

From

Celce-Murcia, M. (ed.) (1991). *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed.). Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle Publishers.

Language Teaching Approaches: An Overview

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INTRODUCTION

The field of second (or foreign) language teaching has undergone many fluctuations and dramatic shifts over the years. As opposed to physics or chemistry, where progress is more or less steady until a major discovery causes a radical theoretical revision (Kuhn, 1970), language teaching is a field where fads and heroes have come and gone in a manner fairly consistent with the kinds of changes that occur in youth culture. I believe that one reason for the frequent changes that have been taking place until recently is the fact that very few language teachers have even the vaguest sense of history about their profession and are unclear concerning the historical bases of the many methodological options they currently have at their disposal. It is hoped that this brief and necessarily oversimplified survey will encourage many language teachers to learn more about the origins of their profession. Such knowledge will give some healthy perspective in evaluating the so-called innovations or new approaches to methodology that will continue to emerge over time.

PRE-20TH-CENTURY TRENDS: A BRIEF SURVEY

Prior to this century, language teaching methodology vacillated between two types of approaches: one type of approach which focused on *using* a language (i.e., speaking and understanding), the other type which focused on *analyzing* a language (i.e., learning the grammatical rules).

Both the Classical Greek and Medieval Latin periods were characterized by an emphasis on teaching people to use foreign languages. The classical languages, first Greek and then Latin, were used as *lingua franca*. Higher learning was given only in these languages all over Europe. They were also used very widely in philosophy or religion, politics, and business. Thus, the educated elite became fluent speakers, readers, and writers of the appropriate classical language. We can assume that the teachers or tutors used informal and direct approaches to convey the form and meaning of the language they were teaching and that they used aural-oral techniques with no language textbooks per se, but rather a small stock of hand-copied written manuscripts of some sort, perhaps a few texts in the target language, or crude dictionaries that listed equivalent words in two or more languages side by side.

Later during the Renaissance, the formal study of the grammars of Greek and Latin became popular through the mass production made possible by the invention of the printing press. In the case of Latin, it was discovered that the grammar of the classical texts was different from that of the Latin being used as a *lingua franca*-the latter subsequently being labeled Vulgate Latin, i.e., the Latin of the common people. Eventually major differences developed between the Classical Latin described in the Renaissance grammars, which became the formal object of instruction in schools, and the Latin being used for everyday purposes. This occurred at the same time that Latin was being abandoned as a *lingua franca*, (No one was speaking Classical Latin anymore, and various European vernaculars had begun to rise in respectability and popularity.) Thus in retrospect, strange as it may seem, the Renaissance preoccupation with the formal study of Classical Latin may have contributed to the demise of Latin as a *lingua franca* in Western Europe.

Since the European vernaculars had increased in prestige and utility, it is not surprising that people in one country or region began to find it necessary and useful to learn the language of

another country or region. Thus the focus in language study shifted back to utility rather than analysis during the 17th century. Perhaps the most famous language teacher and methodologist of this period is Jan Comenius, a Czech, who published books about his teaching techniques between 1631 and 1658. Some of the techniques that were used and espoused were the following:

- **Use imitation instead of rules to teach a language.**
- **Have your students repeat after you.**
- **Use a limited vocabulary initially.**
- **Help your students practice reading and speaking.**
- **Teach language through pictures to make it meaningful.**

Thus, Comenius, for the first time, made explicit an inductive approach to learning a foreign language, the goal of which was to teach use rather than analysis of the language being taught.

Comenius's views held sway for some time; however, by the beginning of the 19th century the systematic study of the grammar of Classical Latin and of classical texts had once again taken over in schools and universities throughout Europe. The analytical grammar-translation approach became firmly entrenched, as a method for teaching not only Latin but modern languages as well. It was perhaps best codified in the work of Karl Ploetz, a German scholar, who had a tremendous influence on the language teaching profession during his lifetime and afterwards (he died in 1881).

True to form, however, the swinging of the pendulum continued. By the end of the 19th century the Direct Method, which once more stressed the ability to use rather than to analyze a language as the goal of language instruction, had been established as a viable alternative. Gouin, a Frenchman, began to publish in 1880 concerning his work with the Direct Method. He had been influenced by an older friend, the German philosopher-scientist Alexander Von Humboldt, who had expressed the following notion:

A language cannot be taught. One can only create conditions for learning to take place.

The Direct Method crossed the Atlantic in the early 20th century when de Sauzé, a disciple of Gouin, came to Cleveland, Ohio in order to see to it that all foreign language instruction in the public schools there reflected the Direct Method.

