

History of Language Teaching Methods¹

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Abstract:

The earliest European written accounts of language teaching methods are from the 5th century AD, referring specifically to Latin. For centuries the language of the Romans was the primary foreign code throughout much of Europe, functioning as the language of scholarship, trade, and government. The founding of universities in the latter Middle Ages led to developing the Grammar-Translation Method, based on the centuries' long tradition of reading Latin and Greek learned texts. In the 15th century, Europeans began shifting from Latin to using the continent's modern languages more widely. By the 19th century, the Direct Method was developed, modeled on first language acquisition and addressing the greater need for speaking skills in e.g. French, German, and English. In the early 20th century, research largely in educational psychology led to developing the Audio-lingual Method in the 1940s. Believing language use was an issue of stimulus and response, teaching methods emphasized repetition and dialogue memorization. A decade later, Chomsky's landmark research on cognitive aspects of language acquisition recognized that children do not acquire an inventory of linguistic stimuli and responses. Instead, deep processing in the brain enables them to generate sentences they have never heard before. This led to modernizing the Direct Method by incorporating cognitive dimensions of language learning. Since the 1970s, language is further recognized as a social phenomenon that inherently entails expressing, interpreting, and negotiating meaning. To foster such competence, the current approach of Communicative Language Teaching emphasizes having learners do meaningful activities involving the exchange of new information.

Keywords: Grammar-Translation Method; Direct Method; Audio-Lingual Method; Communicative Language Teaching

Language teaching methods are the set of teaching practices, approaches, and materials instructors use to facilitate foreign-language (FL) learning. Throughout history, methods have been developed in response to societal imperatives for learning another language. These include, for example, a desire to communicate with foreign trade partners, or to spread religion through missionary efforts. Other motivations have been interest in

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reading foreign scholarship and religious texts, or, most recently, in interacting socially and professionally on transnational levels. Language teaching methods, therefore, have prioritized different skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading, writing) at different times. Theoretical understandings of second language acquisition (SLA) and FL pedagogy furthermore have informed teaching methods, as have research developments in related disciplines such as linguistics, literature studies, education, and psychology.

While a rich array of FL teaching traditions undoubtedly exists throughout the world, because of space limitations this account focuses on methods developed in Europe and North America. The entry initially outlines the historical factors shaping the first formal teaching methods and then describes the numerous methods developed since the 19th century.

Early History

Written records concerning FL teaching first appear in Europe in the fifth century AD, however they do not discuss general methods for language teaching (Musumeci, 2009, p. 43). Instead, the writings focus largely on the teaching of Latin, which had been the official language of the Roman Republic (509 BC to 27 BC) and Roman Empire (27 BC to AD 476). With a singular status as the primary FL throughout much of Europe and the Mediterranean region, Latin functioned as “the universal language of scholarship, education, government, and the marketplace” (Musumeci, 1997, p. 4). A second FL widely taught at the time was Greek, given the influential achievements of classical Greece (ca. fifth and fourth centuries BC) in politics, philosophy, the arts, sciences, and literature.

Following the fall of Rome, Latin remained the primary language of wider communication in the Empire’s former territories for centuries. This was the case even though Latin evolved into the distinct regional varieties of the present-day Romance languages and dialects, and eventually no longer was spoken as a native language (L1). Thus, for more than 1,000 years FL teaching was primarily understood with reference to Latin and a lesser extent Greek. These two classical languages were the codes in which most academic, literary, and sacred texts were written (Musumeci, 2009, p. 43).

Grammar-Translation Method

As universities of higher learning began appearing throughout Europe in the late Middle Ages, and the *Studia humanitatis* grew in popularity, language study gained a broader significance. Grammar-translation (G-T) became the dominant FL teaching method, having evolved out of the historical interest in learned writings in Latin and Greek. As its name suggests, G-T emphasized a thorough understanding of the target language (TL) grammar and extensive text translation. Learning entailed studying vocabulary lists and memorizing grammatical paradigms, for example of the various forms of verbs. Instructional activities included deductive, or explicit, grammar presentations, recitation of memorized passages, and dictation exercises, all facilitated by discussion in the L1. The TL was more an object of study rather than a code for personal communication, with instruction simultaneously providing learners with a greater understanding of their own L1 (Musumeci, 2009, p. 52; Rodgers, 2009, p. 345).

With FL teaching focusing largely on Latin, G-T was oriented to the grammatical characteristics of that language. Grammatical terms were coined in Latin, and teaching was greatly influenced by that language's extensive case system (Neuner, 1995, p. 182).

Direct Method

In the 15th century, vernacularization began spreading throughout Europe, with local languages gaining uses in domains traditionally reserved for Latin. By the late 19th century the earlier focus on classical languages had expanded to include Europe's contemporary modern languages. The fact that French, Italian, German, and English, for example, had large L1 speech communities meant that oral communication skills became of greater importance.

As a result, the direct method (DM) was developed, modeled on beliefs about L1 acquisition. Since children hear a significant amount of language before producing speech, the DM first prioritized teaching listening comprehension. This was done through immersion, that is, the exclusive use of the TL in instruction. Speaking skills next were taught through direct language use, preferably by having learners perform the physical actions of what was said (Omaggio, 1986, p. 57). Another hallmark of the DM was inductive grammar teaching, requiring learners to discover rules based on the language input they received. (Adamson, 2004, p. 607; Neuner, 2007, p. 228).

Audio-Lingual Method

Developments in the fields of linguistics and learner psychology in the early 20th century brought new impulses to language teaching methods. Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure's research conceptualizing language as a static system of forms introduced a structural approach to language study. In North America, interest in documenting Native American languages cultivated further a disciplinary emphasis on spoken language. Meanwhile, in learner psychology B. F. Skinner and others developed the behaviorist framework, which viewed learning as a conditioning process. Language learning was seen as an issue of habit formation, with speech being a response to specific linguistic stimuli (Omaggio, 1986, pp. 22–6; Neuner, 1995, pp. 183–4).

