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**“20 Years of Challenges and Decisions”**

**From challenges of the past**  
**to waves of the future**

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**Outline**

My major challenge is for us all to take a closer look at the actual language that we teach and expose learners to. In arguing this, I shall explore five current 'waves' in ELT which should become more influential in the future:

- a sharply focused needs analysis exploring the roles of English in Portugal
- the use of specifically tailored corpora for syllabus and course design
- the identification and analysis of lexical patterns and chunks that provide a link between vocabulary and grammar
- the need for more emphasis on teaching aspects of spoken language
- the implications of SLA research findings and the challenge of task-based teaching as a framework for achieving the above.

These 'waves' have many implications for teachers of general English, EAP and ESP and will be dealt with in the main part of this paper. But let us start by exploring why we need to have a closer look at the language we teach.

## Introduction: a closer look at language

‘WAVES OF THE FUTURE’ being in the title of this paper, I decided, for fun, to investigate the word *waves*. Using the Collins COBUILD concordance sampler, I analysed data for the plural noun *waves*, searching three corpora (spoken British English, written British English and written American English) totalling 45m words.

So what kinds of waves are there in addition to the *ocean waves* painted so beautifully by Hokusai that I showed at the beginning of my plenary?

- Typical noun + noun collocations included:

*sound waves, light waves, shock waves, ocean waves, brain waves, heat waves, gravity waves, air waves, radio waves.*

- Verbs describing *waves* included:

*rolling waves, heaving waves, crashing waves, breaking waves*

- Adjectives: *tidal, foamy, huge, massive, rapid, small-scale, complex, brown, dark, fresh.*

- Verbs collocating with *waves* : *riding, travelling, causing, generating; caused, sent.*

All these seemed similar in British and American, written and spoken. I then looked up *waves of*, and found, in the written corpora, around twenty samples. Notice how many are metaphorical in use. Look at these carefully and work out what proportion seem positive in meaning and what proportion sound negative. Some of course will be neutral.

*waves of ideas*

*waves of new life*

*waves of good fortune*

*waves of jubilation*

*waves of strikes and street protests*

*waves of Albanians streaming into the*

*waves of attack and counter-attack*

*waves of guerrillas*

*waves of doubt and distrust*

*waves of the North Atlantic*

*waves of change*  
*waves of grief and agony*  
*Waves of Fear*  
*waves of stormy light-dappled dark*  
*waves of intense nostalgia*  
*waves of exhaustion*  
*waves of shiny black hair*  
*waves of sound*  
*waves of panic*  
*waves of passion*

All but two or three are metaphorical in use. Roughly a quarter seemed positive; half were negative. To my further surprise, there were no examples of ‘*waves of*’ in the spoken corpus at all.

As we have seen here, we can learn a lot from looking closely at samples of real language data. I now want to give some examples of commonly taught language items and evidence from corpus data that shows why it is important not to become complacent about the language we teach.

In all the following six cases, conventional pedagogic grammars and texts books have given us information about these items that is wrong or misleading.

1. The rules traditionally given for *SOME* and *ANY* are: use *some* in positive statements and *any* in negatives and questions. But what about these common usages?

*Would you like some tea?*

*Do you have some money?*

*Any child under two is eligible.*

*Report any suspicious telephone calls.*

Why are these acceptable? It is to do with meaning. The meaning of *any* is *all* or *every*; ‘*it doesn't matter which/when/what,*’ whereas *some* is used when we have something specific in mind (e.g. money for the shopping.) *Any* is often used in questions and negatives simply because these contexts are generally (but not always) non-specific. In this case, then, knowing the meaning is far more useful than a misleading rule.

2. *WOULD* (sometimes spoken as 'd as in *I'd*) is normally taught in polite requests and conditional sentences. But corpus data reveals other, more common, uses.

- In 48% of sample lines, it is hypothetical in meaning but often occurs without an *if* clause: *it would be nice to keep bees* Only one in six of these actually occur in a conditional sentence *You would be surprised if I told you...*
- In 21% it expresses past habit and is three times as common as *used to*., both in spoken and written: *they would practise all day standing on their heads; we'd always stop on the way home to pick wild strawberries*
- It is also used as past tense of *will*: 6%; to make requests etc 2% and in phrases such as: *I would have thought* .

