Why are teachers so ignorant about language?

In the age of information, ignorance is a choice. – Donny Miller

There are many English language teachers for whom terms such as the imperfect, finite vs. non-finite verbs forms, polysemy vs. homonymy, the perfective vs. the perfect, aspect vs. tense, nominal clauses, isolating vs. synthetic languages and so on are, and remain, mysterious. Anyone who has trained teachers above initial certificate level will have little difficulty vouching for the truth of this proposition.

Making matters considerably worse, of course, is that much of this ignorance is wilful. It is a choice.

The purpose of this article is to consider the sources of this ignorance and the choice many make to remain stranded in the outer darkness. Ignorance should embarrass but appears not to.

Teachers' ignorance about the nature and structure of language(s) is partly ascribable to methodological influences, partly to changing teaching settings and partly to poor training.

One at a time:

Methodological influences

The first paradigm shift:

For much of its history, language teaching relied on translation into and out of the learners' first language(s) and the target language. The teaching of English was, in general, no exception. Known as Grammar Translation, although it characteristics were more varied than a single name implies, the methodology assumed that to learn a foreign or additional language, it was necessary to:

a) analyse its grammar in relation to the grammar of one's first language, learning to apply the rules of the grammar of the target language, and
b) have to hand a reasonably large lexicon of words and phrases translated out of one's first language.

The method currently has few theoretical adherents although it remains the dominant methodology in many school systems throughout the world and its influences can be perceived in much that happens in classrooms in other settings.

In order successfully to deploy the methodology, it is obviously necessary that the teacher knows both the grammar and lexicon of the target language and the grammar and lexicon of the learners' first language(s). In the classroom, the method is recognisable by a good deal of explanation in the first language of the learners followed by a translation exercise and the keeping of translation notebooks.

The influences of educationalists such as Berlitz and the focus on the so-called Direct Method (i.e., the teaching of the target language in the target language) put an effective end to this need. Thus were teachers spared the chore of knowing anything at all about their learners' first languages.

The second paradigm shift

During the 1960s and 1970s, what came later to be called the Communicative Approach was developed based on an understanding that the target of language learning should be the ability to do things in the language rather than access its literature and cultural base. The method, in its strongest form, now watered down to the extent that it is barely recognisable, removed the focus on teaching grammar and structure completely and thus relieved teachers of the responsibility to know anything about the grammar and structure of the target language either.

Changing teaching settings

Although some language teaching and learning took place in the societies in which the language was spoken (one might cite the instruction of Huguenot immigrants in England during the 17th century and the instruction manual developed by Guy Miège (1685), *Nouvelle méthode pour apprendre l'Anglais*[1]), until fairly recently most language instruction took place in the learners' own countries. This is, of course, still overwhelmingly the case. It is only within the last few decades that very much English language teaching has, in fact, taken place at all in an English-speaking environment and such a benefit is still confined to those who can afford the often very considerable outlay that studying overseas incurs.

Although in a small minority of teachers of English, those functioning in native-speaker settings are usually first-language speakers of English. Lately, thankfully, this is beginning to change with greater labour mobility, especially in Europe, for teachers to come to the UK to teach. Although non-native speakers of English, such teachers frequently command English to impressively high standards and are often educated and trained better than their native-speaking colleagues. Above all, many of these teachers actually understand the grammar, discourse and phonological systems of English and are able accurately to analyse what they teach. For many of their English-speaking colleagues, this cannot be claimed. Too many have a rudimentary knowledge of their subject and rely on their native-speaker intuition to present acceptable models and deal with error.

Another setting-specific change is in the numbers of native speakers teaching overseas in non-native-speaking environments. The development of initial (preparatory, to give them their old title) qualifications in ELT has contributed to the trend. Large numbers of variably qualified native speakers now work in almost all the major countries of the world. Maley[2] states it this way:

> *there is an uneasy division between local non-native speaker teachers, often with long training, experience, and expertise, who often work in the state system, and native-speaker expatriate teachers, often with minimal qualifications and experience and only a temporary loyalty to their country of sojourn, and who usually work in the private sector.*

As temporary residents, many of these teachers do set about learning the language(s) of their students. Many do not. Some of these teachers take seriously their trainers' admonitions concerning the preparatory nature of their qualification and strive to develop. Many do not. Many of these teachers, unqualified and unemployable in their home countries, have only the sketchiest understanding of language in general and English in particular. They side with the *I-can-speak-it-so-I-can-teach-it* school of thought.

(On the other side of the coin, learners, too, in many countries have become less homogenous and it is not at all rare to find multi-lingual groups in schools in countries whose general populations are monolingual. Arguably, that is an additional reason to learn something about languages in general.)

