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Dogme in language teaching in Japan

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Dogme 95 was the idea of film instructor, Lars von Trier. About two years ago, the teacher trainer and writer, Scott Thornbury, proposed a language industry version of *Dogme* (Thornbury, 2002). Where Trier wanted to cut the artifice imposed by Hollywood, Thornbury's version was addressed at our dependence on materials and technology. The full wording of the principles are in Figure 1, and the website to consult is <www.teaching-unplugged.com>.

I learned about Dogme (the language version) from a recent interview with Thornbury (Smith, 2004), and below I will tell what Dogme is, look at it from Japan, and provide a sample Dogme lesson.

Dogme asks us to place the student and student needs and preferences at the center of our teaching; it asks us to become partners with rather than pontificators to students. Applying the Dogme tenets will be simple to some but also require many to rethink our ways in the classroom, and here the meaning of the word "Dogme" may need elucidation. A search in even your unabridged dictionary will not help. In the original paper where Dogme was proposed, a similarly spelled word (dogma) was used in the title and that caused anguish at the fear of having yet more inflexible rules imposed on language instructors (Gill, 2002). The English dogma is indeed a direct translation of the original Danish dogme, but as Dogme is a new word in English, all bets should be off as to the meaning.

A lengthy paraphrasing of the meaning of Dogme in English could be that it is: a plea for cutting the apron strings of materials and technology, remembering that we are teaching real people with real language needs in real classrooms, and that we should look to and trust these students to know what should be learned. We should not be dogmatic about what we want the students to learn.

The global setting of the manifesto

The origins of Dogme are in Europe, in teacher training for teaching of smaller classes, and that may explain why reactions focused on mass produced materials being slighted. In the language teaching profession, our times are seen to be without set methods and practices that can be followed mechanically, and Dogme provides guidelines that will help and support instructors evaluate what to implement in the classroom.

If we step back a few years there was a time when methods, models, and approaches flourished. We had the silent way, TPR, community learning, and many many more. That happy progress was stopped when Swan (1985) called attention to the absence of solid evidence for the efficacy of at least communicative language learning and maybe there was a realization that while most methods were a good thing some of the time, there were always alternative ways to explore.

Today, when models and surefire ways are disapproved of, we have built up different defenses against focusing on student learning. Thornbury's Dogme steps in to encourage us to cease and desist from using textbooks and other machinery to mediate the work in the classroom, to get back to dealing with the language learners there.

The Dogme principles and Japan

Now I will look at some of the Dogme principles and what they may tell us here in Japan. There are ten Dogme vows and I will look at those that I find most pertinent.

The one that struck me most powerfully was number six, doing away with grammar. Implementing this in Japan would mean a great deal of change. It would be argued that language learning would cease when grammar is not at the core, but there are also signs that grammar may be doing real harm.

We do not usually listen to the classes of other teachers but those where I have been an observer (Christensen, 2003) and those we may take part in on the radio or TV seem to contain very little but grammar grounded skits. Words and phrases are explained by their

grammar value and by nothing else. We may hear, as I did recently, an Italian word for angry described as an adjective with no mention of its emotional or semantic value. This could be a reason why my students often seem little attentive to meaning. If meaning was what mattered in the classroom it could be that our students would be less puzzled by word nuances and other points that grammar skates over.

Recently, student English ability in the Center Test for university entrance was found wanting yet again. The published examples of poor performance that I saw could be seen as a result of indiscriminate grammar application and a failure to attend to illocutionary value. Maybe Dogme is on to something.

Thinking about why the grammar item ranks only sixth in the Dogme list seems to show that grammar of the old school that we find here in Japan is not a primary issue in language instruction in other parts of the world. It would be possible to posit a number of reasons why we are not similarly blessed, but that is outside the scope of an introduction to Dogme. We should not forget, however, that we are very much influenced by this practice.

Item five starts with an adjective that we do not use much when discussing our ways in the language classroom. One method that Dogme does not mention here is the present-practice-apply routine that is beloved by many. A grammar point is introduced, it is shown in several unconnected sentences, and then students get an opportunity to apply the newly learned grammar rule. Item five of Dogme says that we should not rely exclusively on even such seemingly rational methods, but vary our ways with needs and situations.

One reason the above method does not always work (like all methods Dogme would say) would be that some grammar is difficult to apply or is rarely used. The confusion and mistakes shown by even beginning language learners show learners to be unsure about fairly common rules even when they are able to trot out obscure examples that must have been internalized in grammar instruction, likely with a blanket application of a method like the above.

Dogme's suggestion for our treatment of pronunciation in item two, will appear entirely alien and irresponsible to language instruction in Japan. Correct, superior pronunciation is an important issue here, at the same time as we are constantly told of the inferior quality of

the local product. Dogme tells us to forget all about that and to interact and listen to each other. For the writer that seems sound advice that our local mores however make it difficult to realize. Discussions among Dogme practitioners talk about 'doing listening' (going through set materials) as opposed to 'listening' (making sense of what is said), a dichotomy to think about.

Item one about textbooks, the one that excited people in Europe, would seem to be an overreaction for Japan. Abandoning set texts seems a sound enough principle whenever practical, however with a very large proportion of language teachers floating in and out of the profession, reliable if pedestrian textbooks seem a good thing where students are accepting of textbooks and instructors are testing the waters before deciding on a career in language teaching. Not to have a textbook available and to trust intuition at all times is difficult for some, and there should be room for such people also among language teachers I feel. The standard textbook published to fit the world market certainly has its place in the world, but in a specific classroom Dogme tells us not to use it. Still, in Japan we should perhaps not be dogmatic about this.

