

Seven myths about beginner language

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There are many myths about beginner language. Some most people laugh at, and some many people believe because they have not fully realised that they are dealing with – well – myths. One definition of a myth is ‘An invented narrative that wholly or partially lacks any basis in reality’, but despite this probably very few teachers of beginner language can claim to be unaffected by myths in their actual teaching. The reason for this is that the myths are often presented as if they were incontrovertible truths that cannot be questioned. They hover like meta-opinions above that which can be discussed. They determine agendas without being placed on the agenda themselves. This is a problem. An important prerequisite for teaching beginner language to be able to develop is precisely that theories, discourses, attitudes, practices and ‘what one usually does’ are constantly being challenged and put to the test. For that reason – as an introduction to this number on beginner language – we have chosen seven die-hard myths about beginner language that we intend to discuss, seek to exorcise or, at any rate, draw attention to, so that as a teacher one can treat them as what they are: myths!



MADS JAKOB KIRKEBÆK

The Department of Learning and Philosophy,
Aalborg University and the Confucius Institute
for Innovation & Learning
madskir@hotmail.com



KAREN LUND

Professor in Danish as a second language,
Aarhus University, DPU Campus Copenhagen
karlund@edu.au.dk

The myth of the necessity to master the system to be able to speak the language

One myth about beginner language is that students¹ first have to understand the *system* – i.e. the grammar, pronunciation and (basic) vocabulary of the target language – before they can be allowed to communicate in the target language. The fear is that otherwise the students will automate language errors which subsequently it will be extremely difficult to correct. Interlanguage theory has long since disproved this myth about beginner language, which even so has proved unusually difficult to eradicate. Interlanguage theory is based on an assumption that language acquisition is a lengthy process in which the student, via testing of hypotheses about the target language, constructs his or her interlanguage with provisional suggestions as to how the target language is constructed. Interlanguage is not static, but develops and is revised on an on-going basis as it moves towards the target language norm (see, for example, Lund 2009). Supporters of interlanguage theory therefore argue that the aim of teaching beginner language is for the learners from the outset to build up a small, efficient communicative basic language that they can use for authentic purposes; on the basis of this early basic language the learners gradually construct an increasingly complex and finely graduated language.

Practically none of the beginner language learners will benefit from a systematic going through of the entire ‘system’ – the characteristics of the structure, grammar and pronunciation in the target language –, and such an approach will not under any circumstances contribute to building up their communicative competences. That is simply not the way a language is learnt.

The myth of limited space on the harddisk

A second myth about beginner language is that learners have a limited capacity for learning language, and that the capacity used to learn one language must inevitably take space from another one. From that perspective, learners busy learning, for example, Danish as a second language must choose – or have someone choose for them – which language they are to use when they are to learn. The choice often falls on Danish, and a deselection of the mother tongue or other foreign languages that they have at their disposal, e.g. English, German, Spanish or French. Extra languages are here viewed not as an enrichment but as an (unnecessary) burden. The myth, which originally derives from parts of language acquisition

research, is based on a general hypothesis that the brain is a closed container, that each language has its compartment in the brain, and that the various languages are fighting for the same limited space. Language are thus best learnt when the mother language is not present as a distracting element (see, for example, Pallier et al. 2003). Recent research, however, has shown that languages are integrated into each other, and that languages inevitably influence each other and are used as resources in the learning processes (see, for example, Cook 2003; Bylund, Abrahamsson & Hyltenstam 2012). Multilingual learners – according to this research – are multi-competent individuals who possess special competences that lead to their not only finding it easier to learn new languages but also to their generally speaking finding it easier to carry out problem-solving in other specialised contexts.

