

Approaches to Language Teaching and Learning

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Abstract—This paper aimed to discuss the statement “Approaches to language teaching can be characterised as the emphasis on certain design features at the expense of others.” Specifically, both grammar-translation method and communicative language teaching method were compared and contrasted. It concluded that no one method is perfect for every teaching situation. For different teaching settings, different methods/methodologies ought to be adopted, ideally, integrated, for they compensate for each other.

Index Terms—Approach, Grammar-Translation, Communicative Language Teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss the statement “Approaches to language teaching can be characterised as the emphasis on certain design features at the expense of others.” The discussion will be exemplified with reference to grammar-translation method and communicative language teaching methodology.

Definition of Some Related Terms

For the convenience of the discussion below, such terms as approach, methodology, method, and design features used in this paper will be defined first.

Approach refers to “theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p.16).

Method/Methodology refers to “the level at which theory is put into practice and at which choices are made about the particular skills to be taught, the content to be taught, and the order in which the content will be presented” (Richards and Rodgers, 1986, p. 15). This paper does not make a strict distinction between method and methodology as Nunan (1991) says, “There has been a tendency historically to equate methodology with method” (p. 3).

Design features, according to Richards and Rodgers (1986, p. 120), include:

- what the objectives of a method are;
- how language content is selected and organised within the method;
- the types of learning tasks and teaching activities the method advocates;
- the roles of learners;
- the roles of teachers; and
- the role of instructional materials

II. GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD (GT)

A. Knowing and Accuracy Emphasis at the Expense of Doing and Fluency

According to Kim (2008), the grammar-translation method or is a language teaching method developed during the 18th and 19th centuries in Germany. It is sometimes called the *classical method*, in which the traditional method was adopted for teaching the classical languages, Latin and Greek. Kim concludes that grammar-translation is a traditional and ancient teaching method. Generally, the classical languages were taught by reading and translating texts extracted from classical literature, which was similar to the grammar-translation method.

According to Celce-Murcia (2014), in the grammar translation approach instruction is provided in the students’ native language. “There is little use of target language for communication. Focus is on grammatical parsing, that is, the forms and inflections of words. There is early reading of difficult texts. A typical exercise is to translate sentences from the target language into the mother tongue (or vice versa). The result of this approach is usually an inability on the part of students to use the language for communication. The teacher does not have to be able to speak the target language fluently” (p. 5). In addition to these principles, Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) state that in the grammar translation method, both the teachers and students have a traditional role. The teacher has the authority in the classroom and students tend to follow the teacher. Moreover, students learn grammar rules deductively; that is, first they are provided grammar rules with examples, second they are asked to memorize the rules, and finally, they are told to use the rules in other examples.

Having experienced the traditional grammar-translation instructional type all the way through our own language learning from school to university, it is well-known that accuracy of forms are the very focus of this method under structural approach. Students are used to wanting to see language 'black-and-white', and seeking 'correct' answers to any language exercise items. Teachers judge students' performance either 'right' or 'wrong'. This method discourages honest enquiry: facing the ambiguity and discrepancies of language with tolerance as well as the conformity of language.

Decontextualised, discrete and purposeless 'parsing' and surface-structure analysis are conspicuous features of the traditional grammar-translation method. It ignores contextualised learning and fails to expose learners to 'authentic varieties in a 'functional context', which usually results in students 'knowing' something about the language (competence) but not being able to 'do' anything with that knowledge (performance). And more often, this knowing is decontextualised. Knowing and doing should be the two sides of language learning according to Widdowson (1990, p. 157). Grammar-translation method emphasises 'knowing' at the expense of 'doing'.

The grammar-translation method overemphasizes written work over oral production. Kim (2008) states that the method does not include spoken communication or listening comprehension. As a consequence, it stresses the rote memorization of vocabulary words and study of the explicit rules of grammar. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), the grammar-translation method is a method without a theory in areas such as linguistics, psychology, or education. But the grammar-translation method is still popular in many parts of the world today, although this method underscores the importance of understanding the literary texts more than speaking and listening in the target language. Richards and Rodgers also attribute its popularity to the fact that the grammar-translation method does not require great skill by teachers. The historical foundations of the grammar-translation method provide valuable insights to situate and understand current practices in language instruction, though many new methodologies have been developed and employed.

B. Deductive-oriented Teaching Emphasis at the Expense of Active Learning

Under grammar-translation method instruction, the teaching procedures are as follows: the teachers give and explain rules, create a 'context' for students to practise these rules, and the students apply the learned rules. Richards and Rodgers (1986) described one of the principal characteristics of grammar-translation method like this: "In most Grammar-Translation texts, a syllabus was followed for the sequencing of grammar points throughout a text, and there was an attempt to teach grammar in an organised and systematic way" (p. 4). From the above description, we can see that under the instruction of grammar-translation method, students are taught the grammar rules systematically.

