Trends and issues in ELT methods and methodology

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Trends and issues in ELT methods and methodology can be identified at two main levels. One is in terms of the theoretical pronouncements of the 'professional discourse', as manifested by major publications, conference presentations, and so on. This article therefore begins by briefly summarizing some of the main developments of this kind from 1995 onwards. In this respect, the period as a whole is seen to be characterized primarily by increased advocacy of a 'communicating to learn' approach. However, methods and methodology also manifest themselves, of course, in the form of classroom practice. The attempt is therefore made to characterize developments since 1995 at this level as well, by comparing earlier and more recent editions of a unit from a widely-used international ELT coursebook. Their methodology is seen to have remained relatively similar, and, in contrast to the theoretical level, to have taken a mainly 'learning to communicate' orientation. The article concludes by also considering what form future developments in the area might take.

> Surely some revelation is at hand;
> Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
> W. B. Yeats

Introduction

Attempting to characterize developments in ELT 'methods' (i.e. 'prescribed' ways of teaching, such as 'Audiolingualism') and 'methodology' (ways of teaching in general) is inherently problematic. It is possible, of course, to identify trends made public by the 'professional discourse' (the main 'messages' emanating from influential publications, conference presentations, and so on). However, it is well known that the extent to which such ideas correspond to practice at the 'chalk face' is very often another matter altogether. But because the world of classroom teaching is largely invisible, detecting patterns at this level is difficult. Even when classroom observation is possible, it is likely that what is seen will differ from what normally happens, due to the 'observer effect'. Furthermore, there is the issue of variability across the myriad situations in which EFL is taught around the globe. To what extent, in other words, can what is observed be described as in any way

'typical' or 'representative' (and thereby be seen to constitute a 'trend' of some kind)?

In what follows, I will therefore first of all briefly attempt to characterize trends in ELT methods and methodology over the last 15 years or so in terms of theoretical perspectives. Then, the reservations just mentioned notwithstanding, I will also attempt to capture at least something of the picture at the classroom level. I will try to do so by analysing a unit of teaching material from earlier and later editions, published during the period in question, of a well-known international ELT coursebook, in order to identify their teaching methods and the extent to which they changed or remained similar.

Of course, how teachers teach does not necessarily reflect the methodology of the coursebook. However, the design of the kind of coursebook that will be analysed is based to a great extent on feedback from practising EFL teachers, working in a wide variety of ELT situations, concerning what kind of teaching methods they feel work best in their classrooms. Thus, tracking developments in the approach used in such teaching materials, although it has its limitations, can be seen as one way of getting reasonably close to identifying trends in methods at the classroom level, and on a widespread basis.

Theoretical developments

First, then, what have been among the main developments in methods and methodology since 1995, in terms of professional debate? One of the most widely discussed theoretical ideas at the beginning of the period was the concept of the 'postmethod condition' (Kumaravadivelu 1994), i.e. the view that 'method', in the sense already indicated—a prescription for how language can best be taught and learnt—was no longer a credible basis for methodology. An allied concept which found expression around the same time was that of 'appropriate methodology' (Holliday 1994), the idea that teaching methods should be based on an appreciation of the sociocultural context in which they are to be used. Both concepts lent support to the view that methodology should take the form of 'principled pragmatism' (Kumaravadivelu op. cit.: 31–2), that is, make use of a mixture of insights from research and theorizing about language learning, information about situational factors, and so on, rather than be built on a monolithic concept of 'method'. However, research by Bell (2007) indicates that, historically, the practice of many teachers has long tended to take such a form, even in the heyday of the 'method era'.

Another major current in theoretical debates about ELT methodology during the period in question has been the application of a 'critical theory' perspective to language teaching methods, i.e. the view that 'structures of inequality' are created and perpetuated by certain kinds of teaching policies and practices, and that more equitable ones should therefore be adopted in order to solve this problem (Waters 2009b). One manifestation of this perspective has been 'critical pedagogy', in which language is analysed in order to show how it contributes to asymmetrical power relations. However, this approach has tended

to result in a form of critical discourse analysis rather than focus on the teaching of basic aspects of language system knowledge (see, for example, Fabrício and Santos 2006).

