

One-on-One: Interview with Scott Thornbury

Albert P'Rayan



A few months ago, a friend invited me to deliver a lecture at an institute of engineering and technology where he is working as a professor of English. When I asked her on which topic I could deliver my lecture, she suggested these two topics: 1) Dogme approach to language teaching, and 2) Post-method pedagogy. Out of curiosity, I asked her why she was interested in the topic “Dogme ELT”. She replied that someone recently discussed the topic at an ELT conference and she and her colleagues wanted to know more about it. I promised to deliver a lecture on the topic, but, unfortunately, I couldn’t make it for reasons more than one. I am sure, there are many ELT enthusiasts in India who have heard about Scott Thornbury and his work and some even have carried out research on the Dogme ELT approach to language teaching.

Albert P’Rayan in his One-on-One with Scott Thornbury asked him questions about Dogme method, Teaching ESL/EFL as a global language, professional development for teachers, etc.

The terms *Dogme ELT* and *Teaching Unplugged* are synonymous with your name. Could you share with us when and how you conceived the idea of Dogme ELT?

Essentially, it grew out of a frustration with the way the so-called communicative approach seemed to have been betrayed and hijacked by globalised ELT publishing initiatives, such as the extraordinarily successful *Headway* series (1986).

I had “grown up” as a language teacher in the mid to late seventies and experienced the transition from a very form-focused, regimented kind of teaching (the tail end of the audiolingual method) to the (at the time) totally liberating communicative revolution, with its emphasis on authenticity, meaning, interaction, and so on. As the director of studies in a large school in Cairo, in the late 1970s, I tried to implement these principles. This, combined with my reading of Earl Stevick, and the influence of Stephen Krashen (particularly the notion of “comprehensible input”) impelled me in the direction of a view of teaching that sought to provide optimal conditions for “acquisition”, that is a language-rich, meaning-driven, learning environment – not one driven purely by a grammar syllabus and a “focus on forms”.

So when, as a teacher trainer on the Diploma programme that I helped set up at International House, Barcelona, in 1986, I saw how NON-communicative the “Headway classroom” had become, I – and my colleague Neil Forrest – set about trying to “de-toxify” language teaching, and to restore the “big C” communicative approach. One of the blocks to effective communicative teaching seemed to be an over-dependence on materials and aids, and so we tried to encourage our trainees to “make more out of less” and to cultivate a learning context that foregrounded what the *learners* bring to the classroom. (This also reflected my own experience teaching in Egypt, where materials were extremely limited, at least initially, and where I learned to be very resourceful). The analogy I drew between the “Dogme 1995” film collective and our own teaching training agenda was accidental, but somehow it captured a feeling that was simmering at the time.

What were the limitations of the most successful and influential course book series *Headway* by Soars and Soars?

After ten years of experimentation with alternative ways of organizing syllabuses – e.g. tasks, functions/notions, topics – that followed from the recommendations of the Council of Europe in the mid-seventies, the *Headway* series effectively revived the grammatical syllabus and basically ‘re-set’ language teaching back in the 1960s. Because, when you have a syllabus of grammatical forms, the tendency is to teach those forms for their own sake, rather than teaching them when they are needed for communicative effectiveness. Whereas the

communicative approach had prioritized the meaning-making potential of language (“Say what you want and I will help you say it better”), the rehabilitated ‘Headway’ approach, while claiming to be communicative, prioritized grammatical structure: ‘You can say what you want but you have to use the present perfect continuous’. And, as N.S. Prabhu (1987) nicely puts it, “If the meaning is not one’s own, it seems to follow that the language is not one’s own either”.

What do you mean by “de-toxifying” language teaching?

By ‘de-toxifying’ I mean ridding teaching of its obsession with grammatical form, with accuracy, and with native-speaker standards of – among other things – pronunciation.

Kumaravadivelu in his article titled “Toward a postmethod pedagogy” (*TESOL Quarterly*, 35, 2001) says: “Language pedagogy, to be relevant, must be sensitive to a particular group of teachers teaching a particular group of learners pursuing a particular set of goals within a particular institutional context embedded in a particular sociocultural milieu.” Is this reflected in the philosophy of Dogme ELT?

Yes, very much so. As we wrote in *Teaching Unplugged*:

Dogme is more than simply a new set of techniques and procedures. It is more an attitude shift, a state of mind, a different way of being a teacher. In fact, because it prioritises the local over the global, and the particular over the general, the individual over the crowd, a Dogme approach will vary

according to its context. For some teachers and in some situations, it may be enough to intersperse their teaching with ‘Dogme moments’, such as when a student’s utterance offers a learning opportunity and the lesson takes a brief detour in pursuit of it. Other teachers may be motivated to – or in a position where they are allowed to – design their whole course according to Dogme principles.

How successful is Dogme ELT in countries where English is taught as a second or foreign language? Has it been well received by the ELT community in countries where English is taught either as a second or a foreign language?

Dogme ELT certainly hasn’t become mainstream in practice, because many educators still encounter resistance when they try and apply it. But it has entered the mainstream as an idea which many people who are serious about ELT feel is worthy of consideration – something they need to have an opinion on and even, in the case of publishers and coursebook authors, adapt to.

Is it important for a Dogme ELT teacher to prepare a lesson plan? What is the structure of a typical Dogme method lesson plan?

