Methods, myths and mindfulness

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rethinks what works in the classroom.

A field of fashions

Language teaching has always been a field of fashions. Each decade seems to bring a new 'answer' to the question of how best to teach a second language: one method is hailed as revolutionary, another declared outdated, only for the cycle to repeat again. Teachers swap stories, academics publish papers and institutions cling to whatever approach promises measurable success. Yet after decades of debate and experimentation, one thing remains remarkably consistent: no single methodology has been proven superior across all contexts (Chang *et al.*, 2011).

I've lived through several of these swings first hand, both in the UK and abroad. I've seen methods introduced with great enthusiasm and later abandoned with equal speed. Fairly recently, I've overseen the phasing out of one such approach — the Callan method — and in doing so I began to question the very premise of 'the best method'. Coming close to burnout a few times over the years has led me to look more closely at another area that has never really been given its due place in language teaching: wellness. While methods receive endless attention, the wellbeing of teachers and learners — the human conditions that make learning possible — remain underrated and underutilised (Zeilhofer, 2020).

The Callan method: a case study in extremes

If you've ever sat in a Callan class, you won't forget it. The teacher speaks quickly, firing questions in rapid succession, demanding instant responses, correcting every mistake the moment it happens. Students repeat, respond and repeat again, but only when they're spoken to. For novice learners it can feel thrillingly intense. The method is built on the idea of immersion and drilling: students hear and produce English continuously, leaving no space for translation or hesitation. Schools embrace it because it offers structure, discipline and, above all, a sense of progress that can be marketed. A student can measure their 'speed' in answering, their fluency improving lesson by lesson (Ismail & Saiful, 2024).

I oversaw the eradication of the method in a school I worked at for a while, training the team to deliver a more communicative approach. I think I was very lucky to have a team willing to embrace the change, but it didn't happen overnight; as it's so prescriptive, Callan teachers are used to opening the book on X page and continuing where they left off. There is no planning or preparation needed, which most time-restrained teachers would hail. Shy learners are attracted to the rhythm and routine, as every lesson follows the same format. The repetition creates a sense of security, a safe predictability that neurodivergent students also benefit from. And it forces students to follow a script and speak, whether they feel ready or not, giving an immediate sense of achievement.

But its limitations are clear. The teacher dominates the room, creativity is verboten and genuine communication is rare. It is an extreme example of what happens when a method becomes an ideology. It promises answers it never truly delivers at all levels (I believe it does get the ball rolling for A1/A2 learners). In this sense, it serves as a microcosm of a larger truth:

no method, however cleverly packaged, has ever been proven to work universally (Boliqulova, 2024).

Nevertheless, trying to win round both the teachers and learners required some convincing. As the Callan method is taught at 50-minute intervals, it was simple enough to introduce new methodologies without overburdening anyone. With the use of AI we were also able to make very specific lessons our teachers felt comfortable delivering, personalising the content and bringing everyone out of their comfort zone without even realising it. In one term we had made the transition, keeping the core staff and extremely satisfied learners, many re-enrolling.

Hunting down the 'best' method

The history of language teaching is littered with discarded champions. Grammar translation ruled classrooms for many a year, focusing on accuracy, rules and the translation of classical texts. Then came audiolingualism in the mid-20th century, rooted in behaviourist psychology, with endless drills and pattern practice. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) swept through in the 1970s and 80s, prioritising real-life communication over form. Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) followed, promising authenticity and learner-centredness. More recently, technology-enhanced methods, flipped classrooms and blended learning have been touted as the future.

Each of these has strengths, but none have been definitively proven to be the 'best'. Outcomes vary more by context, teacher skill, learner motivation and classroom environment than by method itself (Chang *et al.*, 2011; Wang, 2024).

No singular teaching method works across the board. Outcomes vary more by context, teacher skill, learner motivation and classroom environment than by method itself. What works for a motivated group of adult learners in Barcelona may flop with reluctant teenagers in Bangkok. Teacher enthusiasm often matters more than the approach being used.

From my own vantage point, this was obvious. I'd observe two teachers in adjacent classrooms: one painstakingly following a communicative syllabus, another pretty much sitting around having a chat. Both produced successful learners — not because of the method, but because the teachers were engaged, responsive and connected to their students. I've also seen the exact same lesson being taught (in the same order, no embellishments or changes) with wildly different receptions and outcomes.

This doesn't mean methods are irrelevant. They provide frameworks, inspiration and structure. But they are not magic keys. They are tools in a toolbox, not recipes for guaranteed success. And while we've spent decades arguing over which tool is superior, we've often neglected the human conditions that determine whether any tool can be effective at all (Aşık & Koçali, 2024). Which brings us to wellness.