A further manifestation of the critical theory-based re-evaluation of ELT methodology has been the view that certain well-established teaching techniques, because of their 'nativespeakerist' provenance, can be regarded as 'culturist' or even 'racist'. Thus, Kubota (1999) argues that cultural generalizations about students' preferred learning styles are a form of racial stereotyping, and should therefore be avoided. Similarly, Holliday (2005) sees everyday aspects of methodology as capable of harbouring neocolonialist undertones. For example, the use of realia is regarded as forming

> a parallel ... with the trinkets offered by Western explorers to the 'natives' of a foreign shore where there was thought to be no shared civilization. (ibid.: 50)

However, such views can be criticized for failing to also give due consideration to the potential pedagogical benefits of such practices (Waters 2009b).

None of the developments discussed so far, however, can be regarded as being centrally concerned with the methodological 'heart of the matter', i.e. what further understanding has been developed, during the period in question, of the methods of teaching more likely to help learners master both a knowledge of the 'system' of English *and* the ability to use it for practical communication purposes? One attempt to answer this question is provided in Lightbown and Spada (2006), on the basis of their review of classroom-based research conducted over the last 15 years or so. They conclude that, in overall terms, the findings from such studies

> offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative and content-based programmes are more effective in promoting second language learning than programmes that are limited to a virtually exclusive emphasis on comprehension, fluency, or accuracy alone. (ibid.: 179)

However, as they also go on to say:

> Decisions about when and how to provide form focus must take into account differences in learner characteristics ... Quite different approaches would be appropriate for, say, trained linguists learning a fourth or fifth language, young children beginning their schooling in a second language environment, both younger and older immigrants who cannot read and write in their own language, and adolescents studying a foreign language for a few hours a week at school. (op.cit.: 179–80)

and

> ... it is not necessary to choose between form-based and meaning-based instruction. Rather, the challenge is to find the best balance of these two orientations. (op.cit.: 180)

Nevertheless, despite the eclecticism implied by these perspectives, the main tenor of professional discussions since 1995 about how best to achieve the twin goals of equipping learners with a knowledge of form and the ability to communicate has revolved to a much greater extent around the continuing promotion of a more monolithic, 'communicating to learn' approach, one originating in the 15 years or so before 1995. Seen by its adherents as drawing support from the findings of second language acquisition (SLA) studies, such an approach advocates maximizing opportunities for learners to interact as autonomously as possible with 'authentic' communication data in order to produce personally meaningful utterances. This work is allied with a proportionally much smaller component involving a 'focus on form' (i.e. an 'emergent', 'just in time') and/or 'awareness-raising' treatment of grammar and so on.

Methods based on such thinking that have grown in strength or been developed since 1995 include what might be called the 'strong' form of 'task-based' language teaching, whereby 'tasks'—activities in which learners use language as communication—form the central component of teaching and learning. The increasing spread during the period of CLIL (content and language integrated learning; see elsewhere in this issue) can also be seen as influenced by the same current of thinking. Another example is the emergence of 'Dogme ELT', 'a materials-light, conversation-driven philosophy of teaching that, above all, focuses on the learner and on emergent language' (Meddings and Thornbury 2009: 103).

In addition (and however paradoxically), there have also been repeated calls for a relatively 'communicating to learn'-oriented methodology to be adopted as the basis for coursebook design (Tomlinson 2010). Indeed, because of the degree to which this concept of language teaching and learning has been promoted over the last 15 years or so, Prodromou and Mishan (2008: 193–4) argue that it has become a form of 'methodological correctness'. In overall terms, thus, an era which began with an anti-method stance has resulted in what is, in many ways, and ironically enough, the renewal of a strand of 'methodism' originally developed during the preceding period, a kind of 'second coming'.

Practice

However, to what extent has the practice of ELT methodology followed a similar path over the same period? To attempt to answer this question, as already explained, an analysis was carried out of the main methodological features of two versions of a unit of coursebook teaching material published since 1995, the first appearing near the beginning of the period, and the second towards the end. The coursebook editions in question were the 1996 and 2009 versions of *Headway Intermediate* (Soars and Soars 1996, 2009). This coursebook was chosen because it is widely used and influential, and the intermediate level from it on the grounds that this is the one attained by most EFL learners.