De Sauzé's endeavor was not completely successful (in Cleveland or elsewhere) since there were too few foreign language teachers who were fluent speakers of the language they were teaching. This later led the Modern Language Association of America to endorse the Reading Approach to language teaching, since given the skills and limitations of most language teachers, the most one could reasonably expect is that students would come away from the study of a foreign language with an ability to read the target language with emphasis on some of the great works of literature that had been produced in the language.

The Reading Approach, as reflected in the work of Michael West (1941) and others, held sway until the 1940s, when World War II once more made it imperative for the U.S. military to teach foreign language learners how to speak and understand a language quickly and efficiently. At this time, the U.S. government hired linguists to help teach languages and develop materials: The audio-lingual approach, which drew heavily on structural linguistics and behavioral psychology, was born. In Britain the same historical pressures gave rise to the Situational Approach (e.g., Pittman, '1963), which drew on Firthian Linguistics and the experience of Britain's language educators with oral approaches to foreign language teaching. Although somewhat influenced by, but less dogmatic than, its American counterpart (i.e., the Audiolingual Approach), the Situational Approach advocated organizing structures around situations that would provide the learner with maximum opportunity to practice the target language, with "practice" nonetheless often meaning little more than choral repetition.

NINE 20TH-CENTURY APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE TEACHING

In addition to the Grammar-Translation Approach, the Direct Approach, the Reading Approach, Audiolingualism, and the Situational Approach - whose historical development we have now sketched out briefly - there are four other discernible approaches to foreign language teaching that have been widely used during this era, the final quarter of the 20th century. Thus, there are nine approaches altogether that I shall be referring to:

1. **Grammar-Translation Approach**
2. **Direct Approach**
3. **Reading Approach**
4. **Audiolingualism (U.S.)**
5. **Situational Approach (Brit.)**
6. **Cognitive Approach**
7. **Affective-Humanistic Approach**
8. **Comprehension-Based Approach**
9. **Communicative Approach**

However, before specifying the feature of each approach, I would like to digress a moment to clarify some terminology that is crucial to this discussion. Namely, what do we mean by the terms "approach," "method," and "technique"? Are these terms synonymous? If not, how do they differ? Anthony (1963) has provided a useful set of definitions for our purposes. An *approach* to language teaching is something that reflects a certain model or research paradigm- a theory, if you like. This term is the broadest of the three. A *method*, on the other hand, is a set of procedures, i.e., a system that spells out rather precisely how to teach a language. Methods are more specific than approaches but less specific than techniques. Methods are typically compatible with one (or sometimes two) approaches. A *technique* is a classroom device or activity and thus represents the narrowest term of the three concepts. Some techniques are widely used and found in many methods (e.g., imitation and repetition); however, some techniques are specific to or characteristic of a given method (e.g., using cuisinaire rods = the Silent Way). See Blair's discussion of the Silent Way in the following chapter.

At this point, I would like to outline each of the nine approaches listed above. In addition, I will note any special proficiency or role that the teacher is expected (or not expected) to fulfill.

1. **Grammar-Translation Approach** (an extension of the approach used to teach classical languages to the teaching of modern languages).
 - a. Instruction is given in the native language of the students.
 - b. There is little use of the target language.
 - c. Focus is on grammatical parsing, i.e., the form and inflection of words.
 - d. There is early reading of difficult classical texts.
 - e. A typical exercise is to translate sentences from the target language into the mother tongue.
 - f. The result of this approach is usually an inability on the part of the student to use the language for communication.
 - g. The teacher does not have to be able to speak the target language.
2. **Direct Approach** (a reaction to the grammar-translation approach and its failure to produce learners who could use the foreign language they had been studying).
 - a. No use of the mother tongue is permitted (i.e., teacher does not need to know the students' native language).

- b. Lessons begin with dialogs and anecdotes in modern conversational style.
- c. Actions and pictures are used to make meanings clear.
- d. Grammar is learned inductively.
- e. Literary texts are read for pleasure and are not analyzed grammatically.
- f. The target culture is also taught inductively.
- g. The teacher must be a native speaker or have nativelike proficiency in the language.

3. **Reading Approach** (a reaction to the impracticality of the direct approach; reading was viewed as the most usable skill to have in a foreign language since ordinary people traveled abroad around 1930; also, few teachers could use a foreign language well enough to use a direct approach in class).

- a. Only the grammar useful for reading comprehension is taught.
- b. Vocabulary is controlled at first (based on frequency and usefulness) and then expanded.
- c. Translation is once more a respectable classroom procedure.
- d. Reading comprehension is the only language skill emphasized.
- e. The teacher does not need to have good oral proficiency in the target language.

4. **Audiolingualism** (a reaction to the reading approach and its lack of emphasis on oral-aural skills; this approach became dominant in the United States during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s; it takes much from the direct approach but adds features from structural linguistics and behavioral psychology).

