical, pragmatic, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse rules of the language with the ultimate goal of developing communicative competence.

(Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Savignon, 2001, as cited in Bell, 2003, p. 328)

It is important to mention, however, that even though the term communication seems to imply conversation only, most proponents of communicative competence incorporate reading and writing as part of the total communicative approach to second language instruction (Grittner, 1990).

Brown (2000) offers a comprehensive list of four interconnected characteristics as a definition of CLT:

1. Classroom goals are focused on all of the components of communicative

competence and not restricted to grammatical or linguistic competence.

2. Language techniques are designed to engage learners in the pragmatic, authentic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes. Organizational language forms are not the central focus but rather aspects of language that enable the learner to accomplish those purposes.
3. Fluency and accuracy are seen as complementary principles underlying communicative techniques. At times fluency may have to take on more importance than accuracy in order to keep learners meaningfully engaged in language use.
4. In the communicative classroom, students ultimately have to use the language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts. (pp. 266-267)

He writes that these characteristics are in part a natural by-product of previous language teaching methods and that in some ways they were also radical. For example, even though grammatically structured sequenced curricula were the standard of second language teaching for centuries, “CLT suggests that grammatical structure might better be subsumed under various functional categories” (Brown, 2000, p. 267). Furthermore, in an effort to build fluency, a great deal of authentic language is suggested in communicative language teaching (Chambers, 1997, as cited in Brown, 2000).

Practical application in the classroom is dependent on how the tenets of communicative language teaching are interpreted and applied (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Implications for practice include the following concepts:

1. “Communicative” implies “semantic,” a concern with the meaning potential of language.

2. There is a complex relationship between language form and language function.
3. Form and function operate as part of a wider network of factors.
4. Appropriacy of language has to be considered alongside accuracy. This has implications for attitudes to error.
5. “Communicative” is relevant to all four language skills.
6. The concept of communication takes us beyond the level of the sentence.
7. “Communicative” can refer both to the properties of language and to behaviour.

(McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 26)

Language is for communication. The communicative approach emphasizes the need to teach communicative competence, “i.e. the ability to use the target language effectively and appropriately, as opposed to linguistic competence. Thus, language functions are emphasized over language forms” (Pentcheva & Shopov, 1999, p. 45). For years, researchers have scrutinized the definition of communicative competence with the goal of learning how best to teach communication (Brown, 2000). Hymes (1972) first used the term ‘communicative competence’ as opposed to Chomsky’s ‘linguistic competence’ (as cited in Stern, 1983). It reflects the generally accepted view that language is more than a set of rules; language is mainly seen as a tool in creating meaning (Nunan, 1989). Larsen-Freeman (2000) writes that there are two aspects that comprise communicative language teaching: linguistic competence, the knowledge of forms and their meanings, and communicative competence, the knowledge of the functions language is used for. Thus, [learners] “need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings, and functions” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 128). There is a need to distinguish between ‘learning that’ and ‘knowing how.’ “In other words, we need to distinguish

between knowing various grammatical rules and being able to use the rules effectively and appropriately when communicating” (Nunan, 1989, p. 12).

Two quite distinct orientations of the communicative approach have evolved over time: a “weak” version and a “strong” version of the method (Pentcheva & Shopov, 1999). Anthony Howatt (1984) suggests that the “weak” version could be explained as learning to use the target language, while the “strong” version suggests using the target language to learn it (as cited in Pentcheva & Shopov, 1999). The “weak” version proposes that communicative syllabuses and teaching materials should afford the learner opportunities to attain communicative competence necessary and satisfactory for meaningful communication. In contrast, the “strong” version of the communicative approach tends to focus on the planning and implementation of realistic communicative tasks, which allows the learner opportunities to acquire the target language while using it (Pentcheva & Shopov, 1999).

