Methodology is Dead

Doug Evans argues that language teachers should not adhere to any one methodology but be open to them all

The ideas of multiple intelligences and learning styles continue to have a powerful effect on how teachers approach their craft. As our understanding of how students acquire, retain, and apply information deepens, it become more and more critical that our approaches to language teaching be reflective of these principles. This article examines important historical events in the development of language methodologies and why, ultimately, the strict adherence to any language teaching methodology should be rejected to the point of altogether abandoning the adherence to any and all language methodologies as a legitimate teaching strategy.

In 1983, Harvard professor Howard Gardner published *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* as a criticism of contemporary views on the idea of intelligence in the field of psychology. One of his aims was to shake up the thinking in this area among his fellow psychologists and this is exactly what happened. However, one of the things that surprised him most was the massive and immediate swell of support that came to him from professionals in the field of education. *Frames of Mind* hit a nerve among educators and the repercussions from his assertion that there is more to intelligence than the "three R's" is still being felt in the most profound ways across the educational spectrum. By adding an "s" to the word intelligence, not only did he challenge the point of view that intelligence should be measured by a single quantifiable number, but, at the same time, he showed us that as educators we needed to be more aware of student differences and dispositions than we had ever imagined before. As ESL teachers, we ignore the lessons, opportunities, and responsibilities that Gardner presented us with the Multiple Intelligence (MI) theory at our own peril and, more importantly, at our students' peril. It is from this position that we must come to the inevitable conclusion that language methodology in and of itself is a doomed relic that should be abandoned. If we agree that our students process, approach, and react to information in

a wide variety of ways, if we accept that often there is more than one suitable path from which to approach a problem, and if we assume that some of our pupils naturally will be less predisposed to our particular teaching styles and preferences, then we must conclude that the adherence to any one methodology with rigid and possibly narrow rules and assumptions naturally will be less accessible, relevant, and meaningful to some students than to others, thus putting them at an unfair and yet completely avoidable disadvantage. Instead, teachers must have a variety of teaching strategies that they can willingly and skillfully call upon based on the diverse needs, strengths, and interests of the students in any given group.

In a very short and incomplete explanation to the point of almost being misrepresentative of Gardner's writings, MI theory suggests that everyone has several different kinds of intelligence to be developed, and that each person is more attuned to and capable of processing, understanding, and displaying information from one or more particular intelligences more efficiently and with greater depth and expertise than from others. Naturally, people tend to gravitate towards the activities and contexts of the particular intelligences that fit and appeal more closely to them individually. MI is just one model of many. Thurstone's Multiple Factors Theory, Guilford's 180, Sterberg's Practical Intelligence theory all promote differing analyses on the topic of intelligences, and they all provide important insights into how our brains function. However, it was *Frames of Mind* that made the greatest impact inside and outside the realms of psychology, and brought this concept into the public consciousness. It was *Frames of Mind* that spoke to teachers and helped them understand that it is advisable and even critical for them to be flexible in their teaching styles and content because it is through a deliberately diverse approach that the needs of individual schools, classes, and students are most thoroughly met. MI theory cautions and advises that we need to be fully conscious that there can be many

different legitimate ways and means for a student to display mastery of subject matter as long as we give our students the opportunities to do so. Outcomes do not change; the students still need to learn how to structure a paragraph, for example. But from an MI point of view, they are able to illustrate their mastery of writing in up to eight different ways. It gives every student, no matter their particular predilections, a better chance to succeed.

The rethinking of intelligences also brought with it a wave of reform and research in the concept of learning styles. Learning styles differ from intelligences in that while intelligences focus on the "what" of the educational process, learning styles focus on the "how." Some students need the information presented in a clear and straightforward manner while others are more comfortable with less rigid guidelines as to how they are to approach their given tasks. To illustrate, using Jung's four psychological types paradigm, four students with four different learning styles will be naturally more comfortable and drawn toward one of the following four literature questions based on a hypothetical poem:

1. What is happening? Who is speaking?
2. What does the poem mean? What does the "lion" signify?
3. How can you relate to this poem? Tell about a time you were in a similar situation.
4. What do you imagine the poet was thinking of when he wrote this poem?

