

Dogme: Dancing in the dark?

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In 1995, over a bottle of red wine, the Danish filmmaker Lars von Trier and three cronies drafted the manifesto of the Dogme 95 film-makers collective. They were driven by a commitment to rescue cinema from big-budget, hi-tech, Hollywood-style production values and to recover what von Trier referred to as “our joyful film-making”. In order to make films that would be true to the “inner story” of the characters, the group pledged allegiance to a set of “vows”, the first of which was:

Shooting should be done on location. Props and sets must not be brought in (if a particular prop is necessary for the story, a location must be chosen where the prop is to be found)¹

By analogy, four years ago I wrote a short, uncharacteristically provocative, article (Thornbury, 2000) suggesting the need for a similar “rescue action” in ELT, which – at least in the contexts I was familiar with – seemed to be drowning in an embarrassment of resources. An over-dependency on manufactured materials (I argued) ran counter to the often expressed desire of both teachers and learners to create more opportunities for “real language use” in their classrooms. This was partly due to the single-minded fixation of these materials, as *coursebooks*, on teaching the system (mainly grammar), and due also to their textual density, not to mention cultural blandness and lack of relevance, as *textbooks*.

The article provoked some sympathetic mutterings, and these mutterings evolved into the Dogme on-line discussion list (www.groups.yahoo.com/group/dogme). At last count this has over 300 members and has triggered nearly 7000 postings. Out of this “long conversation” a number of principles have emerged that “dogmetists” seem to hold in common, irrespective of the contexts they are teaching in. These might be summarised as being:

- Materials-mediated teaching is the “scenic” route to learning, but the direct route is located in the *interactivity* between teachers and learners, and between the learners themselves.
- The content most likely to *engage* learners and to trigger learning processes is that which is already there, supplied by the “people in the room.”
- Learning is a social and *dialogic* process, where knowledge is co-constructed rather than “transmitted”

or “imported” from teacher/coursebook to learner.

- Learning can be mediated through *talk*, especially talk that is shaped and supported (i.e. *scaffolded*) by the teacher.
- Rather than being acquired, language (including grammar) *emerges*: it is an organic process that occurs given the right conditions.
- The teacher’s primary function, apart from promoting the kind of classroom *dynamic* which is conducive to a dialogic and emergent pedagogy, is to optimise language learning *affordances*, by, for example, directing attention to features of the emergent language.
- Providing space for the learner’s *voice* means accepting that the learner’s beliefs, knowledge, experiences, concerns and desires are valid content in the language classroom.
- Freeing the classroom from third-party, imported materials *empowers* both teachers and learners.
- Texts, when used, should have *relevance* for the learner, in both their learning and using contexts.
- Teachers and learners need to unpack the ideological baggage associated with EFL materials – to become *critical* users of such texts.

As you can see, there is a lot here that echoes the precepts of other “transformative” pedagogies, such as humanistic education, critical pedagogy, pedagogy of possibility, border pedagogy, and so on. Indeed, one of the pleasures of the dogme discussion has been in having these connections pointed out. In short, there is nothing very original in dogme.

Nevertheless, it is curious how it continues to be a source of irritation, not only for publishers (who, I have to admit, have been on the whole pretty indifferent) but for many teachers. This may be due to a healthy scepticism on their part about bandwagons, false prophets, and hokum; or it may hint at a more profound insecurity with regard to some teachers’ perceptions of their role, and the expertise associated with it. Dogme may threaten the traditional “authority” of teachers, suggesting as it does that teachers are just another “person in the room”. “Winging it, elevated to an art form,” was how one teacher dismissed dogme-style teaching.

1. All quotes from Dogme 95 Vow of Chastity come from the official Dogme website: www.dogme95.dk

Tilting at windmills, too, perhaps. The publishers' indifference to dogme may simply be due to their unshakeable confidence in the culture of the coursebook. Nothing written on the dogme list, or anywhere else for that matter, is going to dislodge the coursebook from its role as keystone in the monumental edifice of globalised ELT. Dogmetists are merely ELT Luddites, whistling in the wind.

Or dancing in the dark. Significantly, in 2000 Lars von Trier seemed to have turned his back on dogme values when he made the all-dancing, all-singing, movie musical "Dancer in the Dark" starring Björk. Wasn't this a betrayal of the spirit of 1995? Von Trier argued that he was simply moving on. The dogme vows were not carved in stone. They had served to raise awareness of what could be achieved with minimal means, of the potential of a "poor" cinema. But, as with any prescriptive rules, there was the danger of reductionism and a kind of cinematic fundamentalism which, far from being liberating, might become asphyxiating. Besides, the values that inspired dogme in the first place – such as narrative and psychological authenticity – had not been betrayed in "Dancer in the Dark", nor in his subsequent film, "Dogville", even if the cinematic means of realising these values had become more sophisticated. And, finally, von Trier may well have been motivated by his own political activism, and the need to broadcast his radical agenda as widely as possible. While dogme films remained mere art-house curiosities, there was little chance of this agenda reaching a wide audience.

