

# A Dogma for EFL

## Scott Thornbury takes a vow of EFL chastity



In 1995 a group of Danish film-makers, including Lars von Trier, signed a “vow of chastity” which became the manifesto of the Dogme 95 film-making collective. Their intention was to cleanse cinema of an obsessive concern for technique and rehabilitate a cinema which foregrounded the story, and the inner life of the characters. They rejected the superficiality and “trickery” of mainstream film-making. Films made according to Dogme 95 prescriptions (such as Thomas Vinterberg’s *Festen*) typically have a rough, gritty, even raw, quality and are certainly a far remove from the slick artifice and technical virtuosity of Hollywood. You may not like Dogme films, but they are not easy to forget.

My belief is that it is high time Dogme-type principles were applied to the classroom. While EFL may seem to have little in common with Hollywood, it is certainly true that EFL teaching has never been so copiously resourced. Along with the quantity (I hesitate to use the word variety) of coursebooks in print, there is an embarrassment of complementary riches in the form of videos, CD-ROMs, photocopiable resource packs, pull-out word lists, and even web-sites, not to mention the standard workbook, teacher’s book, and classroom and home study cassettes. Then there is the vast battery of supplementary materials available, as well as the authentic material easily downloadable from the Internet or illegally photocopied from more conventional sources. There are the best-selling self-study grammar books, personal vocabulary organisers, phrasal verb dictionaries, concordancing software packages – you name it. But where is the story? Where is the inner life of the student in all this? Where is *real communication*? More often as not, it is buried under an avalanche of photocopies, visual aids, transparencies, MTV clips and cuisenaire rods. Somewhere in there we lost the plot.

For several years now, my fellow Diploma teacher trainer, Neil Forrest, and I have been waging war on materials-driven lessons. The plaintive cry of an ex-student (“Our teacher never talked to us”) cut straight to the quick. Too many observed lessons, we realized, were being hi-jacked, either by materials overload, or by Obsessive Grammar Syndrome (OGS). We laid down some rules: if the language lesson didn’t include real language use, then we questioned its usefulness. Photocopies were proscribed; the OHP was banished. Grammar presentations had to be squeezed into 5 minutes. Real talk, usually relegated to the bookends of the lesson proper, had to form the lesson core. And the teacher had to talk – not *at* the students or even *to* them – but *with* them. No posturing was allowed.

What we were developing, I now realise, is a Dogme school of teaching. Dogme’s first “commandment” is that:

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)<sup>1</sup>

Translated into classroom terms this might read:

Teaching should be done using only the resources that teachers and students bring to the classroom – i.e. themselves – and whatever happens to be in the classroom. If a particular piece of ma-

terial is necessary for the lesson, a location must be chosen where that material is to be found (e.g. library, resource centre, bar, students’ club...)

Dogme also proscribes music being played that is not actually occurring where the scene is being shot. Nor is artificial lighting allowed. Nor optical work or filters. Nor tripods. In teaching terms, this rigorous rejection of the non-authentic might mean, for example, that

No recorded listening material should be introduced into the classroom: the source of all “listening” activities should be the students and teacher themselves. The only recorded material that is used should be that made in the classroom itself, e.g. recording students in pair or group work for later re-play and analysis.

But Dogme is not only about a stripped down, technology-free kind of film making. It is also about grounding the experience of the film (both its making and its viewing) in the real world:

Temporal and geographical alienation are forbidden. (That is to say that the film takes place here and now).

Learning, too, takes place in the here-and-now. What is learned is what *matters*. Teaching – like talk – should centre on the local and relevant concerns of the people in the room, not on the remote world of coursebook characters, nor the contrived world of grammatical structures. In the same spirit, Dogme is hostile to “genre movies”, such as westerns, thrillers, and wacky comedies, since genres are another form of alienation – they map an artificial world on to the real one. Methods in language teaching – being generalised and simplistic solutions to local and complex situations – have the same distorting effect as genres. A Dogme school of teaching would take a dim view of imported methods, whether the Silent Way, the Natural Approach, the Direct Method, or hard line CLT. No methodological structures should interfere with, nor inhibit, the free flow of participant-driven input, output and feedback.

Are these Dogme-like prescriptions just another method? I hope not. The point is to restore teaching to its pre-method “state of grace” – when all there was was 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. Who, then, will join me and sign a Vow of EFL Chastity?

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Dogme 95 Vow of Chastity come from the official Dogme website: <http://www.dogme95.dk>