As with multiple intelligences, there are several learning styles models. McCarthy's 4-MAT system, Kolb's Experiential Learning, and Lawrence's "quadrants" theory all provide different but important insight as to how people are inclined to process and approach various tasks.

If we agree that students learn and process information in a variety of preferred methods and styles, then, as teachers, we have no choice but to abandon the strict tenets of any single language methodology or methodologies. We must assume that by exclusively using the Natural Approach, for example, as a direct result of our classroom decisions, we are creating learning events and activities in which certain students will naturally be less likely to prosper. Just as most effective classroom managers have and use a variety of tools and strategies that are mixed and matched in order to work more effectively with the wide variety of student personalities, needs, and challenges, language teachers too must be ready to use a variety of instructional strategies focused on the needs and dispositions of the students rather than being exclusively based on the teaching styles, processes, and outcomes that make the most sense to them. In a modern language setting, based on what we now know of learning styles, intelligences, brain-based learning, and constructivist theory, we must look at any given methodology as being relevant only from a historical perspective and not as an exclusive means to an end.

The first true methodology was the grammar-translation method. It was designed as a means to intellectually challenge the learner's logical powers and to serve as a tool for literary research. The first real challenge to this approach was the Direct Method, which among other things stressed a rethinking of what roles the L1 and L2 play in language learning. This later was followed by the Skinnerian-influenced Audiolingual Method (ALM). These indeed were very important developments in the evolution of second-language thought, theory, and education. However, there were two events in the 1950s that became the primary catalysts as to how methodologies and foreign language teaching would very quickly grow from being regarded as necessary only for the elite or college-bound to being a field considered vital in the interests of world peace, which to many at that time meant the interests of the U.S.

The first event was the 1952 publication of *The National Interest and Foreign Language* by the Indiana University academic William Riley Parker, who later went on to serve as the executive secretary of the *Modern Language Journal*. Parker argues that it is in the best interests of the U.S. globally to have competent and effective people who are multilingual and multicultural in both business and government. Even though this seems obvious by today's standards, it was *The National Interest* that first drew legitimate attention to this issue. Although Parker appealed to the one topic that everyone could understand — money, and while *The National Interest* did have an effect in government circles in the realization of the importance of having people in all areas of American interests who can work effectively in an international scale, still its influence paled in comparison to the fallout of what happened on October 4th, 1957.

During the Cold War, the U.S. government was taken almost completely by surprise by the launch of Sputnik and, as a result, in 1958 it enacted the National Defense Education Act—a very aggressive program designed to improve the educational standards of its citizenry. Math and science were at the forefront of this initiative, but a considerable amount of money and time was also invested in foreign language research. Along with the shock of knowing that the Soviet Union was far ahead in certain critical technologies came the realization that the U.S. needed to be far less linguistically isolated, and that far too few Americans had competent bilingual skills. This resulted in massive funding and there was a great deal of scrambling in academia to acquire as much of this new government money as possible. There were two routes to take in this endeavor. First, a professor, think tank, or some similar group could invent a new methodology or theory on second language acquisition. This is how many academics proceeded and these efforts bore much fruit in the 1960's and 70's. Proper research, however, takes a lot of time and, even though Sputnik might have been closer to a publicity stunt than a legitimate threat to the fate of the free world, the public needed to see rapid progress and, as a result, old ideas were rethought, repackaged, and reissued in a somewhat expedient way. At the forefront of this accelerated effort was the audiolingual method. This new "one-true" methodology was accompanied by a quickly-published series of government-sponsored ALM texts for all the major languages including, of course, Russian. There was just one problem. Just as the crisis mentality and the accompanying sense of urgency faded as almost always tends to be the case, the enthusiasm for ALM faded as well when it was discovered that ALM simply did not deliver what it promised. ALM students as a whole did not acquire language better in any measurable way than non-ALM students. Although ALM fell somewhat flat on its face after being very highly touted as the scientific solution to U.S.' language woes, ALM still holds a very important place in modern language teaching history. ALM proponents were the first to create a legitimate and formalized alternative to the grammar-translation method. They formally studied the effectiveness of various classroom teaching practices. They analyzed test results. They designated the component parts that defined ALM as a methodology. Once ALM was developed and realized, the floodgates opened and other researchers found there was a market for new foreign language learning paradigms. More and more methodolo-