Is dogme ELT at a similar crossroads? Has the point been made? Is it time for dogmetists to return to the fold? (Sadder and wiser perhaps, but "better" teachers now, for having been out in the materials wilderness). More to the point, is coursebook use compatible with dogme principles? Or, if *current* coursebooks won't do, could there be such a thing as a dogme coursebook? A coursebook that, by promoting dogme values, both subverts the prevailing paradigm, and sets a new industry standard? Is it time, in short, for *Dogway*?

Motivated partly by these questions, but also by a somewhat resigned acceptance of the ubiquitous culture of the coursebook, I have drawn up a checklist of features that a coursebook would need to display in order to gain a dogme seal of approval.

Dogway would need to be...

1. *high on interactivity*: interactive speaking and writing activities should be the most conspicuous feature of the book.
2. *low on text*: the main purpose of texts should be as
 - a) stimuli for production;
 - b) data for contextualised language focus.
 But there should be no pretence that texts are there to develop reading skills (which learners can, and do, easily transfer from their L1,

and which, anyway, are best practised on texts of their choice outside the classroom). For this reason, texts should be short and generically diverse, but the exploitation of them should be exhaustive. Nor should there be any recorded listenings, since these serve no useful classroom purpose. Listening activity should be live and interactive, and integrated into speaking activity, apart from the generous use of dictation. Guidance for composing short texts for dictation and dictogloss purposes based on local and relevant issues can be provided in the teacher's book – again, these should be exploited thoroughly, in the manner of the printed texts. Words, phrases, and isolated sentences, even some scripted dialogues, could be recorded, as guides to features of pronunciation. But no extended, inaudible, disembodied listenings about the Brazilian rain forests!

3. *emergent*: the language focus should emerge from, and not determine, the communicative needs of the learners; guidance for teachers as to how this might be achieved will be provided in the teacher's book.
4. *facilitative*: that is, the linguistic (grammatical, lexical, discursal) means for taking part in speaking and writing activities should be flagged, where these can be predicted, not as "input" to be taught, but as tools to be picked up and put down again until such time as the learner "owns" them; a lot of these tools will be lexical, especially in the form of short, memorable chunks.
5. *reflective*: built in to the activity flow should be frequent opportunities to review, take stock, self- and peer-test, repeat activities, set new goals, raise the bar, move the goalpost. Plenty of white space should be available in the book, for learners' notes, comments, reflections, graffiti... Learners would regularly submit portfolios of work, including their own vocabulary notebooks and journals, for assessment.
6. *"grammar-lite"*: that is, the grammar syllabus would be unobtrusive and sparing, and not the tail that wags the (communicative) dog; there would be an emphasis on high frequency tenses (present and past), and on modality, and less on low frequency, low utility forms (e.g. continuous), especially at lower levels. A clear distinction would be made, on the one hand, between recognition grammar ("full fat") and production grammar ("low fat"), and on the other hand, between grammar for writing and grammar for speaking. Grammar would also be treated as an extension of lexis, that is, high frequency words – such as if, would, that, but, then. These and their associated patterns would be displayed as chains, rather than presented as "grammar mc nuggets" (second conditional, reported speech, etc)

7. *problematizing*: at least some of the language-focused tasks should aim to raise awareness and prime noticing capabilities through posing problems, without necessarily providing readymade answers. Learners would be invited to find and search their own data, to become “language sleuths”. (This is not the same as an inductive approach, incidentally – more like a “slow release” approach).
8. *non-incremental*: the design and layout of the book should encourage teachers and learners to feel free to start anywhere, to move back and forth, to pick and choose.
9. *self-sufficient*: the only extra component should be a (non-linear) homework book, focusing on accurate manipulation of key grammar, vocabulary, and text-types. There will be no wasteful photocopiable resource pack, student cassette, CD-ROM and so on. Teachers will be urged to encourage learners to read extensively outside class, according to their own interests and needs; learners should also be advised as to which dictionary and reference grammar will serve their long-term needs (no need, therefore, to clutter the book with grammar reference sections or “mini-dictionaries”).
10. *cheap*: the book and workbook should be produced to ensure the lowest possible cost to the consumer. After all, if none of the previous nine features were considered marketable in the current climate of over-resourced, over-designed, and over-priced ELT publishing, at least a highly competitive price might just be sufficient incentive to tempt some foolhardy but well-intentioned publisher into taking the risk.

Any takers?

References

Thornbury, S. 2000. A Dogma for EFL. *IATEFL Issues*, 153, 2

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