The overall structure and methodology of all the units in each of the two books is very similar to the two (the fifth, in both cases) that were

randomly selected for analysis.[1] However, it should be noted that the titles of the components of the units in both editions, especially those concerned with 'four skills' work, vary from unit to unit, depending on how the skills have been grouped together (for example sometimes it is 'Reading and speaking', sometimes 'Listening and speaking'). Similar variation occurs with respect to non-grammar language work as well (for example sometimes the heading is just 'Vocabulary', sometimes 'Vocabulary and pronunciation', sometimes only 'Pronunciation', and so on). Also, most parts of the 'four skills' sections also include a subsidiary focus on the other skill areas as well, especially speaking. All this said, however, the same basic mix of ingredients, in approximately similar proportions, occurs in all of the units in each of the two editions, and, as will be seen, to a large extent across the units in both editions as well.

The main features of the two units can be compared and contrasted as follows.

Components

As Table 1 shows, there are some small differences between the two versions in terms of the order of the elements (for example the position of vocabulary work). There are also differences in the titles of most of the components in each of the units. First, however, Item 5 in both the earlier and later versions ('Postscript' and 'Everyday English', respectively) focuses on very similar aspects of language. Also, and as noted earlier, the titles of the four skills components and of the non-grammar language work sections vary from unit to unit in both editions; the ones here should therefore be seen only as indicative, and the differences in this respect are thus not significant. On the other hand, in terms of similarities, it is obvious that both versions contain the same three main components, i.e. work involving grammar, other aspects of language (vocabulary, functions, etc.), and the four skills.

Composition

As Table 2 indicates, taken together, the percentage totals for the two language work areas in the 2009 edition are circa ten per cent lower (60 per cent versus 50 per cent) than in the 1996 version, and the amount of work devoted to the four skills is circa ten per cent higher. However, as will be shown below (see Tables 3 and 4), the four skills and 'Everyday English' components in the 2009 edition, unlike in the equivalent sections of the 1996 version, provide opportunities

Unit 5, 'On the move' (Soars and Soars 1996: 45–55; hereafter '1996')	Unit 5, 'Our changing world' (Soars and Soars 2009: 38–45, 107; hereafter '2009')
1 Grammar presentation and practice (pp. 45–9)	1 Grammar presentation and practice (pp. 38–40)
2 'Listening and vocabulary' (p. 50)	2 'Listening and speaking' (p. 41)
3 'Listening and reading' (pp. 51–3)	3 'Reading and speaking' (pp. 42–3)
4 'Writing' (pp. 54–5)	4 'Vocabulary and pronunciation' (p. 44)
5 'Postscript': 'functional and situational' areas of language (p. 55).	5 'Everyday English': 'social expressions', etc. (p. 45)
	6 'Writing for talking' (p. 107).

TABLE 1
Unit components

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1996	2009
Language work:	Language work:
• grammar: c. 40 % (Item 1 above, pp. 45–9);	• grammar: c. 30 % (Item 1 above, pp. 38–40);
• other language development: c. 20 % (Items 2 and 5 above, pp. 50, 55).	• other language development: c. 20 % (Items 4 and 5 above, pp. 44–5).
Four skills work: c. 40 % (Items 3 and 4 above, pp. 51–5).	Four skills work: c. 50 % (Items 2, 3, and 6 above, pp. 41–3, 107).