Communicative language teaching has altered the concept of both the teacher’s and the students’ role. “The teacher’s role changes from being ‘the sage on the stage’ to becoming ‘a guide on the side’” (Mowrer, 1996, as cited in Pentcheva & Shopov, 1999, p. 45). According to Robinson and Selman (1996), the teacher’s role is viewed differently in three ways: “the teacher is a facilitator and a learning resource rather than an instructor; the teacher collaborates with students to select goals, content and processes for the classroom; [and] the teacher encourages students to develop independent learning skills” (p. 20). As a facilitator, the teacher works in partnership with students to create learning opportunities that encourage them to plan, produce, and practice language. It is important to note that facilitation does not equate abandonment of responsibilities. As a



professional, the teacher continues to make decisions in regards to setting directions, proposing content, and evaluating achievement. As a collaborator, the teacher actively involves adult ESL learners in the learning process. As an encourager, the teacher interacts with learners in ways that help to make learning meaningful (Robinson & Selman, 1996). Breen and Candlin (1980, as cited in Nunan, 1989) also describe three main roles for the teacher in the communicative classroom. “The first is to act as facilitator of the communicative process, the second is to act as a participant, and the third is to act as an observer and learner” (Nunan, 1989, p. 87).

Since the teacher’s role is less dominant in a CLT classroom, students are viewed as more responsible managers of their own learning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). There is much activity and spontaneity present in communicative classrooms (Brown, 2000; Galloway, 1993). “[Students] are actively engaged in [communicating and] negotiating meaning--in trying to make themselves understood and in understanding others--even when their knowledge of the target language is incomplete” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 129). The teacher provides opportunities for students to deal with unrehearsed situations under the guidance of the teacher (Pentcheva & Shopov, 1999). Students often work in small groups on communicative activities, such as games, role plays, and problem-solving tasks (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Galloway points out that “because of the increased responsibility to participate, students may find they gain confidence in using the target language in general” (1993, *How Do the Roles of the Teacher and Student Change in Communicative Language Teaching?* section, para. 1).

For many educators and adult ESL learners there are a number of reasons why the communicative approach is attractive in providing a richer teaching and learning

environment. It can:

- include wider considerations of what is appropriate as well as what is accurate
- handle a wider range of language, covering texts and conversations as well as sentences
- provide realistic and motivating language practice
- use what learners “know” about the functions of language from their experience with their own mother tongues. (McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 34)

On the other hand, the communicative approach has been the subject of critical comment and debate (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). “In many countries the debate is still very current, reflecting the differing and changing perceptions of the international roles and needs of education systems” (McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 22). As Dubin and Olshtain (1986) write:

There are . . . prevailing misconceptions regarding the communicative approach to language learning. One such frequently expressed misunderstanding is the belief . . . that it is a new methodology which has come to *replace* the structural approach . . . The most significant contribution of the communicative approach is that it has brought about a more comprehensive view of teaching and learning. (as cited in McDonough & Shaw, 1993, p. 25)

Reflecting on the legacy of the communicative approach, it is interesting to note that

the communicative approach has so profoundly influence current thought and practice on language teaching strategies that it is hardly possible today to imagine a language pedagogy which does not make some allowance at all levels of

teaching for a non-analytical (experiential or participatory), communicative component. (Stern, 1983, p. 473)

In particular, educators have begun to re-examine language teaching goals, syllabuses, materials, methods, and classroom activities. This has had a major influence on language pedagogy around the world (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). In addition, “the communicative approach has been adapted to the elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary levels” (Galloway, 1993, Where Does Communicative Language Teaching Come From? section, para. 2). It offers techniques for varying ages and purposes. Also, since the 1990s or so, we have witnessed a marked increase in English teachers’ proficiency levels worldwide (Brown, 2000). Moreover, both teachers [and students] in many parts of the world are discovering that they need to come to terms with changes in their roles, as communicative language teaching principles become significant goals of their educational system (McDonough & Shaw, 1993). As educational systems and political institutions in many countries become more attuned to the importance of teaching foreign languages for communicative purposes, greater success may be achieved worldwide in accomplishing the goals of communicative language teaching (Brown, 2000). Bowen (2004a) suggests that

perhaps the most enduring legacy of the communicative approach will be that it has allowed teachers to incorporate motivating and purposeful communicative activities and principles into their teaching while simultaneously retaining the best elements of other methods and approaches rather than rejecting them wholesale. (Communicative Classroom section, para. 1)

