

THE AUDIOLINGUAL METHOD

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1. Background

A glance through the past century of language teaching gives an interesting picture of various methodologies in the field of foreign language teaching. The sudden break-out of World War II heightened the need for proficient language speakers. The US Army provided fund for specific language courses that focused on aural-oral skills under the program called Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). Many American universities contributed to this program. Financial support for language research and development resulted from the National Defense Education Act (NDEA 1957) contributed to the development of audiolingualism.

2. Theoretical Foundation

This approach to language teaching has the roots of its theoretical assumptions based on logical positivism and empiricism as the dominant philosophy of science of the time and consequently using the scientific method.

The linguistic theory behind this method was a version of structural linguistics known as American Structuralism or descriptivism, founded by the famous American linguist, Leonard Bloomfield, with its important tenets of the separation of the levels of linguistic representation and primacy of speech over written form of the language. Contrastive linguistics and the scientific approach to language analysis enhanced the scientific approach to foreign language teaching and learning.

The founders of the Audiolingualism Method, Lado, Fries, and others, not only possessed a convincing and powerful linguistic theory but also worked under the influence of the prominent school of psychology- the behavioral psychology. The psychology of learning, according to this view- point disregards intentions, the thinking, the conscious planning and the internal process of the learner. It emphasizes the externally observable responses (R) to specific stimuli (S), among which need mention, the classical conditioning of Pavlov and the 'operant conditioning' of great American linguist B.F. Skinner. Reinforcement plays a vital role in these S-R theories, whereas learners are considered 'organisms'. The stimulus serves as a tool to elicit a response, and consequently the appropriate response is enforced while the inappropriate response is suppressed.

Language mastery is represented as acquiring a set of appropriate language stimulus-response chains. Foreign language learning is basically considered as a process of mechanical habit formation. The focus is on the mastery of phonological and grammatical structures and the sequence is assumed to start with phonological level and end up with sentence level. The learning principles include habit-

formation, aural-oral, analogy and learning meaning in linguistic and cultural context. Speech is more basic to language than the written form.

3. Design

Since Audiolingualism was theoretically based on the dominant linguistic and learning theory of the time, it demanded a complete reorientation of the foreign language curriculum. As for its objectives, two types of objectives were distinguished, those of the short-term and those of the long-term. The short-term objectives include, as Brooks (1964) has stated, "training in listening comprehension, accurate pronunciation, recognition of speech symbols and reproduction of these symbols in writing. Whereas the long-term objectives include mastery of native-like language.

The Audio-lingual Method benefits from an analytic, structure-based and linguistic syllabus to language teaching. The syllabus contains key items of phonology, morphology and syntax arranged according to their order of presentation, which may have been derived from a contrastive analysis L1 and L2. Vocabulary syllabus is graded into three levels; elementary, intermediate, and advanced. The order that language skills are presented is listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The learning process is viewed as one of habituation and conditioning without the intervention of any intellectual analysis. The activities of teaching and learning process follow a hierarchy; recognition, discrimination, imitation, repetition and memorization. Dialogs are viewed as the core of an audio-lingual lesson and much time is allotted to repetition and memorization of the dialog. Another distinctive feature of audiolingualism is the active use of drills and pattern practice. These drills include free response, directed discourse, single and multiple-slot substitution, transformation, repetition and expansion. They are adaptations of the dialog with a more personal application to the students' own situation and will provide further consolidation of learning and give opportunity for more flexible use of material. However, some audio-lingual text writers prefer to develop drills on structures different from those in the dialogs, believing in this way they can provide a more logical development of basic language requirements. Students are systematically introduced to the reading of the printed script after oral work. In more advanced stages, attention turns more and more to reading materials of well-written passages, carefully chosen for the level of difficulty of language. Writing is imitative in early stages, while in higher stages written composition provides students with further opportunities to use the material they have learned in a more individual fashion.

In accordance with the theoretical assumptions of learning underlying the method, learners are considered as reactive and imitator organisms. They are interaction initiators, respond to and perform controlled tasks, and have no control over content, pace and style of learning.

Teacher like an orchestra leader has a central, active and dominant role who models, controls, monitors, corrects, introduces, sustains and harmonizes all four skills and active verbal interaction between teacher-learner and learner-learner.

Teaching materials are teacher-oriented aiming at the development of language mastery. In the early stages, students' textbooks are not available and students may copy some of the course elements which they have listened to, repeated and responded. Later text books containing dialogs and cues for drills and exercises are provided. Tape recorders and audiovisual equipment play an important role in audio-lingual classes.

Evaluation in audio-lingual classes is based on learner's performance on discrete-point tests and also on learner's class activity.

4. Procedures

The process of instruction follows an implicit strategy of learning rather than an explicit one. As mentioned earlier, this method acts according to a sequence of recognition, discrimination, imitation, repetition and memorization procedure. It is an inductive teaching and learning method. Extensive oral practice in a target language-dominant class is the focus of instruction and the use of the mother tongue is discouraged.

5. Assessments

As it is with any other method, audio-lingual method has strength and weaknesses. It is the only method so far based on the dominant linguistic and learning theory of its age. It has emphasized accurate pronunciation and enhanced auditory memory and listening comprehension at native speed and speed of speech. Amongst its weaknesses which need mention here are; over-abundance and excessive dependence on skills and lack of variety of activity and real language practice. Since its underlying theoretical assumptions considered the role of the external processing of learning superior to that of internal processing, assumed as irrelevant or secondary, they were strongly questioned and doubted. This, consequently, led to the decline of audiolingualism. However, it has been modified, undergone profound changes and is still practiced eclectively throughout the world and some of the so-called new methods such as versions of communicative language teaching use its rich and ripe techniques.

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