- a. Lessons begin with dialogs.
- b. Mimicry and memorization are used, based on the assumption that language is habit formation.
- c. Grammatical structures are sequenced and rules are taught inductively.
- d. Skills are sequenced: listening, speaking-reading, writing postponed.
- e. Pronunciation is stressed from the beginning.
- f. Vocabulary is severely limited in initial stages.
- g. A great effort is made to prevent learner errors.
- h. Language is often manipulated without regard to meaning or context.
- i. The teacher must be proficient only in the structures, vocabulary, etc. that s/he is teaching since learning activities and materials are carefully controlled.

5. **Situational Approach** (a reaction to the reading approach and its lack of emphasis on oral-aural skills; this approach was dominant in Britain during the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s; it draws much from the direct approach but adds features from Firthian Linguistics and the emerging professional field of language pedagogy).

- a. The spoken language is primary.
- b. All language material is practiced orally before being presented in written form (reading and writing are taught only after an oral base in lexical and grammatical forms has been established).
- c. Only the target language should be used in the classroom,
- d. Efforts are made to ensure that the most general and useful lexical items are presented.
- e. Grammatical structures are graded from simple to complex.
- f. New items (lexical and grammatical) are introduced and practiced situationally (e.g., at the post office, at the bank, at the dinner table).

6. Cognitive Approach (a reaction to the behaviorist features of the audiolingual approach).

- a. Language learning is viewed as rule acquisition, not habit formation.
- b. Instruction is often individualized; learners are responsible for their own learning.
- c. Grammar must be taught but it can be taught deductively (rules first, practice later) and/or inductively (rules can either be stated after practice or left as implicit information for the learners to process on their own).
- d. Pronunciation is de-emphasized; perfection is viewed as unrealistic.
- e. Reading and writing are once again as important as listening and speaking.
- f. Vocabulary instruction is important, especially at intermediate and advanced levels.
- g. Errors are viewed as inevitable, something that should be used constructively in the learning process.
- h. The teacher is expected to have good general proficiency in the target language as well as an ability to analyze the target language.

7. Affective-Humanist Approach (a reaction to the general lack of affective considerations in both audiolingualism and cognitive code).

- a. Respect is emphasized for the individual (each student, the teacher) and for his/her feelings.
- b. Communication that is meaningful to the learner is emphasized.
- c. Instruction involves much work in pairs and small groups.
- d. Class atmosphere is viewed as more important than materials or methods.
- e. Peer support and interaction is needed for learning.
- f. Learning a foreign language is viewed as a self-realization experience.
- g. The teacher is viewed as a counselor or facilitator.
- h. The teacher should be proficient in the target language and the student's native language since translation may be used heavily in the initial stages to help students feel at ease; later it is gradually phased out.

8. Comprehension-Based Approach (an outgrowth of research in first language acquisition, which led some language methodologists to assume that second or foreign language learning is very similar to first language acquisition).

- a. Listening comprehension is very important and is viewed as the basic skill that will allow speaking, reading, and writing to develop spontaneously over time given the right conditions.
- b. Learners should begin by listening to meaningful speech and by responding nonverbally in meaningful ways before they produce any language themselves.
- c. Learners should not speak until they feel ready to do so; this results in better pronunciation than when the learner is forced to speak immediately,
- d. Learners progress by being exposed to meaningful input that is just one step beyond their level of competence.
- e. Rule learning may help learners monitor (or become aware of) what they do, but it will not aid their acquisition or spontaneous use of the target language.
- f. Error correction is seen as unnecessary and perhaps even counterproductive; the important thing is that the learners can understand and can make themselves understood.
- g. If the teacher is not a native speaker (or near-native), appropriate materials such as audiotapes and videotapes must be available to provide the appropriate input for the learners.

9. **Communicative Approach** (grew out of the work of anthropological linguists (e.g., Hymes, 1972) and Firthian linguists (e.g., Halliday, 1973), who view language first and foremost as a system for communication).
- a. It is assumed that the goal of language teaching is learner ability to communicate in the target language.
 - b. It is assumed that the content of a language course will include semantic notions and social functions, not just linguistic structures.
 - c. Students regularly work in groups or pairs to transfer (and, if necessary, negotiate) meaning in situations where one person has information that the other(s) lack.
 - d. Students often engage in role-play or dramatization to adjust their use of the target language to different social contexts.
 - e. Classroom materials and activities are often authentic to reflect real-life situations and demands.
 - f. Skills are integrated from the beginning; a given activity might involve reading, speaking, listening, and perhaps also writing (this assumes the learners are educated and literate).
 - g. The teacher's role is primarily to facilitate communication and only secondarily to correct errors.
 - h. The teacher should be able to use the target language fluently and appropriately.

