Teaching Unplugged

Dogme in English Language Teaching

Luke Meddings and Scott Thornbury

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Acknowledgements

From the authors

Scott's story

In 2000 I was working as a teacher trainer in Spain. My colleagues and I were becoming increasingly frustrated with what appeared to be the prevailing orthodoxy in second language teaching, one in which the people in the room were somehow incidental to the process of teaching, where the learners were simply frogmarched down a one-way grammar street, or where the lesson space was filled to overflowing with *activities*, at the expense of the learning *opportunities*. And this was despite the lip-service paid by their teachers to a 'communicative' approach.

To a large extent, the problem seemed to stem from an over-reliance on materials and technological aids. Classroom interactions were being mediated almost entirely through 'imported' texts. Lack of engagement with such texts, and the activities they generated, meant that learners were interacting at the lowest level of involvement – like car engines that are 'idling' but not going anywhere.

Accordingly, we instituted a rather draconian policy whereby materials were to be used minimally and judiciously. On our training courses, we recorded segments of lesson talk and analysed them from the perspective of the communication displayed. The improvement in the quality of the teaching was dramatic.

When, around the same time and by chance, I went to see a Dogme film and read the Dogme 95 manifesto, I found a metaphor for the kind of teaching that we were aiming at. The first 'vow' of a Dogme film-maker is:

> *Shooting should be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found).*

I then wrote an article suggesting that ELT needed a similar 'rescue action'. I called it Dogme ELT, the first commandment of which began:

> *Teaching should be done using only the resources that teachers and students bring to the classroom – ie themselves – and whatever happens to be in the classroom.*

The uptake was instant, surprising and gratifying. Before long, enough people (including Luke) had got in touch to justify starting a web-based discussion group.

Scott

Luke's story

Around the time Scott and his colleagues were re-evaluating their teacher training course in Barcelona, I was helping to set up an experimental language school in London.

Working as a journalist in ELT, I had grown tired of hearing about 'optimum course delivery', as if language were a 'product' and learning a 'package'. My years as a teacher suggested that that a worthwhile lesson was an *experience*: vital, unrepeatable, and brought to life by the spontaneous interaction between learners and teacher. I was determined that the new school should reflect this, and took with me two books that had set me thinking.

One was the Common European Framework of Reference for Modern Languages. I liked its summary of what language learning should be for:

> *'to satisfy … communicative needs'*, enabling learners to *'exchange information and ideas … and communicate their thoughts and feelings'*.

To communicate thoughts and feelings! By the 1990s one might have been forgiven for thinking that language learning was all about grammar and accuracy. Coursebooks were colourful and full of pictures of celebrities, but it was as if we had regressed to the era of grammar translation.

The second book was a copy of *The Future of English?* by David Graddol. I was particularly struck by his prediction of a bilingual future, in which 'authority' would pass from mono-lingual to bi-lingual or multi-lingual speakers of English.

Our new students were coming to us with their English, not coming to us *for* English. They belonged to a world in which English was being used and taught more widely than ever before: they were Graddol's new generation, for whom English was simply *there*, in one form or another, *in the world*.

What they wanted was to engage with it. Our first courses were conversation-based and used no coursebook. Bring your English, we said, and we'll build on it together.

It proved hard to sustain this simple model as the school grew. I felt isolated, which is why Scott's article in *IATEFL Issues* made such an impact. Like many others reading it, or subsequently joining the discussion group, I realised I wasn't alone.

Luke

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Dogme 95:

A filmmaking movement set up by a group of Danish filmmakers who challenged what they saw as cinema's dependency on special effects, technical wizardry and fantasy. The emphasis on the here-and-now requires the filmmaker to focus on the actual story and its relevance to the audience.

Dogme ELT:

A teaching movement set up by a group of English teachers who challenge what they consider to be an over-reliance on materials and technical wizardry in current language teaching. The emphasis on the here-and-now requires the teacher to focus on the actual learners and the content that is relevant to them.