Content-Based language teaching. Communicative language teaching has produced a variety of different teaching methods “that share the same basic set of principles, but which spell out philosophical details or envision instructional practices in somewhat diverse ways” (Rodgers, 2001, Schools of Language Teaching Methodology section, para. 4). These CLT spin-off approaches include content-based teaching, task-based teaching, cooperative language learning, proficiency-based instruction, the natural approach, and the functional notional approach (Galloway, 1993; Rodgers, 2001).

“Content-based (also known as ‘content-centered’) language teaching integrates the learning of some specific subject-matter content with the learning of a second language” (Brown, 1994, p. 220). According to Brinton, Snow, and Wesche (1989), content-centred education is “the integration of content learning with language teaching aims. More specifically, it refers to the concurrent study of language and subject matter, with the form and sequence of language presentation dictated by content material” (as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 82). In other words, content-based language teaching views subject-matter content as the source for language learning and language as the channel for learning content (Grabe, n.d., as cited in “Content,” n.d.). The second or foreign language is the medium to convey subject-matter content of interest and relevance to the learner, often in academic subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies (Brown, 1994; Crandall, 1994). “Content-based [language teaching] usually pertains to academic or occupational instruction over an extended period of time at intermediate to advanced proficiency levels” (Brown, 1994, p. 220). The overall format of a content-based curriculum is directed more by the nature of the subject-matter than the language forms and sequences. This approach contrasts sharply with many traditional

language curricula in which language skills are often taught virtually in isolation from subject-matter content (Brown, 1994).

Integrating content from other disciplines in language courses is not a new concept. Larsen-Freeman (2000) writes that “for years, specialized language courses have included content relevant to a particular profession or academic discipline” (p. 137). In many parts of the world, interest in integrated language and content instruction is prominent particularly in countries where English serves as the medium of instruction for part of an educational program (Crandall, 1994). For example, “in Canada, successful second language immersion programs, in which Anglophone children learn their academic subjects in French, have existed for years” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 141). In the 1970s, the ‘language across the curriculum’ movement for native English speakers in England was introduced to integrate the teaching of reading and writing into all other subject areas (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

In the United States, Krashen’s theory (1982, as cited in Crandall, 1994) of second language acquisition has affected the development of integrated instruction at all educational levels. Krashen (1982) suggests

that a second language is most successfully acquired when the conditions are similar to those present in first language acquisition: that is, when the focus of instruction is on meaning rather than on form; when the language input is at or just above the proficiency of the learner; and when there is sufficient opportunity to engage in meaningful use of that language in a relatively anxiety-free environment. (as cited in Crandall, 1994, *Why Use Content-Centered Instruction?* section, para. 1)

In other words, the implication for second language classrooms is that learning should be focused on meaningful content, such as academic subject-matter (Crandall, 1994).

“Modification of the target language facilitates language acquisition and makes academic content accessible to second language learners” (Crandall, 1994, Why Use Content-Centered Instruction? section, para. 1).

In content-based classrooms, students’ intrinsic motivation and empowerment increases when they “are focused on very useful, practical objectives as the subject matter is perceived to be relevant to long term goals” (Brown, 1994, p. 220). As students work towards their own long-term goals, their self-confidence increases as they view themselves as competent and intelligent individuals capable of using their new language for their personal goals (Brown, 1994). Based on the benefits of content-centred language teaching, which include more motivated students and a marked increase in second-language skills, it seems quite likely that there will be an increase in the provision of content-based language courses in the future (Bowen, 2004b). These courses offer a means for adult ESL learners and foreign language students to acquire academic language proficiency while still being able to continue their academic or cognitive development (Crandall, 1994).