To sum up, we can see that certain features of several of the first five approaches outlined above arose in reaction to perceived inadequacies or impracticalities in an earlier approach or approaches. The four more recently developed approaches also do this to some extent; however, each one is grounded on a slightly different theory or view of how people learn second or foreign languages, or how people use languages, and each has a central point around which everything else revolves:

Cognitive Approach: Language is rule-governed cognitive behavior (not habit formation).

Affective-Humanistic Approach: Learning a foreign language is a process of self-realization and of relating to other people.

Comprehension Approach: Language acquisition occurs if and only if the learner comprehends meaningful input.

Communicative Approach: The purpose of language (and thus the goal of language teaching) is communication.

These four more recent approaches are not necessarily in conflict or totally incompatible since it is not impossible to conceive of an integrated approach which would include attention to rule formation, affect, comprehension, and communication and which would view the learner as someone who thinks, feels, understands, and has something to say. In fact, many teachers would find such an approach, if well conceived and well integrated, to be very attractive.

A NOTE ON APPROACH, METHOD, AND SYLLABUS TYPE

We now understand that an approach is general (e.g., Cognitive), that a method is a specific set of procedures more or less compatible with an approach (e.g., Silent Way), and that a technique is a very specific type of learning activity used in one or more methods (e.g., using rods to cue and facilitate language practice). Historically, an approach or method also tends to be used in conjunction with a syllabus, which is an inventory of things the learner should master; this inventory is sometimes presented in a recommended sequence and is used to design courses and teaching materials.

What sorts of syllabuses have been used with the approaches discussed above? Most of them have used – implicitly or explicitly – a structural syllabus, which consists of a list of grammatical inflections and constructions that the teacher is expected to teach and the learner is expected to master. The Grammar-Translation Approach, the Direct Approach, the Audiolingual Approach, the Cognitive Approach, and even some methods following the Comprehension Approach have all employed a structural syllabus. In other words, teachers and textbook writers following these approaches have organized their language courses and language-teaching materials around grammar points.

In contrast to the structural syllabus, the Reading Approach is text based, and this kind of language course is organized around texts and vocabulary items with only minor consideration given to grammar.

In the Situational Approach, there is often a dual-objective syllabus in which various situations are specified for instruction (e.g., the post office, a restaurant, a bus, the doctor's office, etc.) along with some of the structures and the vocabulary that one might need to produce language in these situations.

In the Communicative Approach, one type of syllabus is organized around notions (meanings such as spatial location, age, degree) and functions (social transactions and interactions such as asking for information or complimenting someone). In this syllabus format (Wilkins, 1976), grammar and vocabulary are quite secondary, being taught not in and of themselves, but only insofar as they help express the notions and functions that are in focus. Some adherents of the Communicative Approach, however, reject any sort of atomistic syllabus, whether structural or notional functional. They advocate instead a communicative syllabus (i.e., a process-based or task-based syllabus) in which real-world tasks and materials are used to design language courses (see Yalden, 1983).

The Affective-Humanistic Approach has produced the most radical syllabus type—the learner-generated syllabus. Thus, in methods like Community Language Learning (see the following chapter by Blair) and Project Work (see the chapter by Eyring), the learners decide what they want to learn in and do with the target language.

CONCLUSION

What is the solution for the ESL/EFL teacher, given the abundance of current and future approaches? The only way to make wise decisions is to learn more about the specific methods available (see Blair, this volume). This chapter has just scratched the surface. Further information is available in books, in journal articles, at professional conferences, and at professional workshops. There are also four other things the teacher has to do to make a good decision concerning the choice of an approach or method (or a combination of these):

1. **Assess student needs:** Why should they be learning English? For what purpose?
2. **Examine instructional constraints:** time (hours per week, days per week, weeks per term); class size (nature of enrollment); materials (set syllabus and text or completely open to teacher); physical factors (classroom size, AV support).
3. **Determine needs, attitudes, and aptitudes of individual students** to the extent that this is possible (see Peck, this volume).

Having done all these, the teacher will be in a position to derive useful techniques or principles by studying all the available approaches and methods. Clifford Prator, a former professor and current colleague of mine, sums up the professional ESL teacher's responsibility nicely: Adapt; don't adopt.

A teacher is certainly in a better position to follow this advice if s/he is familiar with the history and the state of the art of our profession. References are provided below to aid the reader in the attainment of these objectives.

Answer the following questions.

1. What has been the attitude toward the teaching of (a) pronunciation, (b) grammar, (c) vocabulary in the nine approaches discussed in this chapter? Has there been a swinging of the pendulum? Why or why not?
2. What changes have occurred regarding the position of spoken language and written language in the various approaches? Why?
3. Which of these approaches have you personally experienced as a language learner? What were your impressions and what is your assessment of the effectiveness of the approach or method?
4. Which approach do you, as a teacher, feel most comfortable with? Why?