Poor training

A less obvious contributor to ignorance is training.

A case in point concerns the world's most popular initial training course, the Cambridge CELTA, which will be discussed here although it should be noted that other initial training schemes are very similar in content and intent. One aim of these courses is for participants to acquire a knowledge of "Basic concepts and terminology used in ELT to discuss language form and use" and be able to "demonstrate a basic working knowledge of how the verb phrase and the noun phrase are formed and used in English". Later, the syllabus has as an objective for trainees to "understand some features of connected speech".

With reference to the learners' first languages, the syllabus also contains the target ability to "identify some significant differences between their own language and a foreign language, and demonstrate in practice their understanding of the relevance of some of these differences for the teacher and learner". All references are to the published CELTA syllabus document[3].

Note how carefully hedged and minimalist all these targets are: *some* features, *some* significant differences, *Basic* concepts, a *basic* working knowledge and, even more worryingly, *a* foreign language (i.e., only one) etc.

Only a fragmentary and oversimplified knowledge of English structure can be gleaned from such courses. Anything beyond the scope of a grammar for an intermediate learner of English is outside the remit of initial training courses and no understanding of how languages are related and structured at a macro level is required at all.

Schemes of this sort, already poor and unambitious in relation to subject knowledge, suffer from a further debilitating handicap. At initial level in particular (but not confined to this setting), tutors are frequently trained by colleagues in house or in sister institutions, overwhelmingly in the private sector. Making matters worse, tutors on many of these courses are themselves graduates of such programmes, frequently in the institution in which they now deliver them. Having assumed that the knowledge they have been given of language in general is adequate, they now proceed to assign subject knowledge to the background and deem it less important than observable procedural (what they would call 'practical') ability.

There are reasons for the persistence of degraded training:

a. Initial training courses are profitable. In some cases, institutions remain financially viable only because of a constant supply of untrained native-speakers of English looking for work overseas that pays better than grape picking. Profits accrue, too, to the accrediting bodies and to the many organisations who exploit people's naivety concerning the nature of qualifications by offering unrecognised and worthless on-line courses.
b. It is tempting to feel that one can expend a month of one's time and a few weeks' salary achieving some sort of qualified teaching status. This naïve assumption is, of course, assiduously cultivated by many training organisations. It is in their interests to do so.
c. The demonstrably false assumption that native speakers already 'know' the language they hope to teach continues to be widespread especially among participants and trainers on initial courses.

Outcomes

Three phenomena have been identified so far:

a. The two major shifts in the theoretical underpinnings of language teaching which have led some to believe that they need understand neither their own language nor that / those of their learners.
b. The unearned and undeserved reverence for native-speaker teachers whose training is desultory at best and often entirely absent in any meaningful respect.
c. Poor training practice combined with unambitious training syllabuses even for 'recognised' qualifications. Many other unrecognised courses exist, of course, and they are often even worse.

Each of these factors alone would be serious; in combination, their effects are truly grim.

The main issues are:

a. That many (especially native-speaking) teachers of English are unable to identify, analyse, explain or teach fundamental areas of English structure, including, but not confined to its grammatical structures, phonological features and discourse characteristics.
b. That too much 'teaching' goes on at the level of phrase-book language and game playing masquerading as a communicative approach of some kind.
c. That learners of English are being short changed by ignorant (often wilfully so) teachers who believe, conveniently for them, that learners of the language do not need or want to understand the formal features of the language they aspire to master or to notice, and be able to exploit a knowledge of, the differences between their languages and the targets.

This is by no means a new development, of course. These three wholly displeasing phenomena have been noticeable for decades. As long ago as 1992, Maley (*op cit*) summed up the situation of English Language Teaching as follows:

> *We are not 'professionals' in quite the same sense as medics or lawyers. To take a military analogy: we are not an army of career soldiers, all equally well-trained, battle-hardened, well-equipped and committed. We are more like one of those marauding armies in 17th Century Europe with a core of highly trained and motivated cavalry, surrounded by footsoldiers of sometimes dubious reliability and a host of camp-followers bringing up the rear.*

Nothing has changed in any significant way and it will not until the study of language itself becomes central to the study of teaching language. That will require a fundamental re-think of initial teacher training by precisely those organisations and trainers in whose interests it is to avoid anything of the sort.

Do not hold your breath waiting for that to happen.

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[1] Howatt, A.P.R, 1984, *A History of English Language Teaching*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

[2] Maley, A, 1992, *An Open Letter to the Profession*, English Language Teaching Journal, Volume 46/1, Oxford: Oxford University Press

[3] *Cambridge English CELTA Syllabus and Assessment Guidelines*, 4th Edition, (2015), Cambridge: Cambridge English Language Assessment