A variety of models of content-based language teaching have been developed to meet the needs of second language students, many involving the integration of language and content instruction (Crandall, 1994). Some examples of content-based curricula include: adjunct model; sheltered English programs; competency-based instruction; immersion programs for elementary school children; language across the curriculum; and English for specific purposes (Brown, 1994; Crandall, 1994; Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

What all models of content-based language teaching “have in common is learning both specific content and related language skills” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 142). Wesche (1993) comments that “in content-based language teaching, the claim in a sense is that students get ‘two for one’--both content knowledge and increased language proficiency” (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 142).

In the adjunct model of content-centred language teaching, a subject-matter teacher and a language teacher combine efforts by linking their courses and curriculum so that each complements the other (Brown, 1994). Students enrol in a language course that is linked to an academic course. “During the language class, the language teacher’s focus is on helping students process the language in order to understand the academic content presented by the subject teacher” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 141). The language teacher also assists students in writing term papers, improving their note-taking abilities, and reading academic textbooks assigned by the content teacher (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Content-based language teaching has also been used in sheltered-language instruction in a second language environment. Both native and non-native speakers follow a regular academic program. However, sheltered instruction is geared towards helping non-native speakers develop second language proficiency. Instructors support students with specific instructional techniques and material. The advantage for second language students is that they don’t have to delay their academic study until their language control reaches a certain level (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Finally, some content-based programs do not focus on academic needs but rather on certain functional abilities. For instance, competency-based instruction, an effective method of content-based language teaching for adult immigrants, affords students

opportunities to develop their second language skills while they are learning essential survival skills such as filling out a job application or preparing for a job interview (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Content-based language teaching provides new opportunities and challenges for teachers and students alike (Brown, 1994). Instruction in content-based language teaching is usually directed by ESL, bilingual, or foreign language teachers (Crandall, 1994).

“[They] use instructional materials, learning tasks, and classroom techniques from academic content areas as the vehicle for developing language, content, cognitive, and study skills” (Crandall, 1994, Program Models section, para. 1). Brown writes that

challenges [for teachers] range from a demand for a whole new genre of textbooks and other materials to the training of language teachers to teach the concepts and skills of various disciplines, professions, and occupations, and/or to teach in teams across disciplines. (Brown, 1994, pp. 82-83)

Teachers need to adopt a different perspective in regards to their role; first and foremost, they are subject-matter teachers, and second, they are language teachers (Brown, 1994).

Students who are studying academic subjects in a second language need a great deal of support in comprehending subject-matter texts. Consequently, providing clear language objectives in addition to content learning objectives is essential in advancing their educational program (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).



Task-Based language teaching. Task-based language teaching (also known as ‘task-based learning’) is “a teaching approach based on the use of communicative and interactive tasks as the central units for the planning and delivery of instruction” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 540). In this approach, learners are presented “with carefully graded activities or “tasks” in order to develop their communicative competence” (“Task-Based,” n.d., para. 1). Such tasks are believed to provide an effective foundation for language learning since they involve meaningful communication, interaction, and negotiation. They also enable learners to acquire grammar as a result of participating in authentic language use (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). “Appropriate contexts are provided for developing thinking and study skills as well as language and academic concepts for students of different levels of language proficiency” (Rosebery, Warren, & Conant, 1992, as cited in Crandall, 1994, Teaching Methods section, para. 3).

