

Many years ago, after working in the UK and Mexico, I did an MA at the University of Reading, UK – home to among others David Wilkins and the two Keiths (Morrow and Johnson) – and at that time the heart of the functional/notional movement. I went directly from the MA back to Mexico where, with a brain stuffed full of applied linguistics, my trainees couldn't understand a word I said (because I hadn't processed everything properly). The only thing I could think to

Harmer's half-dozen

Kicking off a new series for the *Gazette*, EFL legend **Jeremy Harmer** lists six things he didn't know when he first wrote *The Practice of English Language Teaching*

do, therefore, was provide them with written notes to back up my incoherent input sessions. Printed out on different-coloured paper (green for grammar, pink for skills, blue for pronunciation,

etc. – if I remember correctly) they seemed to do the trick. My trainees ignored what I was saying, read the notes instead, and disaster was averted. Excited by this I sent the notes off to Longman (as it then was) and promptly heard – nothing! It was more than a year later that the notes were found with two

approving reports in the back of a filing cabinet of a wonderful publisher (Peter Clifford) who had died. And so, 32 years ago, the first edition of *The Practice of English Language Teaching (Pelt)* was published. There have been four new editions of the book since then, the last of which has just been published. ■



Courtesy Hebling

FREEWHEELING Methodologists must 'go on treading the wheel, searching for answers which always seem to be just out of reach'

The world of English was about to change dramatically

Back in 1983 there was an assumption that native speakers in inner-circle countries (UK, US, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, etc.) added up to about half the English speakers in the world – even though everyone knew that would change. But we didn't really know how much it would change. Depending on who you believe – and how you measure it – speakers of English as a second or additional language now outnumber native speakers by a factor of four or five to one. Are British

or American English appropriate models for learners in that reality? And if people really do speak a kind of ELF (English as lingua franca) what implications does that have? Not only that, but even if you believe in the automatic supremacy of native speaker teachers (which I most assuredly don't), there simply aren't enough of us to go round! English teaching takes place in many different cultural and linguistic contexts, and methodology – and classroom techniques – have to shift to take account of that.

Classroom technology would change everything – wouldn't it?

I wrote the first edition of *PELT* on an Olivetti portable typewriter. It was then turned into tidy copy on an electric typewriter with one of those 'golfballs' with different letters (normal and italic etc.). If we were lucky we had overhead projectors and cassette recorders to go with the blackboards in our classrooms. By the time I got my first wordprocessor a year or two later the pace of technological development had already started to speed up at an almost exponential rate – but we never knew back then that you would be able to hook up to the World Wide Web by tapping on a whiteboard, or that small

phones would enable us to be in contact with everyone, everywhere, whenever we liked. We certainly never suspected that huge software companies would develop programs which, they hope, will remove the need for teachers altogether! But let's not exaggerate. I have just returned from Cuba, where English is taught superbly with almost no classroom technology at all. The role of teachers to guide and nurture and feed back on student progress isn't going away yet. It's just that being a teacher, if you do have all the latest technology, is much richer – and perhaps more fun – than it ever used to be.

Communicative language teaching didn't have all the answers

'Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive!' The communicative approach – with the underlying belief that 'language learning would take care of itself', in Dick Allwright's words – promised so much. Just get students doing communicative tasks and somehow the magic would work. It freed up classroom practice, that's for sure, but it didn't please everyone, especially students who wanted 'more grammar' (see below). Crucially an emphasis on activity, activity, activity meant that in some hands explicit language teaching (taking the details of language and studying them) was downgraded. Students with more cognitive needs were left floundering. Our excitement was also predicated, I think now, on fairly comfortable teaching realities with a very Western-style sensibility. Ah well.

The other thing we didn't know was that teachers would always say they were 'communicative teachers' even if their classroom practices were often wildly different from other committed 'communicative

teachers'. Since then we've had task-based learning and the unplugged Dogme movement, but, like the communicative approach, they have not satisfactorily answered, for many teachers, preoccupations about syllabus and sequence and, perhaps, about the explicit teaching of language.

The best that can be said about the communicative movement – and it is worth saying – was that it encouraged teachers to let their learners talk about things and interact with each other rather than only concentrating on pattern practice.

We are hamsters on a wheel

It's not that we thought we knew the answer to everything back then, but I suppose with the confidence of youth we kind of thought we did! The zeal and enthusiasm of early communicative teaching sounded like the way forward and the research we read seemed like the last word. But of course it wasn't. It never is. Our uncertainties and excitements never stop. Research keeps arriving, invigorating and often contradictory, pieces in what I refer to in the latest edition of *PELT* as 'some vast pedagogical jigsaw'. Sometimes they fit, sometimes they don't. But we go on treading the wheel, searching for answers

which always seem to be just out of reach about exactly how people learn languages and how we can best help them to do so. That could be depressing, but in fact the opposite is true. The journey is all, and the view from the wheel is ever-changing and varied. Moreover that constant activity keeps us going, stimulating our curiosity, and it is curiosity and research which are the lifeblood of the engaged and engaging teacher. As for me, the privilege of continually revisiting the contents of a book that first appeared 32 years ago has been a kind of personal continual professional development and I am grateful for that nearly every day!

Celta-type training courses would last for ever!

It was in the 1960s that people like John Haycraft and Paul Lindsay pioneered short teacher training courses which aimed to turn people into functioning language teachers in an impossibly short time. Haycraft's brilliance, in particular, was to focus on the practical side of teaching, and gradually his courses morphed into the Celta, a teaching preparation qualification that can be achieved in four weeks.

It was (and is) a brilliant concept – equipping someone with enough skills in a short time so that they can stand in front of a class and more or less survive!

Celta courses were originally designed for native-speaker teachers and they espoused an essentially structural-situational view of language teaching, which, when the communicative movement turned up, rebranded itself as PPP (presentation, practice and production).

I suppose that all of us back then assumed that the courses would change dramatically as the world of language teaching moved forward. But I can't help feeling that in many respects modern Celta courses look remarkably similar to their twentieth-century origins. Some people will now start to insist on the changes that have been made – and they have – but it's the similarities that intrigue me. Other courses are also available!

Lexical chunking is the key to fluency

In 1983, when the first edition of *PELT* was published, people were only just beginning to build large language corpora to help us observe how language works. In the intervening years we have discovered a great deal about collocation patterns, frequency, genre, etc. that we may have suspected before, but (despite Michael West and his generation) which we could not be sure of. Well, we can be a lot more certain now – as any

comparison of a 1983 learners' dictionary and its 2015 descendant will show. The work of writers like Dave Willis and Michael Lewis (who pointed out that words which group together in meaning 'chunks' form the essential building blocks of fluent language use) was unknown to us then. The closest we got was the excitement of functional/notional syllabuses which, in their phrase-approach to language listing, had some-

thing in common with what was to come.

You would think, knowing what we now know, that grammar syllabuses as organising systems might have been discarded, but they're still going strong and still form the spine of many language teaching materials and courses. People find them comforting, I suppose, and so we are still waiting for a radical new shift away from structural syllabuses.

Jeremy Harmer's
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