The Principled Approach (TPA)

Advancing Language Acquisition by Developing Departmental Cooperation

by *John De Mado*

There is a distinct difference between an 'approach' and a 'method'. An approach is philosophical in nature and pertains to a teacher's belief system or, as written in Alice Omaggio Hadley's Teaching Language in Context, a teacher's *organizing principles*.

Conversely, a method reflects the arsenal of instructional techniques that a teacher deploys to implement that belief system or those *organizing principles*.

ACTFL (The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) has recurrently reminded us that, for a language department to be successful, it must be philosophically cohesive to the greatest degree possible. What exactly does that mean? ... Does that imply that all members of a department must teach the same way? ... If so, is that actually a realistic expectation? ...

I have consulted with language departments in every state in the USA as well as with a number abroad. One thing that I have found to be indisputable is the fact that, of nature, we language teachers are a very independent lot. We are collegial to one another up to a point; that point of separation pertaining to the methods that we employ and deploy on a daily basis. We are very deferential to one another when the topic arises. It is, I suppose, professional courtesy. Yet, it may be just that deference that is deterring us from our stated mission of delivering to the USA, and thus to the world, a generation of American born students who can function in at least one other language.

Moreover, is it realistic to actually expect each language teacher in a given language department to teach the same way? I am inclined to say no. The way one teaches is influenced by several factors: beliefs held, experience, willingness to experiment, age, tethering to the textbook, departmental or district exams, personality, etc. It is best not to guess at such matters, but rather to gather the requisite empirical evidence. Accordingly, I have interviewed literally thousands of teachers over the years and virtually all of them admit to some level of instructional dissonance within their respective language departments.

In Figure 1, you will find an inventory that I customarily use when surveying language teachers about their belief systems. The amount of dissonance in response is amazing, not only among those who answer 'yes' or 'no', but among those who simply 'do not know'.

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"Liberating yourself is nothing. What is arduous is knowing how to be free…"
Gide, The Immoralist

BELIEFS SURVEY

Please respond based on what you _truly_ believe:

1. **STUDENTS ACQUIRE LANGUAGE AT THE SAME RATE? ___YES ___NO**

2. **A STUDENT, IN L2, CAN EXCEED HIS/HER ABILITY IN THE NATIVE TONGUE (L1). ___YES ___NO**

3. **LINGUISTIC ERRORS ARE LARGELY NEGATIVE AND LEAD TO 'FOSSILIZATION' OF THE ERRORS. ___YES ___NO**

4. _ALL_ **STUDENTS ARE 'CANDIDATES' TO BE MULTILINGUAL. ___YES ___NO**

5. **LANGUAGES CAN BE 'MASTERED'. ___YES ___NO**

6. **LANGUAGES ARE PRIMARILY LEARNED THROUGH IMITATION. ___YES ___NO**

7. **THE CONVENTIONS OF LANGUAGE (RULES) TAKE PRECIDENCE OVER LINGUISTIC INVENTIVENESS. ___YES ___NO**

8. **LANGUAGE IS ONLY 'STANDARD' WHEN IT IS GRAMMATICALLY ACCURATE. ___YES ___NO**

9. **GRAMMAR CREATES COMMUNICATION. ___YES ___NO**

10. **LANGUAGES CAN BE TAUGHT. ___YES ___NO**

Figure 1

It appears that there is a philosophical line drawn in the sand between those who consider themselves to be 'Proficiency-oriented' and those that consider themselves more 'traditional'. In reality, the flashpoint between the two factions is 'grammar and syntax'. Teachers that tend to be more traditional in nature feel that language acquisition is a byproduct of sound grammatical instruction coupled with a keen eye toward accuracy. They generally hold the belief that proficiency-oriented teachers essentially neglect accuracy and grammar. Conversely, proficiency-oriented teachers are apt to believe that more traditional language teachers have little to no interest in communication skills other than reading and writing in the target language.

This debate is a waste of time and passion and does not serve to advance our agenda. The question does not revolve around whether grammar and syntax should be taught. *Structure and syntax are natural consequences of language acquisition.* There are no languages devoid of a structural and syntactical code. Rather, the real issue is 'why'? ... Why is it important to provide grammatical and syntactical instruction? To my way of thinking, the importance of structural and syntactical accuracy is not in the creation of communication per se, but rather in the <u>avoidance of miscommunication</u>.