But this 'teacher-exposition' method has two shortcomings: a) Students can be easily bored. Thus, language learning becomes an agonising experience without any enjoyment; b) The original function of a language feature can be obscured without being explored in its original context. Learners have no opportunities to be exposed to various data sources and they have no opportunity to 'generate and test hypotheses and to discuss language phenomena'. The 'student-exploration' method makes language learning an enjoyable experience, because 'if the teacher talks about language to the students, he/she is far less likely to capture their interest than if he/she lets them explore it for themselves under conditions carefully prepared and controlled by him/her' (Tinkel, 1985, p.38). Students usually enjoy self-exploration, and self-discovery. Besides, Self-induced rules are more likely to be remembered and applied more appropriately. As Lewis (1986) noted, "all learning theory suggests that those things we discover for ourselves are more firmly fixed in our minds than those which are 'told'..." (p. 165). Generally speaking, the traditional grammar-translation method tends to rely more on deductive reasoning in language teaching. Of course, both deductive-oriented and inductive-oriented reasoning can be effective methods in language teaching/learning, depending on the goals and contexts of language teaching/learning. Sometimes "it may be more appropriate to articulate a rule and then proceed to its instances, but most of the evidence in communicative foreign/second language learning points to the superiority of an inductive approach to rules and generalisations" (Brown, 1987, p. 83).

C. Reading and Writing Emphasis at the Expense of Listening and Speaking

With Grammar-Translation method, the focus of teaching is reading and writing, especially reading. And the most common mode is 'lockstep', which is "the class grouping where all the students are working with the teacher, where all the students are 'locked into' the same rhythm and pace, the same activity." The teacher acts as 'controller' and 'assessor' (Harmer 1983, p. 205). This learning mode has its own advantages. For example, everyone can hear what is being said; students can get a good language model from the teacher, etc.

However, some very important language learning elements are neglected in this mode. For example, *talking*, which is a very important means to improve learners' language proficiency especially in communicative sense, is neglected. With all the students working in one group, no pair work or group work, students get very little chance to speak. Brought up with this method, students' English are often 'dumb' English, which means they cannot speak in English.

D. Summary

Generally speaking, under the traditional grammar-translation method, the mother tongue as instruction language is more frequently used than the target language. Vocabulary and grammar rules are usually taught in isolation from context. The context is more often treated as the source for doing grammatical analysis exercises. A lot of translation exercises: translating disconnected sentences from the target language into the mother tongue or from mother tongue to

the target language, are included. Since structure analysis and vocabulary memorisation are emphasised and are almost regarded as the language learning aim instead of its meanings, learning how to use the language and how to communicate through the language is ignored to a large extent. In addition, the grammar-translation method focuses much more on reading and writing than on the oral/aural use of the language. It gives very little attention to pronunciation. Consequently, language learners having been brought up through this traditional method are usually very weak in communication, particularly in oral/aural communication.

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Of course, this traditional method also has its own advantages. The development of accuracy is one of the major ones among others, although most often this accuracy is decontextualised.

III. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING APPROACH (CLT)

Daisy (2012) stated that CLT is an approach to the teaching of second and foreign languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. And Richards and Rodgers (2001) wrote that, CLT "aims to (a) make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and (b) develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication" (p. 155). CLT approach is believed to be the most effective theoretical model in English language teaching since early 1970s. Richards and Rodgers further emphasized that in the light to the concept of this approach, language carries not only functional meaning, but also carries social meaning. Thus, both learning the linguistic forms and understanding their potential communicative functions and social meanings are equally important. In other words, the language learners should be competent enough to associate the linguistic forms with appropriate non-linguistic knowledge so as to account for the specific functional meaning intended by the speaker (Littlewood, 1981). Littlewood (1981) further proposed that one of the most typical features of CLT approach is that it lays stress on both functional and structural aspects of language.

CLT is based on Hymes's (1966) concept of communicative competence which is an extension of Chomsky's (1965) concepts of linguistic competence and performance. Hymes (1966) posited that it is not enough for the learner to be competent in linguistics or grammar alone to use language in a given cultural social context. Therefore, the situation in which language has to be used becomes relevant for language teaching. Howatt (1984) stated that "The Communicative Language Teaching stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use English for communicative purposes and attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching" (p. 27). In the light of this approach, both instructional and learning goals are aimed at communication. It assumes that language does not occur without a social context. Based on this concept, therefore, both language teaching and learning should be accomplished in its context. Learning emphasizing communicative competence is now commonplace in the world.

A. *Fluency Emphasis at the Expense of Accuracy*

Communicative language teaching sets as its goal the teaching of communicative competence. That is developing fluency. Fluency is natural language use occurring when a speaker conducts meaningful interaction and maintains comprehensible and ongoing communication despite limitations in his or her communicative competence. As a consequence, the CLT Approach has come under attack from teachers for being prejudiced in favor of native-speaker teachers, or those teachers who give up the traditional teaching method---grammar-translation method (Chang, 2011). Harmer (2003) believed that the CLT Approach is often seen as having eroded the explicit teaching of grammar with a consequent loss among students in accuracy in developing fluency.