TABLE 2
Overall composition

1996	2009
Focus: 'future forms' (e.g. 'going to', 'will', etc.), weather vocabulary, and expressions for 'travelling around'.	Focus: 'future forms', 'future possibilities' ('may', 'might', etc.), 'word building', and 'arranging to meet'.
• 'Test your grammar' (p. 45): identifying and explaining differences between various verb forms with future time reference.	• 'Presentation' (pp. 38–9): grammar for making predictions about the future of the world in the light of global warming, i.e. using carrier content related to the overall unit content theme.
• 'Presentation (1)' (pp. 45–6) and 'Practice' (pp. 46–7): differences in usage between 'going to' and 'will', followed by exercises concerned with practising and distinguishing the two forms.	• 'Practice' (pp. 39–40): exercises on using the forms in the previous section to make predictions about everyday personal matters and the weather.
• 'Presentation (2)' (pp. 47–8) and 'Practice' (pp. 48–9): the use of the present continuous with future time reference, followed by exercises involving this form and the others introduced in the earlier part.	• 'Vocabulary and pronunciation' (p. 44): information about and exercises on the use of suffixes, prefixes, and word stress. A wide range of everyday vocabulary items are used in the exercises, none of them with any obvious connection to the previous parts of the unit.
• 'Language review' (p. 49): summary of the uses as well as examples of each of the three main verb forms covered so far.	• 'Everyday English' (p. 45): exercises on understanding and using common expressions related to arranging meetings. This work also involves making frequent use of the grammatical forms studied earlier on in the unit.
All the above parts of the unit make use of a wide range of everyday situations as 'carrier' content,[2] with no particular overall theme.	
• 'Vocabulary development' (p. 50): exercises concerning words for geographical features and weather states, as well as further practice in the use of 'will'.	
• 'Postscript' (p. 55): exercises regarding everyday expressions associated with forms of transport and hotel service requests. The 'On the move' unit 'content' topic therefore occurs here as well as in the 'four skills' section (see Table 4 below).	

TABLE 3
Language work

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1996	2009
• 'Listening and reading' (pp. 51–3): a combined listening/reading text on the topic of a type of holiday tour and a related set of pre-, while-, and post-comprehension exercises, the last of which involves conducting a spoken class survey concerning holiday-type preferences.	• 'Listening and speaking' (p. 41): a short written introduction to a listening passage about 'space tourism', and a related set of listening comprehension exercises, the last of which appears to constitute the main speaking exercise. Also, under the heading 'Spoken English', this section contains information about and an exercise on one of the other linguistic features of the listening passage, i.e. a small further 'language work' section.
The text used for this section has the appearance of being specially written for the level rather than 'authentic', and since it has the features of a written text but is used for listening as well as reading, is 'inauthentic' in this way also (i.e. it appears more like a 'play script' than natural discussion).	The listening text is in the form of a radio interview and appears 'authentic'. It also contains numerous examples of the kind of grammatical structures focused on in the preceding parts of the unit. The related speaking exercise ('What do you think?'), however, does not seem to require any obvious use of these forms.
• 'Writing' (pp. 54–5): making and responding to a written holiday booking enquiry.	• 'Reading and speaking' (pp. 42–3): a reading passage about possible forms of 'Life in 2060' and a related set of comprehension exercises.
Neither of these sections appears to focus to any significant extent on the grammar or vocabulary covered in the earlier grammar presentation and practice parts of the unit.	The text, while appearing lifelike in terms of layout, structure, and so on, has been adapted to form part of a 'fill the gap' exercise, i.e. its use is 'inauthentic'. Like the main one in the preceding section, this text also contains frequent examples of the 'target' grammar. The last exercise in this section ('What do you think?') appears to function as the main speaking exercise, and this time a good deal of it would seem likely to involve use of the grammar studied earlier in the unit.
	• 'Writing for talking' (p. 107): preparing and delivering a talk, similar to an example given (in both spoken and written form), on the subject of a personal 'cause for concern'.
	There is no obvious relationship between the main grammatical forms that would be used here and those studied earlier in the unit (in addition, this time the carrier content of the sample text is similarly unrelated to the rest of the unit).

TABLE 4
Four skills work

for further reinforcement and practice of the ground covered in the grammar section. In terms of its 'application' aspect, in other words, the language work element is a good deal more extensive in the later edition.

Language work   As Table 3 shows, although both versions of the unit focus on 'future forms', the 2009 one also includes work on the language of expressing 'future possibilities'. The grammar work is therefore more extensive but also more 'concise' (three pages rather than four) in the later edition.

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The two versions also focus on different areas of vocabulary and 'social' English, and in the 2009 version there is also more extensive use of the unit content theme ('Our changing world') via the work in pages 38–9, as well as more coherence in terms of language focus between the earlier grammar work and the 'Everyday English' section. However, as the table also shows, there are many underlying similarities between the two versions in terms of their methodology, i.e. both provide copious amounts of language 'input', use texts primarily in order to illustrate language points, and contain activities which focus mainly on practising the language items on a section-by-section basis.