David Nunan (1991) offers five characteristics of a task-based approach to language teaching:

- (1) An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.
- (2) The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation.
- (3) The provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on language, but also on the learning process itself.
- (4) An enhancement of the learner’s own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning.
- (5) An attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom. (as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 228)

As with content-based language teaching, task-based learning is not a new method. Brown (1994) points out that “it simply puts task at the center of one’s methodological focus” (p. 83). The learning process is viewed “as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve, and the purposes of which extend beyond the practice of language for its own sake” (Brown, 1994, p. 83). Research on task-based language teaching

attempts to identify types of tasks that enhance learning (for example, open-ended, structured, teacher-fronted, small group, pair work) and to define task-specific learner factors (roles, proficiency levels, styles), teacher roles, and other variables that contribute to successful achievement of goals. (Brown, 1994, p. 83)

In essence, task-based learning extends the learning principles of communicative language teaching, and its advocates attempt to apply principles of second language learning to teaching (Richards & Schmidt, 2002). Tasks are used in communicative language teaching. However, a task in a CLT lesson is intended to allow students to practice making various communicative functions, whereas in a task-based lesson, the approach does not focus on specific functions or any other specific language forms (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Long and Crookes (1993) explain that “the departure from CLT . . . lay not in the tasks themselves, but in the accompanying pedagogic focus on task completion instead of on the language used in the process” (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 146). This indicates a shift in perspective (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Task-based language teaching goals and curricula differ in distinct ways from content-based language teaching. The course objectives in task-based learning are somewhat more directly language-based than what we observed in content-based

language teaching. The ultimate focus is on communication, purpose, and meaning. The goals are more linguistic in nature, but not in the conventional manner of just focusing on grammar or phonology. The course goals centre on students' pragmatic language competence by focusing on the importance of practical functions such as greeting people, expressing opinions, requesting information, etc. (Brown, 1994). "While content-based instruction focuses on subject-matter content, task-based instruction focuses on a whole set of real-world tasks themselves" (Brown, 1994, p. 229).

Task-based language teaching and content-based language teaching share the similar goal of providing "learners with a natural context for language use" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 144). Advocates of the task-based approach believe that learners must be involved in making meaning and negotiating meaning with others. They need to interactively use language while carrying out tasks and attend to form in the context of making meaning (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). "Such interaction is thought to facilitate language acquisition as learners have to work to understand each other and to express their own meaning" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 144). As Candlin and Murphy (1987) write, "The central purpose we are concerned with is language learning, and tasks present this in the form of a problem-solving negotiation between knowledge that the learner holds and new knowledge" (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 144).

There are a number of different interpretations in the literature on how to describe or define a task. However, what all of these interpretations emphasize is the central importance of the task in a language course and the importance of organizing a course around authentic, communicative tasks which are meaningful to the learners in the real world (Brown, 1994). Michael Breen's (1987) interpretation seems to capture its

essence: “any structured language learning endeavor which has a particular objective, appropriate content, a specified working procedure, and a range of outcomes for those who undertake the task” (as cited in Brown, 1994, p. 83). According to Brown (1994), a task is actually a unique form of technique. In some instances, task and technique may be identical; in other situations, several techniques may comprise a task.

Prabhu (1987, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000) identified three types of tasks: an information-gap activity, an opinion-gap activity, and a reasoning-gap activity.

An information-gap activity involves the exchange of information among participants in order to complete a task. An opinion-gap activity requires that students give their personal preference, feelings, or attitudes in order to complete a task. A reasoning-gap activity requires students to derive some new information by inferring it from information they have been given. (Prabhu, 1987, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, pp. 148-149)

Of the three types, Prabhu (1987) suggests that reasoning-gap tasks work best because they tend to encourage a more continuous engagement with meaning, even though a somewhat predictable use of language is common. On the other hand, information-gap tasks tend to involve a single step transfer of information and opinion-gap tasks tend to be vague and open-ended (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Long and Crookes (1993) have distinguished three different types of task-based approaches which they call syllabi (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000). The first task-based approach is procedural. The second approach is based on Breen and Candlin’s (1980) concept “that language learning should be seen as a process which grows out of communicative interaction. As such, students and teachers decide together upon which

tasks to do” (as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 149). Lastly, the third approach is based on their own task-based language teaching. Meaningful interaction is stressed while still pointing out language form to students as required (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