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The overlooked factor: wellness in the classroom

Wellness in education has become a buzzword in some areas of schooling, but in language teaching it is still largely marginal. Institutions focus on curricula, assessment and accreditation; teachers focus on methodology, activities and materials. The emotional and psychological wellbeing of learners is often treated as incidental, or worse, irrelevant.

Yet anyone who has taught knows how crucial it is. A student who is anxious will struggle to speak. A class that feels unsafe will stay silent. A teacher who is burnt out will not inspire. Wellness is not a 'nice extra' — it is the ground on which learning stands (Morgan, 2021; Muñoz Gallardo & Guamán Luna, 2024). We can look at wellness on two levels.

1 Personal wellbeing

This includes practices that help learners and teachers manage stress, build focus and sustain energy. Meditation, mindfulness, breathing exercises and moments of reflection can all be integrated into lessons without derailing them. At IATEFL I spoke about using meditation in the classroom, and the responses were revealing: many teachers were curious, some were sceptical, but many admitted they had never been encouraged to consider wellness as part of methodology.

Simple practices – a simple deep breathing exercise before a speaking task, a short body-scan at the start of class, a guided reflection after an intense activity – can reduce anxiety and improve focus. In my own classes, I saw shy learners visibly relax after such exercises, suddenly more willing to take the risk of speaking and opening up to those around them.

2 Classroom wellbeing

This is about the atmosphere we create. Is the classroom a place where mistakes are tolerated? Where students feel safe to laugh, experiment and fail? Do we allow space for silence or is every moment filled with activity? Classroom wellness is about relationships, tone and emotional connection.

Research supports this. Studies on affective filters show that anxiety blocks acquisition, while positive emotions enhance retention (Li, 2025; Zou, 2024). Learners who feel supported are more likely to persist. Yet institutions rarely measure or reward these factors, because they are harder to quantify than test scores or completion rates.

From a school leadership perspective, wellness is also about sustainability. Teachers who feel valued and cared for are less likely to burn out, and learners who feel supported are more likely to return, recommend and succeed. Yet

many institutions still equate quality with methodology, not with wellbeing (Yang Wang & Chao Liu, 2021).

Practical steps for integrating wellness

How might we bring wellness into everyday teaching without it feeling forced or 'alternative'? Here are a few starting points:

- **Start with stillness** Begin lessons with one minute of silence, breathing or guided focus. Explain why you are doing it. Reflect afterwards. It may not be for everyone at first, but most will find themselves re-centred and more ready to learn.
- **Reduce performance pressure** Allow pairwork before whole-class answers; normalise mistakes as part of the process. Simply providing the answers at the end of an exercise and then checking why can have more impact than focusing on the competitive element of getting every answer correct.
- **Check in emotionally** For many teachers I know, this is standard practice at the beginning of class, almost as an ice breaker. Learners can predict this and mask their true feelings so it's always worth checking in at other times too.
- **Embed reflection** After a task, ask students how they felt doing it and how they'd tackle it again. Reflect how you would feel doing that exercise. Putting yourself in your learners' shoes on a regular basis builds empathy.
- **Model wellness** Teachers who show balance and calm model it for learners. Same story with vulnerability (not weakness). If you can show your human side, learners will trust the space and open up more, bringing more of themselves into the class.
- **Institutional support** Schools could provide spaces for relaxation and wellness activities, encourage shorter lesson blocks or build wellness training into CPD.

These are small steps, but together they shift the culture of a classroom from one that treats learning as purely cognitive to one that recognises the whole person.

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A serious investment

The Callan method, with its relentless pace and promises of fluency, is just one chapter in the story of language teaching methodologies. Recent studies suggest it still has a place at the table, but it certainly isn't a one size fits all. The truth is, no method is. Research confirms what experience shows: teaching success depends less on the choice of method than on the context, the teacher and the learner.

What has been consistently underestimated, however, is wellness. Without attention to the mental and emotional state of learners and teachers, even the most elegantly designed method falls short. Wellness is not an optional extra, nor a trend to be bolted on. It is the foundation on which meaningful learning rests (Zeilhofer, 2020).

As we look ahead, the real challenge for language education is not to discover the 'next method', but to reframe what we value. If institutions can move beyond methodological fashions and invest seriously in wellness, we may finally give learners not just the tools to pass exams, but the resilience and confidence to thrive in language and in life.

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