The myth of the single solution

A third myth about beginner language is that one single teaching method exists that can cater for all the challenges of the classroom. This typically starts with a book in English that is translated into Danish. After this, the author or one of his or her disciples come on a lecture and promotion tour, and then everyone in the teaching business suddenly knows and/or talks about some new acronym: e.g. TBLT, CLIL or CL (*Task-Based Language Teaching, Content and Language Integrated Learning, Cooperative Learning*). In the promotional folders and on websites the method is introduced with variations based on the sentence: ‘Do you want to have students who are ... (insert the present-day ideal), then take a closer look at ... (insert the name of the method).’ What makes the method that the new acronym stands for popular is that it claims to be able to come up with the solution to what we teachers at a given point regard as being a major problem: e.g. to get the students to participate more actively in the lessons, to make more efficient use of teaching time by teaching maths via English, to handle inclusion or recapture control in the classroom. Each method has its particular focus and its merits, but also prices to be paid and weak points. The latter, however, is often forgotten or overlooked in the euphoria of the moment at apparently having found an answer to the questions one has been grappling with for a long time. After a while it turns out that the new method is good, but it (too) does not have the answer to all the challenges in the classroom. But by that time a new book is nearly always in the process of being translated.

The myth of ‘We’ve tried that before!’

A fourth myth about beginner language, which partly follows from the third one, is that every suggested change and innovation that newly qualified teachers, pedagogical development consultants or firebrands of the staff room happen by ill-chance to come up with is not new at all, but has been tried before – and with a very bad result! Those teachers who typically shoot down new initiatives and suggestions mainly use their many years of teaching and their experience as the most important argument.: ‘We’ve tried that before,’ they say, ‘... and it didn’t work!’ This type of teacher, the one unprepared to change but sensitive to change – or, when they have finally set like concrete, totally change-resistant – can be a powerful group in the staff room because they normally belong to the group of experienced teachers that one listens to, that one also respects as being knowledgeable within their subject area, and that *by dint of* their long experience, have typically assumed their right to be deriders! They do not contribute much that is new themselves, but are more than willing to deride what is new! Even so, one has to admit that the ‘we’ve-tried-that-before teachers are often right. As the teaching area has become commercialised, marketing has become increasingly intense hunt for quick-profit teaching techniques and practices that can rightly be called ‘old wine in new bottles’. So there may be good reason to be critical when answers to the teacher’s urgent problems are flashed and marketed as ushering in a new era. The problem with the attitude of the we’ve-tried-that-before teachers, however, is that this is not *always* the case.

The myth of one people and one teaching method

A fifth myth about beginner language is that there are teaching methods and approaches that certain people, e.g. Danes, can profit from whereas others cannot. Let us take the task-based approach to beginner language for example. Language tasks work well in Danish classrooms. An important reason for this success is that the aim of language tasks – to get the students to interact, put forward and test hypotheses and adopt an independent attitude to solving practical communicative problems – is in accordance with the core values of Danish child-rearing: independence, the ability to cooperate and the critical, autonomous assumption of attitudes. Good experience with tasks in Denmark, however, often leads to the fallacy that tasks will *automatically* work well everywhere else. This is not the case.

There are a number of empirical studies which show that it is difficult to get task-based teaching to work in such countries as Japan, Thailand, China and Hong Kong (Burrows 2008; Carless, 2007; McDonough & Chaikitmongkol, 2007). This so easily leads to a second fallacy: that Asians cannot learn languages with the aid of tasks. It is a culturalist explanation based on an essentialist understanding of our being predisposed or particularly well or badly equipped to receive teaching using the principles on which task pedagogics is grounded. The reason why tasks perhaps functions less well in e.g. Japan than Denmark is rather that Japanese students, unlike Danish ones, have not been socialised to be able to like tasks – neither in their upbringing nor in education. They do not master ‘task language’ and do not understand ‘task ideology’. This naturally does not mean that Japanese students cannot get something out of working with tasks, with the obvious language learning advantages that are inherent in various forms of task work. It only means that the pedagogical carpet has to be rolled further back, and that they are to be introduced more thoroughly to these ways of working than is the case for Danish students.