3. The word *THING* is generally taught as denoting an object; but some of its most common uses are pragmatic in nature, in phrases with specific discourse functions: *The thing is*,...(signalling a problem) *and the best thing is*, ...*the other thing was*, ... (signalling the importance of what is coming next). It also occurs in lists and in vague language: *and things like that, that kind of thing*.

4. We teach REPORTED SPEECH from books often giving complicated rules for tense switches. But what about: *Susan was telling me the other day the best hotel in Dublin is The Shelbourne?* Surely, the tense is selected to reveal the time reference, as it is in any other context. Interestingly we don't teach REPORTED THOUGHT although in the corpus verbs of mental process reporting thought, e.g. *think, hope, wonder* are more frequent than verbs reporting speech. Learners seem to acquire this naturally without the need for rules.

5. Notice the use of ADVERBS OF FREQUENCY with the continuous tense (breaking the rule that they are used only with present simple): *At eight o'clock I'm generally having my breakfast*.

6. Here we might equally well say: *I'm generally having my breakfast when the post arrives*. which shows that we do not only have the INTERRUPTED PAST, but interrupted present and future: *He'll be cooking supper when I get back tonight*. We could save a lot of time by teaching the meaning of *-ing* forms, and illustrating a general rule that works for all tense patterns.

Above I have given six examples highlighting rules that don't work, uses that are not taught and gaps in coverage. I'm sure, in your teaching, you will have noticed many more.

There is so much English to be learnt, it is vital not to waste learners' time with misleading rules and untruths about language use. So the first challenge is - how do we find out what language will be useful for our learners and typical of natural English? Read on.

### **Wave 1. A more sharply focused Needs Analysis**

This first wave began in the 1970s, with the work of John Munby and others, investigating ESP contexts. At that time, people concentrated on investigating the skills and subskills learners would need, and in what social and professional contexts they would need them (performance objectives).

But skills are not enough - they give us at best an impressionistic picture of what to teach. We need to see the detail, to know what specific language learners will have to handle (knowledge objectives). What genres? what types of interactions? on what topics? and to what level of competence? This comprises discourse, socio-cultural, lexical and grammatical knowledge.

So we can begin by investigating and collecting sample language from the learners' **target discourse community** (TDC). If they are training to be nurses, their target discourse community would include hospitals, nursing homes and training contexts. With EAP students, sample language might comprise lectures, tutorials, lab work, library, www resources, text books, and coffee bar chat with peers. With exam-oriented students, their TDC might simply be the exam context itself, in which case an investigation of past papers, of past students' exam experiences might be useful. With young learners, their TDC could include things children will enjoy doing in a future classroom community: learning about their world, hearing/reading stories, making things, emailing pen-pals in other countries.

Ideally (and here is the challenge) we need to shadow people in the target discourse community at work and observe/record what they say, who they listen to, what they read and write during the course of a typical day. If we cannot work-shadow, we can obtain recordings and ask for samples of data. For example, to investigate the English that primary teachers of

English typically use, a colleague and I sent out blank cassettes to mainly non-native primary English teachers asking them to record their next lesson. (See Willis 2002). We listened to all their recordings, transcribed lengthy extracts, analysed and classified language samples. We also looked at Young Learner course books. Thus we gained a clearer picture of typical classroom English (Slattery and Willis, 2001)

However, what happens if you have students with little or no motivation for learning English, or no idea of what they might use English for? Their teachers, who know them best, might be obliged to negotiate one or two target language areas with them. For example, as internet users, they might engage with chat rooms and teenage web-pages; as TV viewers, with video or film extracts, or magazines with story features and problem pages, or pop songs. Learners could be asked to collect sample extracts from sources that interest them to be used in class as language data. Learners can go on to create their own English web-pages, or begin their own email correspondence with students from other countries. For example, an Aston MSc participant who was teaching writing to 12 year old pupils in Turkey forged a pen-pal link with a secondary school in Spain; pupils corresponded in English; the teacher collected and analysed whole sequences of their letters and gained many insights into language useful for future writing courses. The students' motivation rose because they were using English for real.

This investigation of language used in the target discourse community brings us on to my second wave: collecting and assembling typical language data from the target discourse community to create a specifically tailored research corpus from which to build a syllabus.

## **Wave 2. Creation of corpora for syllabus and course design: from research corpus to pedagogic corpus**

After identifying appropriate sources of language data, the steps for compiling a research corpus are, briefly, as follows:

- decide the amount and weightings and balance of the types of language to be collected,(e.g. proportion of spoken to written; proportion of spontaneous to planned language; proportion from each context or source.)
- assemble written and spoken language for your research corpus
- record and transcribe representative samples of spoken language
- for an electronic corpus, scan in sample texts and type in transcripts.

