The forms of language learning: old dogmas and new directions.

Throughout the last (twentieth) century, language teaching was plagued by changes of fashion and disputes between rival methodologies. Often, the trouble was caused by the insensitive application of theories from linguistics and psychology which did not take account of pedagogic realities. Many current approaches, however, claim to have redressed the balance, and to have achieved a more dynamic and sensitive relationship between theorist and practitioner. But is this actually the case? Are current directions really any more balanced, less dogmatic and more permanent than their predecessors?

This first part of this paper reflects upon the legacy of theory-led twentieth-century influences on language teaching practice. It questions their assumption that native-speaker use and acquisition are the best models for all learners. It also questions the notion that language learning should always focus upon 'real' language and activity. In the modern multilingual world, there should be room for more customised syllabuses and approaches, which make greater use of the students' own language and traditions.

In the second part, it is argued that contrary to current assumptions, a good deal of authentic language use is playful: focusing upon sound and grammar rather than meaning, fiction rather than fact, and ritualistic rather than transactional communication. An emphasis on these uses of language would facilitate the attention to language form needed by many students. This opens the possibility for language learning activities which are natural and authentic, but also focus usefully and enjoyably on language structure.

The paper concludes by arguing that teachers need an awareness of theoretical developments, not in order to be passive recipients of an intimidating wisdom from above, but in order to defend themselves against simplistic ideas, and to make their own contribution to a complex model of language teaching in which the latest linguistic theory is only a part.