Communicative language teaching methodology under communicative approach over emphasises fluency at the expense of accuracy. Its attitude towards learners' errors is a typical example. Traditionally, errors are usually seen as signs of failure on learners' and teachers' parts. However, communicative language teaching approach emphasises on communication efficiency. Fluency is put much more emphasis than accuracy. It perceives learners' errors as a sign of progress in internalising the language system. According to communicative language teaching approach, the errors may provide us with insights into how language learners process language data. Errors may be caused by interference from the mother tongue when the learners 'fall back' on their existing knowledge of the first language to solve problems in the target language, when they have not mastered enough knowledge of the target language. Or they may be caused by over-generalisation when learners try to apply what they have gained in the target language. It is evident that both transfer and generalisation are important learning strategies that can be employed in second and foreign language

learning. For example, if a language user says, "This indicates that how careless you are", we can see that this error is caused by over-generalised use of *that* for introducing a noun clause. Of course, sometimes errors do not result from learners' actively constructing rules in an attempt to master the language. They can be simply due to 'immediate communication strategies', which are employed by learners to convey messages which otherwise would be beyond their acquired competence. They can also be due to 'slips of the tongue', or unclear explanations by the teacher about some items. Errors may also be caused when some items are overemphasised and over-practised that students apply them in inappropriate contexts (Littlewood 1984).

Communicative teaching methodology advocates that since errors can be due to various factors, they should be treated differently. It is advisable that teachers be selective in error correction: ignore those errors which do not relate to previously acquired knowledge and avoid correcting the errors if the correction would interfere with the learners' concentration on communication with the benefit for both learners' motivation and more conducive classroom climate (ibid.).

Thus, learners' accuracy is sacrificed. In some cultural background, learners may feel annoyed without being corrected instantly when they make mistakes. Or they may feel no gain if teachers do not correct their mistakes.

B. Doing Emphasis at the Expense of Knowing

Like what Widdowson (1990, p. 159) stated, CLT method "concentrates on getting learners to do things with language, to express concepts and to carry out communicative acts of various kinds." The assumption is that learners will learn the rules of language naturally when they use the language. But, unfortunately, according to Widdowson (1990), "the grammar, which they must obviously acquire somehow as a necessary resource for use, proves elusive. So quite often the situation arises where learners acquire a fairly patchy and imperfect repertoire of performance which is not supported by an underlying competence" (p. 161). This means that learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities. Their doing does not naturally lead to knowing but rather sacrifices knowing. Or "Grammatical knowledge did not always follow as a necessary corollary of communication." (Widdowson, 1990, p. 165)

C. Summary

Compared with the traditional grammar-translation method, the communicative language teaching approach emphasises exposure to authentic materials and contexts, and function rather than form teaching. This approach pays more attention to fluency than accuracy in conveying messages, as long as it is efficient. A lot of role plays, dialogues, etc. are involved in this approach. Besides, unlike the grammar-translation method, the communicative approach pays attention to developing students' communicative ability in both written and spoken language, both productively and receptively. It may emphasise the development of learners' use of language in 'unrehearsed contexts' (Brown 1987:213), so much that it goes from one extreme to another. It makes both teachers and learners feel guilty whenever conscious grammar rules and vocabulary learning are involved. In other words, 'much more spontaneity is present in communicative classrooms' (Brown 1987:213). This 'grammar-neglected' approach has caused a lot of problems, especially among foreign language learners and teachers, who are used to the grammar-translation method. The learners often feel insecure with no sense of achievement, as they are not learning any grammar rules and vocabulary usage consciously. The teachers often feel a lack of confidence because a higher language level is required and they need to face all kinds of queries from the students.

IV. CONCLUSION

We have discussed above, two approaches characterised by different emphases. The structural approach is based on the belief that language learning comes about by teaching learners to know the forms of the language as a medium and the meaning they incorporate; that they will learn how to do things with this knowledge on their own. On the contrary, the communicative approach is based on the concept that language learning occurs when the teacher gets learners to see the language pragmatically to mediate meanings for a purpose, to do things which resemble in some measure what they do with their own language. They will learn knowledge of the language itself, the formal and semantic properties of the medium, as they go along, without the teacher having to draw explicit attention to it (Widdowson 1990:160).

Therefore, it seems attempting to conclude that no one method is perfect for every teaching situation. Like Widdowson says, "different approaches to language teaching have tended to emphasise one rather than, and often at the expense of, the other." (1990:157). Thus, for different teaching settings, different methods/methodologies ought to be adopted, ideally, integrated, for they compensate for each other. In general, although to completely achieve communicative teaching in foreign language teaching is always pursued as the ultimate goal, we are still experiencing an indispensable stage involving the integration of the grammar-translation method and the communicative method. The two approaches are just different sets of language teaching and learning principles. We may find in each of them strong points and weak points. Therefore, we should encourage language teachers to fuse the two methods to meet the goal of foreign language teaching so as to cater to the actual needs of our language learners, since the two can complement each other.

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