A

Teaching unplugged

Many language teachers have expressed a wish to free themselves from a dependency on materials, aids and technology, and to work with nothing more than the 'raw materials' provided by the people in the room. Or, in other words, to 'unplug' their teaching.

The beliefs and practices embodied in what is known as the Dogme ELT philosophy offer the ways and means to do exactly this. These beliefs and practices, in turn, draw on a rich tradition of alternative, progressive, critical, and humanist educational theory. To give you a flavour, here are five quotations from a variety of sources:

- *Education is communication and dialogue. It is not the transference of knowledge.* (Paulo Freire, Brazilian educationalist and author of 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed')
- *The only questions asked in a school should be by the pupils.* (A. S. Neill, founder of the progressive school 'Summerhill')
- *Success depends less on materials, techniques and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom.* (Earl Stevick, humanist English language teacher and thinker)
- *To most truly teach, one must converse; to truly converse is to teach.* (Roland Tharp and Ronald Gallimore, reforming educationalists and authors of 'Rousing Minds to Life')
- *A good teacher cannot be fixed in a routine … . During teaching, each moment requires a sensitive mind that is constantly changing and constantly adapting.* (Bruce Lee, kung fu practitioner and film star)

The Dogme philosophy grew out of ideas and beliefs about language teaching that echo many of the sentiments in the quotations above.

Dogme in ELT

Since its inception in March 2000, the Dogme discussion list provided the forum where these ideas and beliefs were debated, challenged, adapted, and exemplified. Out of this 'long conversation' emerged ten key principles, each tagged to a key word, that characterise a Dogme approach:

- Materials-mediated teaching is the 'scenic' route to learning, but the direct route is located in the **interactivity** between teachers and learners, and between the learners themselves.
- The content most likely to **engage** learners and to trigger learning processes is that which is already there, supplied by 'the people in the room'.

- Learning is a social and **dialogic** process, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than 'transmitted' or 'imported' from teacher/coursebook to learner.
- Learning can be mediated through talk, especially talk that is shaped and supported (ie **scaffolded**) by the teacher.
- Rather than being acquired, language (including grammar) **emerges**: it is an organic process that occurs given the right conditions.
- The teacher's primary function, apart from promoting the kind of classroom dynamic which is conducive to a dialogic and emergent pedagogy, is to optimise language learning **affordances**, by, for example, directing attention to features of the emergent language.
- Providing space for the learner's **voice** means accepting that the learner's beliefs, knowledge, experiences, concerns and desires are valid content in the language classroom.
- Freeing the classroom from third-party, imported materials **empowers** both teachers and learners.
- Texts, when used, should have **relevance** for the learner, in both their learning and using contexts.
- Teachers and learners need to unpack the ideological baggage associated with English Language Teaching materials – to become **critical** users of such texts.

Of these ten principles, three core precepts stand out:

- Dogme is about teaching that is *conversation-driven*.
- Dogme is about teaching that is *materials-light*.
- Dogme is about teaching that *focuses on emergent language*.

Let's look at these three precepts in more detail, and in so doing lay the foundations for the practical classroom procedures and activities that realise a Dogme approach: an unplugged approach.

1 Conversation-driven

There are at least five reasons why conversation should occupy a key role in language learning. These are:

- Conversation is language at work.
- Conversation is discourse.
- Conversation is interactive, dialogic and communicative.
- Conversation scaffolds learning.
- Conversation promotes socialisation.

Let's look at each of these points in turn.

Conversation is language at work

Conversation is the fundamental, universal and default form of language. In the words of one linguist, it is 'the most basic and widespread linguistic means of conducting human affairs'. [2] For this reason, most language learners feel cheated if their course includes little or no conversation practice. Hence, most language learning methods have prioritised the teaching of the spoken language. However, conventionally, conversation is viewed as the *product* of learning: that is, learners first have to master the grammar and vocabulary before they are allowed to apply this knowledge in fluency activities. This means that, in being left to last, conversation is often neglected. Also, it is less easily 'testable' than knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, and it is often the case that what is not tested will not be taught.