At this stage you have a 'sea' of language, which you can then look at more closely. The next steps are:

- analyse the corpus, identify frequent words, phrases, chunks, patterns; identify and classify common functions, semantic areas, topics etc
- make lists of things to include in your course syllabus
- select a set of teaching materials - texts and spoken language - that reflect the kind of language used in the TDC: a 'pedagogic corpus'. Use your lists to check coverage, and refine the selection of texts if necessary.

This 'pedagogic corpus' will be far smaller and more clearly defined than the larger research corpus, more like a small lake than a sea. (I illustrated this with two abstract paintings of wavy lines by Bridget Riley.)

In some cases, teaching materials could include extracts from the research corpus, so long as the contexts and language are sufficiently familiar and culturally accessible to the learners. This was possible with the course for primary teachers of English. However, with a pre-experience work-force or if using a more general corpus, finding suitable extracts from a research corpus is less easy.

If created following the steps above, the pedagogic corpus of materials should form a microcosm of the research corpus. Having looked this closely at the language of the TARGET DISCOURSE COMMUNITY, you can be confident that what you teach will be of direct use to your learners. It has not been selected on the basis of guesswork or intuition.

### **Wave 3. Identification of chunks and lexical patterns - the link between vocabulary and grammar**

For my third wave I want to look more closely at one aspect of corpus findings - chunks and lexical patterns, also known as lexical phrases (Pawley & Syder, 1983). These form a cline between rigidly fixed phrases, like *of course*, *as a matter of fact*, *At the end of the day*, where no words are likely to change (you would not say *as a matter of truth*;) and phrases or frames that are partially fixed, that have one or two open slots somewhere, like: *See you next week* where the time phrase is changeable.

**fixed** ----- **partially fixed**

prefabricated chunks,  
fixed phrases,  
polywords  
multi-word items

semi-fixed phrases  
patterns  
frames

Widdowson (1989:135) in defining the concept of ‘communicative competence’ stresses the importance of such chunks:

*Communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences... it is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual demands. Communicative competence in this view is essentially a matter of adaptation, and rules are not generative, but regulative and subservient.*

Now go back and see how many chunks and frames you can identify in this extract. Which are fixed? partially fixed? Most people find about twelve, some nesting inside others. They make up a considerable proportion of written text and they are also very common in spoken language (Foster 2001 and Ketko 2000).

So why are they important? They help

- speakers to compose fast in real time (we rarely compose word by word; we think ahead in meaning units, if there is a pre-assembled phrase for what we mean, we use it.)
- writers to conform to genre conventions and sound expert in their fields,
- learners to impress their assessors e.g. by sounding fluent (Baigent, 2005).

The challenge is to find ways of helping learners identify and acquire such phrases. Several research-based classifications of chunks exist, but we need a systematic way to



classify them for learners. I have begun attempting this by identifying three, four and five word chunks and examining their functions, using a Hallidayan three-way analysis:

Ideational: topic-related *apply the rules*, notional e.g time, location, quantity etc

Textual: discourse organising, signalling devices, markers of clause relations e.g. *with the result that, it's a matter of + ing*

Interpersonal: interactional *You know what I mean?*, vague expressions *and stuff like that*, evaluation and comment etc (adapted from Halliday 1994:179)

but I need to do a lot more before I can publish this - this wave needs to gather momentum!

#### **Wave 4. Some aspects of spoken language**

Both written and spoken language can be somewhere along this cline:

spontaneous	planned
ephemeral -----	permanent
private	public

A shopping list written for oneself would be at the spontaneous end, as would a casual chat with friends, while a carefully planned business product presentation to an invited public audience would be at the other.

Most learners have greater problems with spontaneous spoken language, partly because they have less exposure to this and also because its grammar can be rather different from planned or written language grammar which is what is generally taught. Another reason is that conversation flows like waves lapping onto the seashore and disappearing; it is difficult to hold it still in order to examine new words and expressions or perceive patternings.

One way to hold up the flow is to record and transcribe interactions, for examples recordings of tasks that learners have done themselves, so they are already familiar with the context, performed by fluent speakers (Willis1996, Hobbs, 2005).

