

# Crippled by Dogma

Is your way the right way?

As with all professions, EFL teaching has seen a number of approaches, from Grammar Translation to the Silent Way. Here, **Mario Rinvoluceri** argues that 'one size does not fit all' and that we should follow rather than lead the way our students learn.

The word dogma comes from European religious thinking and means an authoritative teaching, usually about an area where any degree of certainty is hard to imagine. So Orthodox Christians hold to the dogma that, within the Trinity, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, while the Roman Catholic dogmatic belief is that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Dogmas seem to flourish in areas where there is lack of evidence, thin data, inability to know, and yet a deep desire to hold a firm belief. EFL has seen the rise of quite a number of dogmatic approaches of which **Grammar Translation** was the earliest one that I experienced as a schoolboy learning Latin. Eight years of relentless translating both ways (and they told me I was good at it) have left me unable to even gist-read a Roman text.

The **Grammar Translation** method has produced a large crop of learners crippled in

L2. I once worked with a 27-year-old Japanese executive who had lived this system in English classes in Japan all through his school days. When he came to us in Canterbury, UK, he could only understand and use English words by reference to his mother tongue. For him *Good Morning* had no direct meaning and gained meaning only by reference to the REAL way of saying this: *Ohio gozaimas*. This man's case was so extreme that I asked him to take me for several blind walks (I had my eyes closed) through the crowded streets of Canterbury. In this situation, as he held my arm, he had to come out with things quickly to keep me safe. In many of those street situations there was no time for mental reference work leading back to or out from his mother tongue.

Thank God EFL has, in many parts of the world, moved away from **Grammar Translation**.

In its wake, the **Direct Method** has become the Anglo-American Coalition orthodoxy and I have to admit having been a willing **Direct Method**er. I remember, one hot afternoon, miming the word *although*: after I had sweated for three minutes, one student turned to another and asked: "he mean *but*?" I was lucky to have such clued-up students!

Maybe, had they looked up *although* in their bilingual dictionaries, the process would have been faster, more accurate and less sweaty. It was in that period, though, that many of my colleagues consigned any bilingual dictionaries they spotted on students' desks to the bin.

In the same way that **Grammar-translators** knew their way was **the right way**, so did we in the seventies and eighties. For us native-speaker teachers the **Direct Method** was a perfect wheeze, as it gave us a clear edge over non-native speakers of English. The fact that many of us did not, even with monolingual classes, know our students' Mother Tongue could be counted as a plus. This British exaltation of ignorance continues into the 21st Century (or into the mid 13 hundreds after the Hegira) – how many of the British Council schools round the globe help their new teachers to learn the language of the country they are teaching in, or demand that they do so as a professional requirement?

And the **Direct Method**, too, has its victims. It most certainly does not suit the learning style of all students. Here is an account of how one student experienced his **direct method** teachers:

*Fifty five years old, sure of himself, a 'Barone' in his university, this Italian scientist experiences a giant fear and embarrassment which result from his serious inability to understand and respond to oral English.*

Nowadays all his younger colleagues speak efficient, and some, very fluent English. By contrast, when he goes to an international conference G.F. cringes with apprehension and embarrassment, paralysed by shame at his inability to "be with" his non-Italian peers. What it is to be a speechless patriarch!

*"My English teachers always talked to me in English – I often failed to understand them.*

*Their pedagogical response was to say the same things again once, twice or three times.*

*Why... why did they refuse to **explain**, to tell me clearly in Italian. With that sort of help, I would have been able to learn. Can you imagine a teacher of physics behaving like they did? Can you imagine a teacher of any science refusing to answer a student's legitimate questions?"*

I wonder on behalf of how many victims of obtuse, direct method cruelty this Italian professor speaks?

Fortunately we are moving into a period in which more and more people are advocating the judicious use of L1 in the L2 classroom. So Professor Guy Cook has roundly attacked the theoretical basis of the **Direct Method** and its limiting practical applications ([www.richmondpark.net](http://www.richmondpark.net)).

Sheelagh Deller, in *Using The Mother Tongue, Making the most of the Learner's Language* (Delta, 2002) goes several steps further, by offering teachers a whole rainbow of exercises that usefully combine L1 and L2.

But the bizarre dogmatism of our field is not confined to the proponents of **Grammar Translation** or the **Direct Method**.

When did Caleb Gattegno, the father of the **Silent Way**, ever talk about his approach in a relativistic way? His contention was that the **Silent Way** is a fundamental educational discovery of universal relevance. I am unaware of him ever suggesting that it might **not** be appropriate with some students, that some students might be held back by this teaching style. Is it true that all students flourish best when drawn into a heuristic state of mind, into discovery mode?

In proposing **Language Psychodramaturgy** (*Teaching Myself*, OUP, 1994) does Bernard Dufeu anywhere suggest that this approach

works better with some students than with others? Are there some students who object to the lulling of the conscious mind through relaxation techniques, which is central to the first steps in this approach. And yet everything we know about both teaching and learning makes it clear that **Language Psychodramaturgy** must be better for some students than for others.

By this point, dear reader, you may be asking yourself: *So is Mario proposing a form of flabby eclecticism in which anything goes?* The answer to this is a firm **no**. What I am proposing is that how I teach should **follow** rather than lead the way the student learns. Let me give you two concrete examples of this. The first comes from the work of Sylvia Ashton Warner (**Teacher**, 1960). To teach her Maori five year olds how to read in English she asked each child to give her three or four life keywords. She wrote these words down in big letters and asked each child to take the pieces of card home with them. Thus the children learned to read via keywords of their own choice. The learning initiative stayed with the students.

The second example is from the work of a Pilgrims colleague, Seth Lindstomberg. For a fortnight Seth had to work one-to-one with a lower intermediate Italian sales manager. Seth soon found out that this fluent and very inaccurate speaker wanted to spend two weeks enriching his oral vocabulary and avoiding sitting in a classroom as much as possible. Seth accommodated these needs by working with the student in cafes and pubs all over Canterbury and by getting him to talk about ever more linguistically demanding topics. When he said goodbye on the last Friday of the course, Seth reckoned he was now a fluent and highly inaccurate upper intermediate speaker of English.

For the following month Seth worked one-to-one with a German speaking executive

from Hamburg. This man was a total beginner. When he discovered that Seth spoke good German, he asked Seth to help him achieve a matrix overview of English grammar. They worked on this for the first two weeks. In the second two weeks the student asked Seth to help him cover this grammatical skeleton with lexical flesh, so he could begin to talk and write a little. When the man left, Seth judged him to be well on the way towards a deep and accurate understanding of the language.

Seth went into both one-to-one situations with an open mind and taught in reaction to the way the particular student wanted to learn. Seems like common sense, really, but it takes a mind like Seth's that refuses to bow to any of the discordant diktats of any of the dogmatisms of current language teaching methodology.

If you compare our field of language teaching to medicine, at least our fashions and dogmatisms do not maim and kill people in the way that those of the doctors do. The fashion for, say, the **direct method**, has had less frightening consequences than the mid-twentieth century medical fashion for using electric shock treatment and frontal lobotomy with people suffering certain mental conditions. Perhaps our work is a lot less important than that of doctors and therefore somewhat less lethal!

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