An unplugged teacher is more likely to go into class with a framework for activity than a lesson plan as such. For example, they might have it in mind to recycle some of yesterday’s emergent language; to spend some time on homework; then to work on a short text they have selected overnight. But all of this might be delayed by a conversation which develops at the start of the class. And

even these notional phases can be unpredictable in terms of timings: if the homework involved the learners generating some stimulus of their own, this will take more or less time depending on how far they have engaged with the task.

So it’s less about pre-planning than post-planning – ‘identifying’ a lesson plan from the notes that were taken while it was happening. Or, to put it more simply, reporting on what actually happened.

It can be done in a number of ways. For example, you can post-rationalise along the lines of a conventional lesson plan, almost filling in the gaps in a standard schema: ‘so these turned out to be the language exponents, and this is how the timings panned out.’ This can be helpful because it shows you are sensitive to the expectations of the wider community – whether this is colleagues, managers, learners or parents. Or you can involve the learners in reporting what happened in the class in ways that make sense to everyone involved.

You are a successful coursebooks and materials writer but Dogme ELT, as a method, is said to be against using materials and technology. Isn’t there a wide gap between what you practise and what you preach?

Actually, I haven’t written a coursebook for twenty years or more. I think, though, that it was the process of writing coursebooks that confirmed my suspicion as to how unsuited they are for the kinds of learning experiences that I was trying to set up in my classrooms. The obsessive concern for teaching ‘grammar MacNuggets’, and the somewhat anodyne

texts used to reinforce these, turned teaching into a joyless activity, whereas Dogme ELT was an attempt to ‘rescue’ the teaching-learning experience from these artificial constraints. I do write books on methodology though, because that’s one way I can get my message across.

One of the primary aims of the Teaching Unplugged method is that the lesson content should “be driven by the students rather than being preplanned by the teacher”. Are learners equipped to generate material for the course? How realistic is the aim?

It is not realistic if you don’t try it – but it is more likely to work when there is a classroom dynamic in which the learners’ contributions are welcomed, validated and not judged solely in terms of their accuracy. This, in turn, requires the teacher to be an equal partner in the classroom ‘sub-culture’. But, in any case, you cannot – and should not – force learners to talk freely and openly about the things that interest them if they don’t want to. You can, however, provide structured activities that invite them to do so in ways which are ‘safe’ and non-threatening – the activities in *Teaching Unplugged* are designed towards that end.

You and Luke Meddlings jointly wrote ‘Teaching Unplugged’, a comprehensive guide to Dogme ELT, and it won the ELTons award for Innovation in the year 2010. How important is the award for you?

The award was important only insofar that it acknowledged that Dogme ELT had made (or was making) a valid contribution to language teaching methodology – that it was not just a ‘fad’.

Some scholars are of the opinion that it is good to have no methods while teaching a language. What is your take on it?

I think that what they mean is that it is ill-advised to slavishly follow a particular method when it is patently inappropriate or lacking in plausibility (see next point). But you cannot teach without adhering to a set of principles about both language and learning, even if these are not explicit. That is to say, every teacher has a ‘method’ in the sense that they have a theory as to how languages are best learned in classrooms.

Prabhu in his article titled “There is no best method – why?” (*TESOL Quarterly*, 24, 1990) explores the concept “teachers’ sense of plausibility”. Are you also convinced that there is no good or bad method?

I tend to agree with Prabhu in the sense that the ultimate arbiter of a method’s probity is the teacher him or herself, and that if you are not convinced by a method, it will not work for you. As Jane Spiro (2013, p. 218) writes, in comparing different methods, ‘the critical factor in success is the commitment and belief of the teacher in the methods he or she is using, and the continuing reflection of the teacher as to whether these methods are making a positive difference.’

I presume that Dogme ELT is all for corpus-based grammar teaching and not for pedagogic grammar. Can we say that to teach authentic English, it is important to teach corpus-based grammar?

First of all, there is no contradiction between corpus-based grammar and pedagogic grammar: if we are going to teach pedagogic

grammar then it should be corpus-based, in the sense that the selection and sequencing of syllabus items should be informed by findings in corpus linguistics, particularly with regard to the typical register in which particular items are found, and their relative frequency. But Dogme ELT rejects the idea of a pre-selected syllabus of items, whether corpus-based or not, and instead recognizes the pedagogic value of the *learner's* syllabus – that is the syllabus that emerges naturally through engagement with real language tasks. As David Willis memorably said,

‘In helping learners manage their insights into the target language we should be conscious that our starting point is the learner’s grammar of the language. It is the learner who has to make sense of the insights derived from input, and learners can only do this by considering new evidence about the language in the light of their current model of the language’ (Willis, 1994:56).

What do you do when you are not thinking about or working on ELT?

I am probably asleep. ;-)

I am happy to know that you were influenced by Stephen Krashen, the most influential voice in language acquisition and education activist. About six months ago I interviewed Dr Krashen. To my question whether he would like to be known as a linguist or as an activist, he said, “I would like the ideas I have worked with to be known, both among academics and the public, so the answer is both.” Mr Thornbury, what do you wish to be known as?

I will never earn the respect of academics to the extent that Krashen has, since I have not really been part of the research community: my role has been to mediate between the academics and the practitioners, so I hope I am respected by the academics whose work I interpret, and appreciated by the practitioners for whom I interpret it.

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