Which all leads me to these reflections: ***As language teachers, where might we find common ground?... What can we actually agree on?... How might we develop, to the greatest extent possible, more philosophically cohesive language departments?... How do we minimize instructional dissonance?... Is methodology the answer?... Do we need to be more reflective in our instruction?***

I believe that the answers to the preceding questions can not be solved through 'methodology'. As previously stated, there simply is too much instructional diversity within a given language department to achieve the cohesiveness required for success. However, there is something that predates methods. That something is called the 'Organizing Principle'....

And it is the foundation of ***The Principled Approach (TPA)***.

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Historically, we have seen many methodological trends come and go. And, in reality, there is a grain of truth in all of them. As a result, most of us that labor in the linguistic vineyard tend to be *eclectic* in our teaching strategies, favoring a blend of methods over strict allegiance to one specific methodology. I believe that those of us who enjoy a long tenure in our profession, and have tried most everything methodologically, will admit that there is no *'silver bullet'* ... No one methodology that delivers it all.

An 'organizing principle' is the foundation of any belief system. It is so compelling in nature that it can be ignored neither in life nor in one's instruction. It is certifiably true by virtue of research and experience and not simply a byproduct of one's opinion. It helps us to know when we are misdirected in our efforts and when to recalibrate. It helps us to perceive when what we are doing is effective and why. In short, it is our instructional 'North Star'.

My personal journey as a World Language teacher, author and consultant has led me to many awakenings regarding language acquisition; i.e., how the human mind creates and acquires language. My beliefs, my 'organizing principles', have been hard earned through classroom experience, reading mountains of research, maintaining a willingness to admit that there was much that I didn't know and having a healthy respect for the benefits of risk-taking.

I have always found the following quote by George F. Kneller (Figure 2) to be a source of inspiration and reflection:

> **Human beings who wish to become authentic persons must take their chances and be prepared for consequences. In the Socratic sense, you must begin to know by not knowing. If you know that you do not know, you may be born again. But you will not be born again without the pain of birth. And you will have to do violence to your soul... to make it live.**

George F. Kneller
Existentialism and Education
Philosophical Library, 1958
New York, New York
Figure 2

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Simply stated, *The Principled Approach* (TPA) invites language departments not to necessarily agree on methods, but rather unanimity of beliefs. It invites language departments to establish common ground by creating their own set of 'organizing principles'. These are not opinion statements, but rather statements of beliefs rooted in research, particularly pertaining to Applied Linguistics. They are intelligent affirmations that clearly and succinctly state what the department believes about language acquisition.

In essence, once a given language department can agree philosophically, it makes no difference what methods are employed, as long as those methods support and eventually deliver the departmental organizing principles. *"All roads lead to Rome ..."*

In the spirit of collegiality and to serve as an object lesson, I would like to share with you my own 'Organizing Principles for Language Acquisition' (Figure 3). I am not trying to foist these beliefs upon you. Rather, I want you to see what I believe and to experience the latent power that a clear belief system can exert upon instruction.

10 ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION
by *John De Mado*

1. Language is primarily self-selected, not imitated.

2. Language is acquired, not taught.

3. Language is a problem-solving device. To ignore this fact during instruction causes language to <u>become</u> the problem.

4. <u>*Renovation*</u> is a byproduct of <u>*ownership*</u>.

5. A child will not exceed, in L2, the ability he or she has in L1.

6. Linguistic accuracy is a <u>*destination*</u>, not a point of departure.

7. Grammar and syntax minimize the potential for miscommunication.

8. Linguistic accuracy assures that the largest number of us shall have the best opportunity to understand one another.

9. The conventions (rules) of a given language must not impede the invention of that language.

10. People who communicate take risks. There is an intimate relationship between language acquisition and the amount of risk-taking, vulnerability and intuition encouraged.

Figure 3

Neither do I expect nor do I seek your immediate concurrence. After all, these organizing principles are a byproduct of my own research and reflection. You may not thoroughly understand the meaning of some based on the word tracks that I have selected. But believe me when I tell you that, should you ask for clarification, I can explain each one succinctly and with enthusiasm ... And yes, I can quote the research.