More importantly, to move from grammatical accuracy to conversational fluency is to move in exactly the opposite direction from the way that naturalistic language learning occurs. In first language learning, the ability to participate in 'proto-conversations' with parents or siblings is a skill that pre-dates, by years, the acquisition of an adult-like grammar and

vocabulary. In fact, some researchers are of the opinion that conversation is not so much *evidence* of grammatical acquisition, but a pre-requisite for it. As Evelyn Hatch puts it:

Our basic premise has long been that the child learns some basic set of syntactic structures, moving from a one-word phase to a two-word phase, to more complex structures, and that eventually the child is able to put these structures together in order to carry on conversations with others. The premise, if we use discourse analysis, is the converse. That is, language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations. [4]

Hatch is, of course, talking about the learning of a first language, and it is always dangerous to attempt to draw parallels between first and second language acquisition. Nevertheless, evidence from studies of second language learning in naturalistic (ie non-classroom) situations seems to support the view that – at least for learners who have plentiful speaking opportunities – a 'fluency-first' approach works well. This, of course, is a key principle of *task-based learning*. In a task-based approach, the teaching-learning cycle starts with a fluency activity, and the learner's production forms the raw material for subsequent language-focused work. In fact, a Dogme approach shares many of the beliefs and features of a task-based approach.

Conversation is discourse

Discourse is the use to which language is put in order to fulfil the specific communicative needs of its users in specific contexts. Typically, discourse is sustained over several turns (of talk) or sentences (of text). Thus, engaging in conversation involves a lot more than the stacking of isolated sentences one on top of the other. In conversations, speakers co-operate in order to jointly construct a discourse that is both connected and coherent. Speakers respond to, and build on, successive utterances, while at the same time ensuring (and expecting) that whatever is said will be somehow relevant, both to what has been said before and to the immediate context.

Arguments in favour of taking a discourse-level view of language (rather than a sentence-level or an utterance-level view) have gained currency in the last few decades, not least because of the common-sense understanding that all real-life language use occurs as discourse. Hence, the capacity to understand and produce isolated sentences is of limited applicability to real-life language use.

Nevertheless, language teaching has – for a long time – focused primarily on the sentence, rather than on the text, as the basic unit of language. Language teaching traditionally starts (and often ends) with the analysis and production of sentence-level grammatical features, such as verb tenses. An approach that foregrounds larger stretches of language, such as connected talk, might be better preparation for real-life language use. That, at least, is the argument of the Dogme approach. Again, it is an argument that is entirely consistent with a communicative approach – but not necessarily the kind of quasi-communicative approach promoted by current coursebooks, where a sentence-level grammar still predominates.

Conversation is interactive, dialogic and communicative

It goes without saying that conversation is both interactive and dialogic. The value – even necessity – of interaction in language learning is generally accepted. Apart from anything, interaction provides opportunities for *output*, and without output there is less likelihood of *feedback*. The input-output-feedback loop is basic to cognitivist models of language learning.

Interaction is, of course, not the same as communication. Speakers can interact without necessarily registering what their co-speakers are saying. Communication implies more than this: it assumes the exchange and negotiation of meaningful messages. The capacity to do this – what's called *communicative competence* – is the goal of communicative language teaching. To this end, the communicative approach prioritises activities that require communicative interaction, such as *information gap* activities. In an 'info-gap', one learner has access to information that another learner does not, and vice versa. To achieve a satisfactory task outcome, they need to exchange the relevant information through talk.

'Communicative competence is a much wider concept than accuracy. Learn to value fluency, confidence and imagination as well as accuracy. Recognise that accuracy will, whatever methodology is employed, always be the last element of competence to be acquired.'
Michael Lewis [5]

'Language always happens as text, and not as isolated words and sentences. From an aesthetic, social or educational perspective it is the text which is the significant unit of language.'
Gunther Kress [6]