Four skills work

As Table 4 above indicates, there are clearly differences between the four skills parts of the two versions in terms of 'carrier' content topics and in the overall focus of each of the writing sections. There is also greater 'coherence' in the 2009 version between the preceding grammar work and the language used in the 'Listening and speaking' and 'Reading and speaking' texts, as well as, to a more limited extent, in terms of the main speaking activity in the latter. At the same time, however, it is also clear that the overall purpose and nature of the passages and exercises in these sections has remained broadly similar, i.e. to provide structured practice of comprehension and production skills and of aspects of language, using specially constructed texts.

Overall findings

The preceding analysis has shown that there are a number of differences between the two versions of the materials, some relatively superficial, others more significant. For example, the position of the vocabulary work sections has changed, the carrier content frequently differs, and so on. However, more fundamentally, there is a broader and more coherent grammar focus in the later version, and the main listening and reading texts contain frequent examples of the grammar focused on in the earlier parts of the unit, and some of the related exercises, as well as in the 'Everyday English' section, are clearly intended to involve the students in using these forms as well. In these ways there is therefore an increased emphasis in the 2009 edition on exposing students to and giving them opportunities to put the 'target' grammar into practice.

At the same time, however, many of the main features of the methodology remain unchanged. Most of the spoken and written texts in both versions appear to be 'inauthentic' and serve primarily as vehicles for skills and language work. Approximately half of both versions of the unit are taken up with the presentation and practice of the target grammatical forms. Exercises elsewhere in both cases tend to be primarily skills focused, or sometimes provide further grammar practice. Both units, in other words, adopt a largely 'learning to communicate'-based approach, in which language is first of all systematically studied and then put into practice in a relatively controlled fashion. There has therefore been no significant change in methodology from the earlier to the later versions. It is also obvious that the approach used in these materials has differed markedly from the main 'communicating to learn' trend in theoretical discussions during the same period, as discussed earlier. Much the same state of affairs is true of many other similar publications from the period as well

(see Waters 2009a). A possible explanation for this situation is discussed in the last part of the following section.

Conclusion: future developments

What of the future? As just discussed, there is evidence to suggest that methodology at the 'grass-roots' level has remained relatively stable over the last 15 years or so. However, one factor that may cause this situation to change in the coming years is the growing use of electronic technology in language teaching. For example, research shows that the use of the interactive whiteboard can have a significant effect on teaching methodology, by making it possible for new kinds of learning opportunities to occur. There is also evidence that the increasing ubiquity of web-based language teaching and learning resources has the potential to redistribute the balance between teacher-led and learner-based interaction. In addition, many coursebooks are nowadays already accompanied by an ever-widening range of linked e-resources, and these are likely to increase the opportunities for learners to work more independently as well, and for methodology to therefore become more differentiated than at present. It also seems plausible that the current exponential spread of mobile electronic devices will further increase this effect.

On the other hand, it also seems likely that the gap identified above, between ELT methodology at the level of theorizing, on the one hand, and of indicative classroom practice on the other, will continue to exist for the foreseeable future. This situation is by no means new, as surveys of the relationship between professional thinking and coursebooks from the years preceding 1995 testify. Also, in the last decade or so, as already noted, theorizing about ELT methodology has become increasingly based on the findings of SLA studies, and academic research of this kind is typically held in high esteem around the world, a situation which is unlikely to change.

At the same time, however, the primary use of such a 'knowledge-base' will mean that much of what is also vital to take into account in the development of methodology will continue to be overlooked. As Ur (2011) points out, with respect to the teaching of grammar:

> The practice of a second language teaching involves not only SLA processes but also things like students' socio-cultural background, relationships, personalities; motivation; their expectations, learning styles and preferences; the influence of stakeholders such as parents, ministries of education, school principals; aspects of lesson design and planning; time available for preparation and correction of notebooks; classroom management and discipline; upcoming exams … to mention but a few. Such features often actually have more influence on how grammar is taught, and whether it is successfully learnt, than any of those dealt with in research. (ibid.: 518)

It therefore seems likely that classroom-level teaching methods, rather than undergoing some kind of theory-driven 'second coming', will continue to be based rather less on the findings of SLA studies than on enduring situational realities.

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Notes

1 Due to space constraints, only the *Student's Book* materials for the units have been analysed.
2 'Non-linguistic' subject matter that provides an illustrative context for language work.

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