To appreciate the impact that organizing principles have upon methodology, I would like to provide an example. Consider Organizing Principle 10:

> **People who communicate take risks. There is an intimate relationship between language acquisition and the amount of risk-taking, vulnerability and intuition encouraged.**

Linguistic risk-taking refers to the willingness of a language acquirer to confront more language than what she/he owns. Vulnerability means a willingness to err for the broader goal of communication. Intuition refers to the ability to skim and scan for information. I believe that these are primordial psycholinguistic characteristics that need to be carefully nurtured in students. I believe that the classroom needs to reinforce the development of these characteristics in students. I believe that teachers need to exhibit these characteristics themselves to the greatest degree possible.

If you were to fully embrace Organizing Principle 10, as I do, how might this impact your instruction or the methods that you employ? ...

I would venture a guess that your classroom would focus more on situations and dramatizations and less on lecture. It probably would include problems to be resolved using the target language; i.e. asking someone out on a date. I would imagine that your tolerance for error would increase exponentially, thus changing your rubrics, assessments and grading habits. There would be greater emphasis on vocabulary acquisition and a reduced emphasis on grammar and syntactical instruction. Your role would evolve from being the 'editor' in the classroom to that of the 'Applied Linguist', steadfastly seeking to understand how the human mind actually creates and acquires language. The classroom would be more student-centered and less teacher-centered, allowing for more faith in the language acquisition process and, thus, in the language acquirer.

The amount that this would occur and the methods employed would, of course, vary from teacher to teacher. The important point, once again, is that there is concurrence on the organizing principle(s). The methods are secondary.

My purpose for writing is simple. I want more American students to function in other languages. Our traditional hyper focus on methodology has not delivered the goods, despite our good intentions. We talk about the need for teachers to be more 'reflective' in their instruction. Well ... Here is the opportunity. I believe that *The Principled Approach' (TPA)* can lead us to our stated goal of multilingualism for our students and to a more fulfilling professional life for those of us tasked with that goal.

What do we have to lose? ...

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Please see the following additional Organizing Principles. (Figures 4, 5, 6)

10 ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND ERROR

by *John De Mado*

1. There is an intimate relationship between language acquisition and the amount of risk-taking, vulnerability and intuition encouraged by the teacher and exhibited by the acquirer.
2. 'Language transfer' may be the single most common strategy deployed by language acquirers.
3. 'Error' (linguistic interference) is a byproduct of language transfer.
4. An 'error' is not the same as a 'mistake'.
5. In the language acquisition process, error is best viewed as a positive, not a negative.
6. For all intents and purposes, 'ideal bilingualism' is unattainable.
7. Language teachers are responsible for a minimum of <u>3</u> languages in the classroom: L1, L2 and 'Interlanguage'.
8. Language moves from 'non-standard' toward 'standard', with or without instructional intervention.
9. All language 'fossilizes'.
10. 'Interlingualism' is our instructional target.

Figure 4

10 ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES FOR INCLUSION

by *John De Mado*

1. A child who functions in one language is already a candidate to function in others.
2. Tolerating a student in class is not the same as including the student.
3. There are many types of language users.
4. Language, of nature, is inclusionary.
5. IQ is not a prerequisite for effective second language acquisition.
6. Most of what is exclusionary about second language acquisition revolves around the issue of accuracy.
7. There are many paths to cognition.
8. People who communicate take risks, are willing to be vulnerable and use intuition.
9. An inclusionary approach to second language acquisition must be supported by inclusionary assessment.
10. Inclusionary assessment must be supported by inclusionary grading strategies.

Figure 5

10 ORGANIZING PRINCIPLES FOR LANGUAGE ACQUISITION & LITERACY
by *John De Mado*

1. Language acquisition begins with 'comprehensible input'.
2. Comprehensible input turns into 'output' of language, also known as <u>conversation</u>.
3. Most of the vocabulary we own comes from broad conversation, *not reading*, and is self-selected.
4. The amount of vocabulary we own ultimately determines 'literacy'.
5. Language is ambiguous and often inadequate for human needs; thus war, violence and discord exist.
6. Successful reading is ultimately determined by <u>comprehension</u> of what is read, not simply *decoding*.
7. Due to the ambiguity of language, we 'guess' when we listen, read and view.
8. Vocabulary enables us to 'guess' when we listen, read and view.
9. Abundant vocabulary enhances our ability to 'guess' effectively.
10. The most literate among us are the best 'guessers'.

Figure 6

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