

CHAPTER 1

THE SECOND LANGUAGE TEACHING DILEMMA

They spell it Vinci and pronounce it Vinchy; foreigners always spell better than they pronounce.

Mark Twain (1835-1910)

Introduction

The 1880s constitute a significant period in the history of language education. That was the decade in which a group of teachers initiated a grassroots movement, known as the *Reform Movement*, that changed the course of language teaching in a radical way. The objective of those educational “reformers” was to tackle head-on the conceivable reasons why students of languages at school seemed invariably to experience so many difficulties and, by the end of a course of study, to achieve such low levels of proficiency. Why is it, they asked, that language learning in a classroom environment is such a challenging and generally unproductive experience, especially when compared to how easily and *naturally* the native language is acquired during infancy and childhood? The reformers believed that this predicament was not connected, in any way whatsoever, to any diminished ability to learn languages after childhood, but rather to the archaic language teaching method being used in the schools at the time—the so-called *Grammar-Translation Method*.

Is there anything, they asked, that could be done *in the classroom* to make language learning less of a struggle, and more comparable to how the native language is acquired? The reformers turned to the then-fledgling sciences of linguistics and psychology. Their aim was to extract pedagogical principles from the scientific research on both *language* by linguists and on the *learner* by psychologists and then convert these into a *scientifically-designed* method that they hoped would tap into the students’ innate language-learning resources in a productive way. The reformers presented and argued their case persuasively to their fellow teachers. Their argument was so compelling that it has left a legacy to this day. In fact, thanks to the Reform Movement it is virtually impossible to think of second language teaching as anything but a scientifically-designed form of instruction grounded in some theory of learning.

Over a century and a quarter later, however, the reformist paradigm has hardly lived up to the expectations it raised at the outset. Students everywhere continue to complain about the effort it takes to learn a new language and about the insufficient levels of proficiency they attain, *no matter how hard they try or how competent the teacher is*. This raises a fundamental question: Was the reformist paradigm a misguided one? Many now believe that it was. I do not. Theoretically-

informed language teaching *can* make a difference, even if within certain limits. The main objective of this book is, in effect, to revisit the dilemma faced by the reformers and the *theory-into-practice* paradigm they established to resolve it. Like the reformers, I will also tackle the dilemma by turning to a scientific domain for insights—the neuroscientific one. However, before doing so, it is necessary to establish a historical frame-of-reference that will allow me to discuss the dilemma and the paradigm in a meaningful way. That is the goal of this opening chapter.

Throughout this chapter and book I will use certain terms and abbreviations in specific ways. These are now standard in professional discussions of second language teaching. They are listed in the glossary at the back for convenience. The term *native language* (NL) refers to the language (or languages) acquired during infancy and childhood in a *natural* context. The term *first language* is also used in the literature as a synonym for native language. The term *second language* (SL) refers to any language learned after the NL. In this book SL will be used exclusively to designate any language learned formally in school after childhood. In this latter sense, the terms *foreign language* and *target language* are also used interchangeably in the professional literature. The term *native language acquisition* (NLA), rather than *native language learning*, is the one preferred today by most linguists and developmental psychologists. Analogously, the term *second language acquisition* (SLA), rather than *second language learning*, is the preferred one, and will thus be used in this book as well.

The term *methodology* refers to the practice of devising pedagogical practices, techniques, learning materials, etc. based on both the relevant research on learning and the insights of practitioners. The word *syllabus* refers to the organization of a course, or program of study, in terms of a specific view of learning: e.g. a *structural syllabus* would specify *which* structures of pronunciation, grammar, etc. are to be taught and in *what* sequence they are to be taught. The term *method* designates a pre-set, fixed way of designing a syllabus, carrying out procedures in a classroom, and preparing learning materials; *approach*, on the other hand, refers to a more flexible way of doing the same kinds of things. The word *technique* denotes a specific procedure for carrying out some pedagogical task or instructional objective. Finally, *input* refers to the linguistic information to which a learner is exposed and from which he/she is supposed to learn something specific; while *intake* refers to the actual information the learner takes away from the input and is able to store into long-term memory.

The SLT Dilemma

Ever since the Reform Movement, the teaching of SLs has been informed by theories and findings coming out of psychology and linguistics. This interplay between research and practice has produced teachers who are among the most skilled and knowledgeable in the entire field of education. As we enter the first decade of the twenty-first century it is, in fact, difficult to think of the SL classroom in high school, college, or university as anything but a highly advanced learning environment. So, why is there, despite the apparent sophistication, still so much debate going on in scholarly journals, and among practitioners at conferences and meetings, about what to do to make SLA effective and student discourse more native-

like? The recent literature has even rekindled an old debate. Should we continue to focus on developing in the learner a functional knowledge of the target language? Or, should we return to the deployment of age-old techniques designed to help learners develop a conscious control of grammatical structure?

This debate has been re-ignited, no doubt, because teachers continue to be frustrated by the inability of their students to speak in ways that reflect how native speakers of the target language do and because it persistently takes them so much time and effort to produce even the simplest of sentences, let alone entire discourses. The nagging and enduring *second language teaching* (SLT) *Dilemma* can be articulated as follows:

Why is it that, despite considerable research on second language acquisition in classroom environments in the last 125 years, and despite the many pedagogical advancements that such research has made possible, students rarely achieve high levels of proficiency, no matter how long they have been studying a language and no matter how they have been taught the language?

Some teachers now reject the reformist theory-into-practice paradigm completely, since no scientifically-designed pedagogical method has ever proven itself to be universally effective. As Selinker (1972) described a little while back, barely 5% of all language students exposed to classroom pedagogy eventually achieve native-like proficiency in the SL, no matter what kind of instruction they may have received. The vast majority of students, Selinker lamented, were going to have to be satisfied with learning approximations of the SL. Many of those who reject the reformist paradigm generally tend to seek other ways to deliver SL training—e.g. through immersion training or through a “languages across the curriculum” approach (whereby the SL is used by students as a tool to learn other school subjects). Both solutions, incidentally, have ancient roots. In many parts of the ancient world, selected young learners were sent regularly to do their language learning *in loco*, i.e. in the actual societies where they would be later stationed. From their “immersion experience,” it was believed they could learn to speak the foreign language effortlessly and naturally. And, it was the Romans who introduced the “languages across the curriculum” approach, teaching Greek to their children within their own school system, thus establishing one of the earliest models of early childhood bilingual education. In the first years of life, a Roman child would be entrusted to a Greek-speaking slave or nurse so that he/she could be exposed naturally to the language. When the child reached school age he/she would then be taught the curriculum in the two languages—at first by a Greek *grammaticós* (grammar teacher) and a Latin *ludi magister* (task/game master), and a little later by a Greek *rhetor* (teacher of rhetoric) and a Latin *orator* (teacher of oratory) (Titone 1968: 6).

Yet, despite the many successes that have been documented for contemporary immersion and languages-across-the-curriculum approaches, the search for appropriate classroom pedagogy goes on relentlessly nonetheless. The SLT Dilemma is a challenge from which teachers simply refuse to shy away. The reformist dream of turning the classroom into an effective learning environment is alive and well in many professional quarters, as teachers today continue to seek some practical theo-

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