

# An Analysis of Language Teaching Approaches and Methods

## —Effectiveness and Weakness

*LIU Qing-xue, SHI Jin-fang*

*(Foreign Language School, East China Jiaotong University, Nanchang Jiangxi 330013, China)*

**Abstract:** Language teaching approaches and methods have cast light on the language teaching theory and practice. There are still many controversies about their usefulness and appropriateness. This paper tries to analyze their effectiveness and weakness of several most influential teaching approaches and methods: Grammar-translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, Communicative Teaching Method, in order to have a better understanding and application in the future teaching practice.

**Key words:** teaching approaches and methods; effectiveness; weakness

### 1. Introduction

Language teaching has a long, fascinating but rather tortuous history, in which a debate on teaching methods has evolved particularly over the last hundred years. The names of many of the methods (Grammar-translation Method, Direct Method, Audio-lingual Method, Communicative Teaching Method, etc) are familiar enough, yet the methods are not easy to grasp in practice because a method, however ill-defined it may be, is more than a single strategy or a particular technique. As a part of language teaching theories, these methods derived partly from social, economic, political, or educational circumstances, partly from theoretical consideration (new changes in language theories and in new psychological perspective on language learning), partly from practical experience, intuition, and inventiveness. Therefore, to some degree, they represent a combination of language teaching beliefs, but it is evident that they are characterized by the over-emphasis on single aspects as the central issue of language teaching and learning,

### 2. Effectiveness and Weakness of Teaching Approaches and Methods

#### 2.1 Grammar-translation method

Grammar-Translation Method, just as the name suggests, emphasizes the teaching of the second language grammar, its principle techniques is translation from and into the target language. In practice, reading and writing are the major focus; little or no systematic attention is paid to speaking or listening. The student's native language is maintained as the reference system in the acquisition of the second language. Language learners are passive in language learning and teachers are regarded as an authority, i.e. it is a teacher-centered model.

The Grammar-Translation Method has been facing various attacks from reformers. Some criticizes that this method often creates frustration for students by a tedious experience of memorizing endless list of unusable

---

LIU Qing-xue (1969- ), female, M.A., associate professor of Foreign Language School, East China Jiaotong University; research fields: English language and literature and applied linguistics.

SHI Jin-fang (1973- ), female, graduate student of Foreign Language School of Chengdu University of Technology, teaching assistant of Foreign Language School, East China Jiaotong University; research fields: foreign language teaching theory and practice.

grammar rules and vocabulary, and the limitations of practice techniques never emancipate the learner from the dominance of the first language; others say that this method pays little attention to the student's communicative competence.

In spite of the severe attacks, the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely practiced. Why? Because there is no inherent contradiction between grammar instruction and communicative approach, and a sort of explicit grammar instruction can complement communicative language teaching to raise learners' conscious awareness of the form and structure of the target language. Moreover, the first language, as a reference system, can dismiss the misunderstanding in the process of the second language learning. Then, thinking about formal features of the second language and translation as a practice technique put the learner into an active problem-solving situation. Finally, Grammar-Translation Method appears relatively easy to apply and it makes few demands on teachers, which is perhaps the exact reason of its popularity.

### **2.2 The direct method**

The direct method is a radical change from Grammar-Translation Method by the use of the target language as a means of instruction and communication in the language classroom, and by the avoidance of the use of the first language and of translation as a technique. It is a shift from literary language to the spoken everyday language as the object of early instruction. In this method, the learning of languages was viewed as analogous to the first language acquisition, and the learning process involved were often interpreted in terms of an association's psychology.

The direct method was a first attempt to make the language learning situation one of the language use. It demanded inventiveness on the part of teachers and led to the development of new techniques of language, such as demonstrations of pictures and objects, the emphasis on questions and answer, spoken narratives, dictation and imitation, etc. Nevertheless, two questions will be raised inevitably about this method: one is how to safeguard against misunderstanding without translating (especially, some abstract ideas), without reference to the first language; the other is how to apply this method beyond elementary stage of language learning. Furthermore, this method requires teachers who are native speakers or have native-like fluency in the foreign language they teach, but in practice, it is difficult to meet these requirements.

### **2.3 The audio-lingual method**

The audio-lingual method was the first to claim openly to be derived from linguistics and psychology. Audiolingualism reflects the descriptive, structural, and contrastive linguistics of the fifties and sixties. Its psychological basis is behaviorism which interprets language learning in terms of stimulus and response, operant conditioning, and reinforcement with an emphasis on successful error-free learning. It assumes that learning a language entails mastering the elements or building blocks of the language and learning the rules by which these elements are combined, from phoneme to morpheme to word to phrase to sentence. Therefore, it was characterized by the separation of the skills---listening, speaking, reading, and writing---and the primacy of the audio-lingual over the graphic skills. This method uses dialogues as the chief means of presenting the language and stresses certain practice techniques, such as pattern drills, mimicry and so on. Listening and speaking were now brought right into the centre of the stage in this method, tape recordings, and language laboratory drills were offered in practice.

As one of the most popular methods in the history of foreign language teaching, the audio-lingual method is of some great contributions to language teaching, for example, it attempted to make language learning accessible to large groups of ordinary learners because it proposed that language teaching should be organized in such a way

as not to demand great intellectual feats of abstract reasoning to learn a language. In addition, it stressed syntactical progression, while previously methods had tended to be preoccupied with vocabulary and morphology.

In spite of these contributions, audiolingualism was also criticized in many ways. First, its theoretic foundation was attacked as being unsound both in terms of language theory and learning theory by Chomsky's theory of TG grammar; second, the practical results fell short of expectations and students were often found to be unable to transfer skills acquired through Audiolingualism to real communication outside the classroom. Therefore, it ignores the communicative competence in teaching practice.

#### **2.4 Communicative teaching method**

Under the influence of British applied linguists (such as John Firth, M.A.K.Halliday, who stressed the functional and communicative potential of language), sociolinguistics works (Dell Hymes, and W.Labov) and some philosophy work (J. Austin and J. Searle), the communicative method was advocated in language teaching. It saw the need to focus on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastering of structures.

This communicative teaching method aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching, and develops procedures for teaching the four skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication. It encourages activities that involve real communication and carry out meaningful tasks. It believes that language is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. Language learners are expected to be negotiators, teachers to be an organizer, a guide, an analyst, a counselor, or a group process manager.

It is no doubt that the communicative method developed quite fast, it dominates language teaching in many countries because it not only makes language learning more interesting, but helps learners develop linguistic competence as well as communicative competence. However, problems also arose in the initial wave enthusiasm about it. For example, Can this method be applied at all levels in teaching? How such an approach can be evaluated? How suitable it is for non-native teachers? How it can be adopted in situations where students must continue to take grammar-base tests? Of course, these issues will help us have a better application of the communicative method.

### **3. Conclusion**

Each of the different methods has contributed new elements and has attempted to deal with some issues of language learning. However, they derived in different historical context, stressed different social and educational needs and have different theoretical consideration. Therefore, in teaching practice, in order to apply these methods effectively and efficiently, practitioners should take these questions in mind: who the learners are, what their current level of language proficiency is, what sort of communicative needs they have, and the circumstances in which they will be using English in the future, and so on. In a word, no single method could guarantee successful results.

#### **References:**

- [1]Stern, H.H. *Fundamental Concepts of Language Teaching*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1999.
- [2]Richard, Jack C. & Theodore S. Rodgers. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [3]HU Zhuang-lin. *Linguistics: A Course Book* (2nd edition). Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2001.
- [4]Bussmann Hadumod. *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.

(Edited by CHEN Jing and ZHANG Dong-ling)