The myth of easy and difficult languages

A sixth myth about beginner language is that certain languages are ‘easy’ while others are ‘difficult’ to acquire. English and German are classic examples of languages that are perceived in Denmark as being ‘easy’ and ‘difficult’ respectively. From a purely linguistic point of view, the opposite ought to be true. Both when it comes to vocabulary, pronunciation and grammar, Danish and German have more in common than Danish and English. Despite this, English is considered ‘easier’. Why? One explanation has probably something to do with the greater amount of regular case morphology and ditto syntax in German. A second explanation has without a doubt something to do with the positioning of the two languages in the language hierarchy. English reigns in sole majesty, and German finds itself several rungs lower down. English is the most popular foreign language in Denmark, and its popularity apparently promotes so great a desire and motivation to learn that the actual difficulties connected with English are played down and often perceived as being less than they perhaps actually are. The opposite is true of German. A third explanation as to why English is thought of as being easy can be that learners encounter English every single day, e.g. in connection with their use of English-language media, Inter-

net shopping, etc. They are ‘exposed’ to English to a far greater extent than to German, and the teacher therefore does not need to convince students that they need English. With German, it is different. Even though Germany is Denmark’s largest trading partner, students do not notice this in the everyday lives here and now. Questions like ‘What am I to use it for?’ and ‘Isn’t knowing English good enough?’ influence the desire to learn. What is interesting in connection with teaching beginner language is that it is apparently not objective linguistic criteria that determine if a beginner language is perceived as being easy or difficult. It is just as much the popularity of the language and the opportunities the students have to meet the language outside the classroom that determine if the language is perceived as being easy or difficult. In addition, the teacher’s introduction of the beginner language, naturally enough (though often overlooked), seems to be highly important for the way the students view the target language. If the teacher, for example, tells the students that German grammar is extremely difficult, the students will probably perceive it as being so. If, on the other hand, the teacher focuses on the relatively many similarities between Danish and German, it is highly probable that the students will regard German as being easy to get to grips with.

The myth of the no-competence students and the no-value past

A seventh myth – and the final myth about beginner language for the time being – is that (certain) students come to teaching without competences in their back-pack. That they bring nothing to the meeting with the teacher, the subject and the other students that can contribute to the teaching. It is strange just how strong this myth is when one considers how weak the supporting evidence is. For all people who speak a language have competences for learning more languages, and it is a waste of resources not to activate these competences and include them in the teaching. The problem that underlies this myth is perhaps not only that the students are regarded as being devoid of competences but also that we interpret the competences the students actually come with as being negative. Any way of thinking that have the lacking or ‘wrong’ competences of the students as its starting point rather than their resources naturally enough influences their motivation in a negative direction. When one notices that one’s past and the linguistic and cultural back-pack one come with to the teaching are considered to be worthless, it is easy to

feel inferior and second-rate. Lack of positive recognition gives the student the feeling of not being able to cope and intensifies an already existing inequality between teacher and student that is counter-productive when learning a language. To create a basis for new learning it is vitally important to take one's point of departure in what the students already know something about. If not, one exposes them to a highly boring cocktail of having to learn something new with the aid of something else they know nothing about either. To learn something new requires having something else that can help lift one up to what is new. It would be a crying shame if John Dewey (1903) had lived in vain.

Conclusion: a myth-detector

In this article, we have drawn attention to, discussed and hopefully disarmed seven selected myths within beginner language teaching. And there are more of them. The question therefore is how one as a teacher of beginner language can catch sight of the myths so that one can adopt a critical attitude towards them, confront them and preferably exorcise them before they have a negative influence on actual teaching. Our answer to this is a 'myth-detector', i.e. four simple questions that one should ask oneself as a teacher when confronted with attitudes and points of view that one suspects may be based on myths. Here they are:

1. Where do we know this from?
2. What is it based on?
3. What is the underlying view of learning, language and culture?
4. Who says this (or gets anything out of saying this)?

Note

- 1 The term 'student' in this article applies to children as well as adults.

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