Dogme: hype, evolution or intelligent design?

Scott Thornbury

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Abstract: Dogme ELT has been criticised on various grounds, including the claim that it was deliberately engineered as an exercise in self-promotion. While I would argue that the history of Dogme belies such a claim, the healthy debate that Dogme has generated has compelled its advocates to articulate its basic principles and, if it really is a method, to define its methodology retrospectively.

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> Hype: A fad. A clever marketing strategy which a product is advertized as the thing everyone must have, to the point where people begin to feel they need to consume it. (*The Urban Dictionary*)

A teacher, academic, and writer re-posted an article I had written about Dogme ELT (Thornbury, 2000) on his blog, and added this by way of commentary:

> I congratulate Scott for this initiative, and maybe it's done a bit to change teaching practice. But I can't help thinking it's a bit of well-orchestrated hype. Scott makes a living, partly, from selling books used in classrooms, and partly from jetting round the world talking about Dogme; is there not a contradiction there? And anyway, the whole Dogme thing is, in my opinion, vastly overblown. The idea that we should all go back to "a room with a few chairs, a blackboard, a teacher and some students, and where learning was jointly constructed out of the talk that evolved in that simplest, and most prototypical of situations" is both romantic and simplistic. As usual, Scott over-eggs the pud. If he weren't so happy doing what he's doing, I bet he'd easily get a job in politics as a Spin Supremo!

That Dogme is 'well-orchestrated hype' is a criticism that has been made almost since its inception. As is the claim that it represents an act of hypocrisy on the part of its originators. Since to attempt to refute the second claim is a waste of breath (a hypocrite would deny he was a hypocrite, wouldn't he!), I'll just address the first, i.e. that Dogme is 'well-orchestrated hype'.

Actually, the fairly rapid uptake of the term Dogme was neither well-orchestrated, nor, arguably, due to hype. In the article that the blogger refers to, no attempt was made to apply the name Dogme to an approach – to 'brand' it, in other words. All that the article did was use the analogy of the Dogme film movement (anti-Hollywood, low-tech, local film-making) and suggest that, in the interests of foregrounding real communication in the classroom, English language teaching needed to shed itself of an over-dependence on imported materials and aids. That was all. It was a fairly timid and, dare I say it, uncontroversial position to take. Nor was it startlingly original. A number of scholars, notably Dick Allwright (1981), had been arguing for the need for learning materials, as opposed to teaching materials, at least two decades before the advent of Dogme, while progressive education has a long history of rejecting the imposition of officially mandated textbooks (see Thornbury forthcoming).

Nevertheless, that article did strike a chord among a small, but growing, band of like-minded practitioners, and sowed the seeds for a discussion that quite quickly gravitated online, and became the Dogme ELT discussion group. For quite a while, this was the only forum where Dogme's principles, antecedents, and practices were aired, debated, rejected, and embraced. Inevitably, perhaps, the name became attached to a cluster of teaching practices that foregrounded learner-generated content, a process syllabus, and, by extension, the rejection of published materials. None of this discussion was intentionally 'orchestrated' with a view to fabricating a 'method': in fact, from its outset the notion of 'method' was regarded with deep suspicion, on the grounds that methods are top-down structures, while Dogme-style teaching is, in principle, driven from the bottom up, since both the syllabus and the lesson content is supposed to be generated out of local and immediate concerns.

The fact that, over the succeeding years, Dogme attracted so much attention must have owed as much to a fairly widespread frustration with current teaching materials and syllabi as it did to any 'clever marketing strategy'. It was less an idea whose time had come than an idea that had been around for a good long while but which was perhaps in need of validation. Giving it a name conferred a measure of authentication. Teachers were able to say, 'Well, that's what I have always done, but it's good to know that I'm not alone'.

At the same time, this act of naming also attracted a fair amount of (often heated) debate, some constructive, and some less so. The charge of hypocrisy was frequently levelled: the irony was not lost on some critics that recent technological innovations, such as social media, were put to good use by Dogme proponents to promote, among other things, low-tech classroom teaching. More often, though, criticisms of Dogme have revolved around its unsuitability in specific contexts (e.g. large classes of adolescents with non-

native speaker teachers, or the teaching of academic writing at university level, or exam preparation classes).

More seriously, to my mind, has been the charge that a focus on emergent language (rather than on language items that have been preselected in the form of a syllabus) runs the risk of simply recycling what learners can already do, without 'upping the ante', as it were. That is to say, without the persistent 'push' to complexify their mental grammar and to extend their mental lexicon, there is a danger that learners remain forever in a state of suspended animation. To mitigate this effect requires of teachers considerable dexterity, arguably, since they not only have to work with the 'raw material' of the learners' output, but they have to transmute this 'base metal into pure gold'. The ability to do so assumes a degree of experience and language competence that might simply be beyond the reach of many teachers.

Criticisms like these have had the positive effect of encouraging proponents of Dogme to justify their beliefs, recount (and account for) their classroom practices, and – by a process of 'back formation' – retrospectively articulate the 'method' that Dogme was never intended to be. That is to say, rather than having been deliberately 'orchestrated' or authored, Dogme has been very much an emergent and co-constructed phenomenon: a case, not of 'intelligent design', but of natural selection.

So, what might the elements of this 'method' be?

Using the framework provided by Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 330) this is how Dogme would seem to position itself with respect to the following attributes of a method:

> 1. *the nature of language:* language is a resource for making meaning and is realised as discourse, either written or spoken, which is constructed from elements of varying degrees of conventionality (words, collocations, verb patterns etc);
>
> 2. *the nature of second language learning:* learning occurs when these elements are enlisted in discourse for the purposes of making meaning, and shaped and refined in response to implicit or explicit feedback and instruction;
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> 3. *goals of teaching:* to enable learners to become resourceful and self-directed language users, by providing the optimal conditions for discourse creation, and the linguistic means for doing this;
>
> 4. *the type of syllabus to use:* an emergent syllabus (of lexis, constructions, genres etc) that evolves as a (negotiated) response to the learners' developing needs and abilities;

5. *the role of teachers, learners and instructional materials*: the teacher motivates and scaffolds interactions between learners, providing instruction at the point of need, using materials contributed or accessed principally by the learners themselves;

6. *the activities, techniques and procedures to be used:* these are not prescribed, but would need to be consistent with the above goals, contextually appropriate, and mutually agreed. They are likely to share features with the practices of task-based instruction or whole-language learning.

Having outlined the components of a Dogme 'method', I would also want to add a 'health warning' to the effect that any attempt to define a method runs the risk of constraining its potential effectiveness by limiting its generalizability to a wide range of contexts. Moreover, methods are only as good as the 'sense of plausibility' (to use Prabhu's [1990] phrase) that they evoke. If the Dogme 'method' seems to you 'both simplisitic and romantic' (as my blogging friend claims), and hence lacks plausibility, then you might be well advised to ignore it!

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