In the 1940s and 1950s the audio-lingual method (ALM) was developed, with an emphasis on recurring patterns in language. It focused especially on the phonological (sound) and morphological (word construction) systems, as well as on developing oral skills. As in L1 acquisition, language learning was believed to have a natural order, progressing from listening comprehension and speaking to reading and writing. Instruction focused on memorized dialogues and pattern drills, as it was believed that repetition, restating information, and practicing verb and noun forms facilitated acquisition (Omaggio, 1986, pp. 60–2; Rodgers, 2009, p. 346).

Cognitive Approaches to Language Teaching

The American linguist Noam Chomsky's research on cognitive aspects of language acquisition fundamentally challenged the tenets of behaviorism and the ALM. In Chomsky's (1959, pp. 56–8) famous critique of Skinner's book *Verbal Behavior* (1957), among his strongest arguments was the observation that L1 speakers can interpret novel utterances, that is, sentences they have never heard before. Therefore, language acquisition cannot simply be an issue of mimicry as exemplified in ALM dialogue

memorization activities. Rather than relying on an inventory of linguistic stimuli and conditioned responses, language acquisition must involve rule-governed, deep processing in the brain.

Chomsky's scholarship led to a modernization of the DM, with Stephen Krashen's (1982) monitor model being one particularly influential cognitive theory for FL pedagogy. Among Krashen's five hypotheses are (a) the distinction between (subconscious) language acquisition and (conscious) language learning; (b) the recognition of a natural order for the acquisition of grammatical form, which is impervious to the sequence in which form is taught; and (c) the need for learner's to receive comprehensible input ($i + 1$). Krashen's model inspired many popular new methods, including Tracy D. Terrell's (1982) highly influential variation of the natural approach, prioritizing the teaching of communication skills over grammatical form (Omaggio, 1986, p. 75).

Communicative Language Teaching

Since the 1970s, there has been "widespread acceptance . . . of communicative competence as the goal of [foreign] language learning" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 3). Recognizing communication as an interpersonal/social behavior, a "continuous process of expression, interpretation, and negotiation of meaning," has led to teaching methods incorporating such aspects into the learning experience (Savignon, 1997, p. 14).

The sociolinguistic concept of communicative competence comprises not only grammatical competence, but also several other important component competences. There is sociolinguistic competence: appropriate language use within a particular context of situation; discourse competence: language use beyond the sentence level; and strategic competence: mastery of communication tactics, such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, and guessing (Canale and Swain, 1980; Savignon, 1997, pp. 40–4).

Savignon's landmark 1972 classroom study demonstrated the efficacy of a FL pedagogy that goes beyond a traditional focus on grammar. In that study, Savignon (2018, p. 3) found "that time devoted to practice in spontaneous communication, with all the grammatical and pronunciation errors that such communication inevitably implies, was essential...." What is more, communicative competence ultimately was achieved "with no loss of grammatical accuracy." Whereas Chomsky (1959) previously had challenged the ALM on the basis of cognitive linguistic research, Savignon (1972) refuted those methods further from a sociolinguistic perspective.

As outlined by Lee and VanPatten (2003), one major distinction in communicative language teaching (CLT) is the role of the instructor. This shifts from being a transmitter of knowledge (Atlas complex) explicating grammar to being a resource person/architect providing opportunities for communicative interaction. The instructor is responsible for creating mostly student-centered learning activities that require exchanging information and negotiating meaning. Students therefore predominantly work in pairs and groups, with teaching also taking into account learning strategies and individual learner styles.

In recent decades SLA researchers have developed additional elaborated teaching methods oriented specifically towards communicative competence. Task-based language teaching, for example, involves creating a set of "activities in which students are required to use [the TL] with a primary focus on meaning..." (Bygate, Norris, and Van den Branden 2015, p. 1). A series of explicit, manageable tasks leads students towards

completing a larger-scale project, ideally similar to something they would do beyond the classroom. Sample projects are a group presentation of a political position on a local civic issue, or a formal written report on an important cultural event. In the classroom, the specific “tasks might include initial briefing by the teacher, planning time, pair work, [small group work], and subsequent plenary reports and discussion” (Bygate, Norris, and Van den Branden, 2015, p. 1). Another meaning-focused teaching method is content-based language instruction, which simultaneously educates students in other school subjects, such as history or math (Snow, 2013). Genre-based language teaching focuses on conventionalized language use in particular academic and professional communities, for instance business, engineering, or health care.

Conclusion

Although FL teaching methods have evolved over centuries based on learner goals and advances in research, in practice instructors often remain influenced by traditional approaches from the past. The impact of the G-T, DM, and ALM is significant and lingering, in spite of subsequent research demonstrating their shortfalls and inadequacies. The fact this occurs despite extensive teacher training in CLT is most likely because of the challenging nature of reconceptualizing one’s individual understanding of SLA and the methods for facilitating that process. Instructors inevitably are most intimately familiar with the methods they experienced firsthand as language learners themselves, which have been perpetuated over generations. These are so pervasive that even teachers who believe they practice CLT in actuality may use, for example, ALM exercises. This is the case when partner activities only require students to repeat “correct” responses to provided queries, as opposed to having them communicate spontaneously by exchanging new information and negotiating meaning. Such realities speak all the more to the importance of a heightened awareness of the centuries-old history of language teaching methods and an increased understanding of contemporary findings in SLA research.

SEE ALSO: Innovation in Language Teaching and Learning; Teaching Reading; Teaching Speaking; Teaching Vocabulary

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