A task-based curriculum determines what second language learners need to accomplish with the English language. To reach those goals, tasks are organized in terms of target tasks, which students realize beyond the classroom, and a series of pedagogical tasks, which form the core of the classroom activity. Target tasks are similar to the functions of language listed in notional-functional syllabuses; however, they tend to be more particular and more specifically related to classroom instruction (Brown, 1994). “If, for example, ‘giving personal information’ is a communicative function for language, then an appropriately stated target task might be ‘giving personal information in a job interview’” (Brown, 1994, p. 228). The context is specified in the task (Brown, 1994).

Pedagogical tasks are distinguished by a series of techniques that are ultimately intended to teach second language learners to perform the target task. Both formal and functional techniques may be included. In a climactic pedagogical task, students are involved in some type of simulation of the target task itself. For instance, building on the target task of ‘giving personal information in a job interview,’ students may role-play a ‘job interview’ (Brown, 1994). Brown writes that

the pedagogical task specifies exactly what learners will do with the input, what the respective roles of the teacher and learners are, and the evaluation thereof forms an essential component that determines its success and offers feedback for performing the task again with another group of learners at another time. (1994, p. 229)

A distinctive characteristic of task-based curricula is the “insistence on pedagogical soundness in the development and sequencing of tasks” (Brown, 1994, p. 229). As the tasks become more sophisticated, a more developed set of communicative skills is required. This is reflected in the structure of a task-based syllabus (sometimes referred to as a procedural syllabus) in that the syllabus is organized according to the level of difficulty of the tasks required of the learner throughout the course (“Task-Based,” n.d.). In addition, task-based language teaching seeks to integrate the principles of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in relation to the development of the student’s communicative competence for real-world tasks (Brown, 1994).

In terms of the organization of a task-based lesson, three different models have been implemented. The classic PPP approach (presentation, practice, and production) is the most traditional model. The teacher presents individual language forms, students practice the content in the form of spoken and written exercises, and then students produce and perform what they have learned in speaking or writing activities. Two criticisms arise: the selection of the language form may or may not meet the linguistic needs of the learners, and often there is an inauthentic emphasis on the chosen structure during the production stage (Bowen, 2004c).

The TTT approach (test, teach, and test) is an alternative to the PPP model. First, the students are asked to perform a communicative task which is monitored by the teacher. In the lesson stage, the teacher then focuses on some of the grammatical or lexical problems that occurred in the first stage. In the last stage, the students are then required to either perform the first task again or perform an identical task, hopefully with a greater degree of linguistic accuracy than before. An advantage in this approach is that

the language presented in the lesson stage can be predicted if the initial task is selected carefully. However, there seems to be a risk of randomness in this model (Bowen, 2004a, 2004c).

A third model is described in Jane Willis' (1996) book, *A Framework for Task-Based Learning* (as cited in Bowen, 2004c). It is based upon sound theoretical foundations and it also takes into consideration the need for authentic, meaningful communication. This model is typically based on three stages. In the pre-task stage, the teacher introduces and describes the topic. Learners then engage themselves in vocabulary activities that are essential to the task or will be helpful to them during the performance of the main task. During the next stage, the task cycle, learners perform the task in pairs or small groups. Students then prepare a report to share with the class on how they did the task and the conclusions they reached. Lastly, in the language focus stage, students work on specific language forms from the task they worked on. Feedback on the learners' performance during the task cycle may also occur at this time. The task-based learning model stresses the need for real communication; language is used for meaningful purposes. Also, the variety and range of tasks employed may increase students' motivation (Bowen, 2004c). Bowen suggests that "if [task-based learning] is integrated with a systematic approach to grammar and lexis, the outcome can be a comprehensive, all-round approach that can be adapted to meet the needs of all learners" (2004c, Task-Based Learning section, para. 4).