Some needs for Dogme in Japan

As the brief review above shows, this writer thinks that Dogme makes sense for Japan, but what kind of teacher training and other concerns are there when there is no grammar, no text, no method, no tools and no other tasks in the classroom than to make sense of classroom happenings to further language learning?

First the skills called for in a Dogme teacher. Here there seems to be a need for skills to cope with the broad range of issues that may emerge in a lesson, without any particular order or warning. Optimally, Dogme teacher training would instill a relaxed confidence in the use of the language and an intuitive ability to understand the background to problems arising in using language. It would require the instructor to be willing to stand back and let things happen, and to be ready to suggest rather than impose ideas. Learning to get around organizational hurdles and overcoming resistance to changes will also be called for with Dogme. For some it may be necessary to overcome a reluctance to speak English in front of

students and to sit down with them as equals, maybe due to perceptions of poor pronunciation and feelings of otherness due to the imparting of 'non-native' (foreign) ways. Traditional lesson preparation will largely disappear with Dogme, presence of mind in dealing with the target language as it emerges will mark the Dogme specialist. An extensive stock of reference materials and compendia of how specific problems in the language classroom can be overcome will be welcome here. These would need the publishing industry, which then will be able to make up for the lessened use of textbooks. But as lesson preparation, a good stock of paper and pencils will generally do.

Class size is not really important, as I hope my Dogme lesson below will show. Large classes were an issue some years ago until it was verified and realized that most of the problems in large classes are class management problems, and that while large classes do limit some things Dogme seems to offer suggestions even for those.

Dogme paradise

The class I will describe in the following takes place with a group of students who have met a number of times already and who are comfortable with the class. The aim of the class is that all participants are contributing and that all will be able to show proof of having taken part. Below, I will put the numbers of the Dogme principles in brackets where they are in play.

The teacher arrives as the students trickle in and today all 41 enrolled students are present. Last week it was agreed that everybody would prepare a short story, about 100 words, about a recent happening (1). The only limitation put on the story is that it has to include half a dozen new words that the students have recently learned/encountered or would like to try out (6).

First the class divides into six or seven groups, and the first task for the group members is to present their stories to the group. Some students have typewritten their stories, others have memorized theirs, and still others are extemporating (8). The students present their stories, maybe explain 'their' new words, and the rest of the group ask questions to make sure that they understand what the storyteller wants to say. This is in preparation for the

next step where the class reforms into new groups for students to report their own stories in detail in addition to giving summaries of the stories they have heard in the first groups (and which the other students in the new groups did not yet hear).

During this the instructor is sitting in and helping out as there are matters where students ask for help, ever focusing on the 'message' of the stories (4). When there are no requests for assistance the instructor may take part in any of the groups or maybe the instructor was assigned a group at the start (3). The instructor has prepared several stories to share with the students so attendance in several groups is possible, where this is not disruptive of the student work.

After these two cycles, lesson time may be running out or maybe there is time to try elaborating on the stories, making them funnier or springlike maybe, or something may have occurred that invites exploration in the groups or with the whole class (7).

Finally, to show participation the students agree to make up three line stories with a few gaps for filling in, to be completed by the next lesson (9). These snippets may go on the blackboard for copying, the students may email them to each other, or all may agree on some other way of getting the 'exercises' to everybody. In the following lesson the answers are provided and students may report their scores

Now there may be people who feel the above is community language learning without the tape recorder, but other than the silent method there seems to be a little bit of many methods here (5). There were no extraneous listening materials and the focus was on student generated/relevant material (2).

The teacher evaluation will probably be 'not boring' (10), with students attending to the stories, laughing and helping each other, the electrifying atmosphere will bring out the best in us all.

The above is of course only the barest outline of the class and I will be happy to provide further details. Like here, an implementation of Dogme principles is not difficult at all, and it will make for a challenging learning environment and place language learning at the center of the activities.

Think about Dogme. Try it out here and there. You will like it.

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Fig. 1 **The Dogme principles** (Thornbury, 2002)

1. 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 material 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...)
2. 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.
3. The teacher must sit down at all times that the students are seated, except when monitoring group or pair work (and even then it may be best to pull up a chair). In small classes, teaching should take place around a single table.
4. All the teacher's questions must be "real" questions (such as "Do you like oysters?" Or "What did you do on Saturday?"), not "display" questions (such as "What's the past of the verb to go?" or "Is there a clock on the wall?")
5. Slavish adherence to a method (such as audiolingualism, Silent Way, TPR, task-based learning, suggestopedia) is unacceptable.

6. A pre-planned syllabus of pre-selected and graded grammar items is forbidden. Any grammar that is the focus of instruction should emerge from the lesson content, not dictate it.
7. Topics that are generated by the students themselves must be given priority over any other input.
8. Grading of students into different levels is disallowed: students should be free to join the class that they feel most comfortable in, whether for social reasons, or for reasons of mutual intelligibility, or both. As in other forms of human social interaction, diversity should be accommodated, even welcomed, but not proscribed.
9. The criteria and administration of any testing procedures must be negotiated with the learners.
10. Teachers themselves will be evaluated according to only one criterion: that they are not boring.

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