Learners love studying transcripts if they have been involved in a similar interaction, expressing similar meanings. But what to focus on ? Here are some ideas.

Real-time spontaneous spoken language contains:

- **highly interactive phrases** (checking: *See what I mean?* clarifying, use of tags: *isn't it?* Short questions: *What number?*)
- **a lot of evaluation** (*That's great/awful.. Really? Well, OK. Yes but..*)
- **additive patterns** (narrative:*and then, ..then..* Noun groups: *My friend, her step-mother, her partner works for Aldi too...*)
- **ellipsis** (phrases: *I think so. Afraid not, Don't know why.*)
- **vague or imprecise expressions** (*sort of / kind of ; something like that anyway, and stuff like that*)
- **set routines for specific activities** (direction-giving: *You know the library?* anecdote-telling *There was this man...*)

In addition, spoken language is **co-operative** and often **repetitive** (A:*Nice, that.* B:*Yeah, really nice.*); it is **often formulaic** (*Would you like to... At the end of the day..*) It makes heavy use of **core vocabulary** (*nice, big.*) and **reporting** (phrases with *think,/thought say/said/was saying etc*).

A closer look at features of spoken language can help learners gain confidence. They will realise there is no need always to construct perfect 'sentences'; they can learn routines and formulae to give them time to think what to say next, and use evaluative comments to help conversations along. But their major need is to listen to spontaneous talk, and to experiment with speaking spontaneously themselves, in a meaning-focused environment. This is one advantage of using a task-based approach to teaching, since tasks can give learners a reason for communicating and a chance to experiment with using language in the comparative security of their classrooms. Rote learning and practice of conversational gambits may help, but will not in itself be sufficient for acquiring communicative competence.

Thinking about how learners acquire spontaneous spoken language brings us on to my fifth wave.

## Wave 5. SLA research and learning processes

In the past there has been much research on the acquisition of grammar. (Lightbown 2000.) Behaviourist theories are now largely discredited; we all realise that what is taught is not immediately learned or deployable. (Scott Thornbury makes this point very clearly in

Uncovering Grammar.) The metaphor of teaching single items as bricks to build a wall is no longer tenable.

Now, there is more awareness of interlanguage development - of a learner's language as a developing system (Lightbown and Spada 1999.) A better metaphor for language teaching is that of creating a garden; sow a lot of seeds, some will grow some won't. Some flowers will blossom before others. Things will only grow if the conditions are right. (Hutchinson and Waters 1987).

We must recognise the conditions for natural acquisition and re-create them in our classrooms, providing

- **exposure to language in use** (rich input),
- **opportunities for learners to interact and experiment**, and to achieve things using the language (learner output);
- materials and methods that **motivate learners** and make them feel **successful**.

These are **vital conditions**, without which learners will never learn to communicate.

To help them achieve greater accuracy, we can supplement these with

- some **focus on language form**, but always in the context of meaning.

These are the basic principles behind task-based learning. (Willis J 1996; Willis D and Willis J 2006).

Interestingly, it is now thought possible that different aspects of language can be learned through different learning processes.

Ellis, N (1997) suggests that the form, collocation and grammatical class of a word can be acquired naturally given adequate exposure (implicit learning), whereas the semantic properties of a word can be learned explicitly (e.g. dictionary work and memorisation.)

Willis, D (2003), suggests that different language learning problems require different learning processes: recognition, system building and exploration.

- recognition: entails noticing then memorising useful items, e.g. words like *ice cream*, fixed phrases, routines, frames like *Do you...?* in questions

- system-building: a more complex process of putting things together (such as inversion in question forms, structure of noun groups) and incorporating them in their own writing or planned oral presentations,
- exploration: a constant process supported by rich input, where learners look out for and reflect on aspects like use of tenses (e.g. when to use the present perfect) and information structure.

Complex words like *agreement* may require a combination of several processes: system-building and exploration, before their meanings and patterns are fully mastered.

Willis emphasises that these processes need to be supported by language use in the classroom allowing learners to begin by improvisation, stringing together words and phrases to get meanings across, and later to consolidate, systematising and incorporating items into their own language use.

For the future of this wave we need far more research on acquisition of overall competence, especially lexical competence, not just acquisition of grammar.

### **Over to you**

I have outlined here five waves which I hope will gather momentum in the future. I hope that you, working together with your colleagues here in Portugal, will recognise their importance and accept the challenge to ride some of the waves of change right into your classrooms.

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#### **Note**

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