Book reviews

Approaches and methods in language teaching


Reviewed by Robyne Reichel

Language teachers are frequently confronted with what Stevick has called the ‘answerless riddles’ – such as, why do some language students succeed and others fail? And, why do some language teachers succeed and others fail? The approaches and methods used in the classroom clearly play a part in consideration of these questions. And now that there are so many ways – old and new – of teaching language, practitioners and would-be practitioners need clear, impartial guidance in order to make informed methodological decisions.

This revised and expanded edition of Richards and Rodgers’ excellent Approaches and methods in language teaching (1986) provides such a guide – giving updated description and analysis of 17 language-teaching approaches and methods current in the twentieth century, particularly in the past three decades. The proportions of the 1986 edition have been altered to reflect the rise and fall of some methods and the rise and rise of others. The new edition also benefits from being reorganised into three parts, each with an introduction, from a much-expanded index, and updated bibliographies and suggested readings at the end of each chapter.

Opening with a brief history of language teaching, Part 1 (Major language trends in twentieth-century language teaching) examines the mainstream movements of Audiolingualism, and the Oral Approach, and its development into Situational Language Teaching. In writing about these and other ways of teaching language, the authors use the model familiar to readers of the first edition in which method is examined at the level of approach (theories of language and language learning), design (objectives, syllabus, learning activities, roles of learners and teachers, and materials) and procedure (techniques, practices and behaviours). The use of this model enables the reader to compare different aspects of the 17 approaches and methods.

Part 2 (Alternative approaches and methods) examines alternatives to the orthodoxy of the approaches and methods outlined in Part 1. Some of these date from the 1970s and characteristically draw on diverse sources outside the fields of linguistics and applied linguistics such as raja-yoga and music therapy (Suggestopedia) and Rogerian Counselling Theory (Community Language Learning). The authors have condensed the chapters on ways of language teach-
ing which they consider now to be ‘of little more than historical interest’ (p 72). These are Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning and Suggestopedia. However, because the sections which illustrate classroom procedures for each approach or method are uncut, readers still have sufficient material to judge these methods for themselves.

Conversely, new chapters have been added on approaches which have gained a place in language teaching during the past 15 years. These are Whole Language, Multiple Intelligences, Neurolinguistic Programming, The Lexical Approach and Competency-Based Language Teaching. This last chapter will be of particular interest to readers working in the Australian Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) area as it presents a succinct summary backgrounding the approach and presents the AMEP as the example of CBLT in action.

Although the last 15 years have seen the rise of new approaches and methods, Richards and Rodgers argue that it is an earlier approach – Communicative Language Teaching – which has been most influential in that period. In contrast to the one chapter on CLT in the 1986 edition, Part 3 of the new edition (Current communicative approaches) includes 90 pages of material on both ‘classic’ CLT and approaches that the authors call its ‘direct descendants’ (the Natural Approach, Cooperative Language Learning, Content-Based Instruction and Task-Based Teaching. Furthermore, the authors argue that because communicative methodology has become ‘self-evident and axiomatic throughout the profession’ (p 173), most of the new approaches and methods in Part 2 could also claim to practise aspects of CLT.

The authors use the completely new final chapter to restate their central dichotomy of approach – ‘a set of beliefs and principles that can be used as a basis for teaching a language’ (p 244) and method – ‘a specific instructional design or system based on a particular theory of language and language learning’ (p 245). The ways of teaching presented in the book are then classified as either approaches or methods. Summarising criticisms of approaches and methods, Richards and Rodgers argue that we are entering a ‘post-methods era’ in which teachers are more often developing their own ways of teaching outside the approaches/methods framework. Brief references in the first edition to the practice of ‘informed’ and ‘uninformed’ eclecticism (Richards and Rodgers 1986: 158) have been replaced by an acknowledgement that teachers choose from the range of approaches and methods which suit their particular purposes and are in line with their core beliefs about language teaching. To readers who are teacher-educators, the notion of a ‘post-methods era’ has implications – for not only will students need an initial and comprehensive grounding in methodology, they may also need more practical opportunities to begin to develop judgment about selective application of approaches and methods.
For this reader the book presents one major challenge – its central nomenclature. In spite of the authors’ intention to ‘clarify the relationship between approach and method’ (p 18), the distinction can easily slip from mind – especially as the terms are sometimes used synonymously in the literature and in common parlance. Moreover, the term *approach* is used in two ways: first, as one of the book’s two main concepts – *approach* as distinguished from *method*, and second, as method ‘at the level of approach’ (p.22) within the conceptual model of *approach*, design and procedure. Perhaps these two terms are more clearly conceptualised, not as a dichotomy, but as poles of a continuum – as more recently suggested by one of the authors (Rodgers 2001: 2).

*Approaches and methods in language teaching* is one of three significant ‘second-generation’ examinations of language teaching methodology. It joins Stevick’s *Working with teaching methods: What’s at stake?* (1998), a successor to his *Teaching languages: A way and ways* (1980) and Freeman-Larsen’s 2000 revision of her 1986 *Techniques and principles in language teaching*. Taken together, with their different emphases, these make up a fascinating corpus covering many aspects of recent language teaching methodology.

**REFERENCES**