## The Post-Methods Era

### An Informed Approach for Enlightened Eclectics

The current trend toward communicative language teaching and some of the various spin-offs that we have explored illustrate that we have moved to a more complex and a more complete integrated view of second language teaching for adult ESL learners. Teachers have at their disposal a number of methodological--or, shall we say, pedagogical--options for formulating an approach specific to learners' needs and teaching contexts (Brown, 2002). "[An] approach--or theory of language and language learning-- . . . . to language teaching is the theoretical rationale that underlies everything that happens in the classroom" (Brown, 2002, p. 11). Brown points out that "it is the cumulative body of knowledge and principles that enables teachers, as 'technicians' in the classroom, to diagnose the needs of students, to treat students with successful pedagogical techniques, and to assess the outcomes of those treatments" (Brown, 2002, p. 11).

A teacher's method or approach to second language instruction is shaped by many factors including the teacher's beliefs, style, and needs (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). "[Teachers are also] informed by their own experience, the findings from research, and the wisdom of practice accumulated by the [language teaching] profession" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. x). Implementation in the classroom is not only going to be affected by who the teacher is and the wealth of knowledge in the field, "but also by who the students are, their and the teacher's expectations of appropriate social roles, the institutional constraints and demands, and factors connected to the wider sociocultural context in which the instruction takes place" (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. x). Teachers should



continually reflect on their praxis, interact with others, and experiment with “new practices in order to continually search for or devise the best method [or approach] they can for who they are, who their students are, and the conditions and context of their teaching” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 187). As Brown (2002) notes, “The feedback that teachers gather from actual implementation then reshapes and modifies their overall understanding of what learning and teaching are--which, in turn, may give rise to a new insight and more innovative possibilities, and the cycle continues” (p. 11).

Be that as it may, we must not allow ourselves to think that an approach is fixed and permanent. “Language, learning, teaching are dynamic, fluid, mutable processes” (Larsen-Freeman, 2000, p. 185). Brown writes that “an approach to language pedagogy is not just a set of principles ‘set in stone’” (2002, p. 11). In fact, formulating an approach is a dynamic on-going process; it changes with continued experience in learning and teaching. As educators, we have so much more to learn collectively about this process, and new research findings continue to reveal more information, specifically in regards to second language acquisition. We cannot confidently assert that we know everything that there is to know about language, learning, and teaching (Brown, 2002). Larsen-Freeman suggests that

those teachers who approach [the teaching and learning process] as a mystery to be solved (recognizing that some aspects of teaching and learning may be forever beyond explanation) will see their teaching as a source of continuing professional renewal and refreshment. (2000, p. 185)

Furthermore, as second language teachers, we make decisions all the time on how to improve language learning. Stern (1983) points out that

the question is whether the decisions made individually or collectively are well thought out, informed, based on sound theoretical foundations, and are as effective as they can be expected to be, or whether they are patently naïve, uninformed, ill-founded, and inconsistent. (p. 2)

Teachers need to be informed about the many pedagogical options that exist to make the best decisions possible (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). By becoming better informed about the nature, strengths, and weaknesses of methods and approaches, teachers can better arrive at their own judgements and decisions about their present and future classroom practice (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Stevick (1993, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000) adds that

if we intend to make choices that are informed and not just intuitive or ideological, then we need to expend no little effort first in identifying our own values, next in tying those values to an appropriate set of larger aims, and only then devising or rejecting, adopting or adapting techniques. (p. 181)

Through exploratory inquiry, the goal would be to “arrive at an informed, professionally sophisticated, and balanced “theory” of language teaching which is personally valid for ourselves as a guide to action” (Stern, 1983, p. 3).

In evaluating the value and effectiveness of methods and approaches, there are some considerations to keep in mind. First, it is essential to consider the overall language course or program with its unique goals, objectives, and features (Richards & Rodgers, 1986). Teachers should determine if the objectives are appropriate for the present teaching context and the types of students enrolled in the program. Next, they should consider if the techniques and strategies proposed by the advocates of the method are the best choice to achieve the desired objectives. In addition, teachers need to evaluate

whether the demands of the course requirements and techniques are realistically achievable (Rivers, 1981). Finally, the teacher's experience is a valid reference point in determining the effectiveness of a method or approach (Oller, 1993).

It is important to remember that teaching involves more than an intellectual knowledge of methods and approaches. Newton emphasizes that "however well versed a teacher may be in psychological and linguistic theories, in techniques and methodologies, this knowledge alone will not assure success" (1979, p. 24). A teacher's attitude towards his or her students is also vitally important (Newton, 1979). Via (1972) states this truth in his article, *English Through Drama*. He writes, "You must love your students, or you must love the subject you are teaching. It's best if you can love them both" (as cited in Newton, 1979, p. 24). Displaying a caring, considerate, and compassionate attitude towards one's students is a crucial factor in successful language teaching (Newton, 1979).

When confronted with the many pedagogical options for formulating a method or an approach, some teachers will choose and primarily adhere to one method. These teachers discover that a specific method or approach resonates with their own values, beliefs, and assumptions about language, learning, and teaching. It is a good match for themselves, their students, and their teaching context. Larsen-Freeman suggests that we might call this position one of absolutism (2000).

However, the current direction in second language teaching methodology since the late 1990s seems to show a trend toward eclecticism (Newton, 1979). Many teachers "tend to pick and choose, selecting elements of various approaches and tailoring them to the needs of the learners and our own philosophy, beliefs and teaching style" (Robinson & Selman, 1996, p. 20). They believe that each method has some value and that different

methods, or parts thereof, should be practiced in the same teaching context (Larsen-Freeman, 2000; Prabhu, 1990, as cited in Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Teachers who formulate their own method by combining features of other methods in a principled manner, could be said to be practicing principled eclecticism (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Brown (1987) suggests that there is no single theory, model, or discipline that will be the panacea for second language learning. There are too many complex variables that make this difficult. Grittner (1990) writes that

if we consider the variables that confront teachers throughout the profession, it becomes almost ludicrous to contemplate a single set of teaching strategies that will be appropriate for every age group, proficiency level, learning style, class size, socio-economic background, motivational mindset, ethnic background, teaching style, teacher preparation level, and administrative support system, to name but a few of the most common teacher-learner variables.

(p. 38)

Interestingly, this eclectic approach has an honourable ancestry. Dating back to the late 1800s, Henry Sweet (1899) believed that “a good method must, before all, be comprehensive and eclectic. It must be based on a thorough knowledge of the science of language . . . . In utilizing this knowledge it must be constantly guided by . . . psychological laws” (p. 3, as cited in Rivers, 1981, p. 54). Rather than searching for one absolute method, he sought to discover sound general principles as a foundation for language teaching (Sweet, 1899, as cited in Rivers, 1981).

An eclectic approach makes great demands on teachers. First, teachers need to be well-informed about the various pedagogical options in order to make intelligent choices

that are suitable for their teaching purposes (Newton, 1979). In addition, teachers need to be willing to experiment with various teaching techniques and strategies. Through experimentation, teachers can validate what is beneficial for their students' needs in respect to the objectives of a language course or program (Grittner, 1990). Lastly, a dose of energy and enthusiasm is required for the job as teachers instruct and interact with their students in the classroom.

I believe that success in second language instruction for adult ESL learners is contingent upon teachers being cautiously eclectic in formulating their approaches. By having an increased knowledge and understanding of adult ESL learners, the principles of adult learning theory and second language acquisition theory, and some of the contemporary communicative approaches to language teaching, teachers will be better able to make educated and informed choices in relation to their teaching. By using a cautious, enlightened, eclectic approach, teachers will be able to formulate their own theory and vision for second language learners that will be able to meet adult ESL learners' needs more successfully.

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