

Language Teaching Methods from the Greeks to Gattegno^{1 2}

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Introduction

The field of foreign language teaching has undergone many fluctuations and dramatic shifts over the centuries. As opposed to physics or chemistry where progress is more or less steady, it is a field where fads and heroes have come and gone in a manner fairly consistent with what occurs in youth culture. I believe that one reason for this almost random change 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 them some historical perspective that will be healthy in evaluating the so-called "innovations or "new" methods that they are frequently exposed to.

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 francas*. Higher instruction was given in these languages all over Europe. They were also used very widely in 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 language they were teaching and that they used aural-oral techniques and no languages textbooks *per se*, but rather hand-copied written materials of some sort that were in the target language.

Later during the Renaissance the formal study of the grammars of Greek and Latin became popular. Particularly in the case of Latin, it was discovered that the grammar of the Classical texts was different from that of the Latin being widely used as a lingua franca—the latter subsequently being labeled degenerate or vulgar. Eventually a chasm 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 with the result that Latin was ultimately abandoned as a *lingua franca*. (No one was speaking Classical Latin anyway, and various European vernaculars had begun to rise in use and popularity). Thus in retrospect, strange as it may seem, the Renaissance preoccupation with the formal study of Classical Latin contributed significantly 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 he used and espoused were the following:

- use imitation instead of rules to teach a language

¹ This article was originally published in the *MEXTESOL Journal*, Convention issue, Vol. IV, No. 4, 1980. pp. 2-13. This version has been reformatted and minor errors have been corrected.

² Oral presentations of this paper were made at the L.A.-Long Beach CATESOL mini-conference in October, 1978 and at the CATESOL Convention in Los Angeles in April, 1979. This paper is obviously a synthesis: I have drawn on many sources, notably Kelly (1969), Madsen (1979), and Prator with Celce-Murcia (1979).

- have your students repeat after you
- use a limited vocabulary initially
- help your students practice reading and speaking
- teach languages through pictures to make it meaningful.

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

Comenius' views held sway through most of the 18th Century; 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, not only as a method for teaching Latin but modern languages as well. It was perhaps best codified in the work of Karl Plotz, 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 ability to use rather than to analyze a language, 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 somewhat earlier by an older friend, the German philosopher-scientist 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 and saw to it that all foreign language instruction in the public schools there reflected the Direct Method.

Seven 20th Century Approaches to Language Teaching

In addition to the Grammar-translation Approach and the Direct Approach³ whose historical antecedents we have already discussed—there are five other discernable approaches to foreign language teaching that have been widely used during the 20th Century. These seven approaches then are as follows:

- Grammar-translation
- Direct 'Method'
- Reading Approach
- Audiolingualism
- Cognitive Code
- Affective/humanistic⁴ Approach
- Functional/ESP Approach

However, before specifying the features 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? Ed Anthony (1963) has proved a useful set of definitions for our purposes. An *approach* to language teaching is something that reflects a certain model or research paradigm—or theory if you like. This term is the broadest of the three. A *method*, on the other hand, is a set of

³ The term 'Direct Method' is more widely used than 'Direct Approach,' however, this is really an approach—not a method—if we follow Anthony's (1963) definitions.

⁴ The term 'humanistic' has two meanings. One meaning refers to the humanities (i.e., literature, philosophy, history, etc.). The other refers to that branch of psychology concerned with the role of the socio-affective domain in human behavior. It is the latter meaning that is being referred to here.

procedures, i.e., a system that spells out exactly how to teach a language. Methods are more specific than approaches but less specific than techniques. Methods are typically compatible with one (or perhaps two) approaches. A *technique* is a classroom device or activity and thus represents the narrowest term of the three. 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 cuisinier rods = the Silent Way). This will become clearer to the reader in the subsequent methodological section of the paper.

At this point I would like to outline each of the seven 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 is usually an inability to use the language for communication
- g. the teacher doesn't have to be able to speak the target language.

2. Direct 'Method' (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 conversation 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 native-like proficiency

3. Reading Approach (A reaction to the impracticality of the direct method that developed in the U.S., i.e., reading was the most usable skill to have in a foreign language since not many people traveled abroad in 1930. Also, there were not enough teachers who could use a foreign language well enough to teach by the direct method.)

- a. only the grammar useful for reading comprehension is taught
- b. vocabulary is controlled at first and then expanded
- c. translation is once more a respectable classroom procedure
- d. reading comprehension is the only language skill emphasized
- e. the teacher doesn't 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 that developed and became dominant during the 40's, 50's, and 60's. It takes much from the Direct Method but adds features from structuralism and behaviorism.)

- a. begins lessons with dialogs
- b. uses mimicry and memorization because it assumes that language is habit formation
- c. grammatical structures are sequenced
- d. grammar is taught inductively
- e. skills are sequenced: listening and speaking—reading and writing (postponed)
- f. pronunciation is stressed from the beginning
- g. vocabulary is severely limited in the initial stages

- h. a great effort is made to prevent error
- i. language is often manipulated without regard to meaning or content
- j. the teacher's role can be compared to that of a dog trainer
- k. the teacher must be proficient only in the structures, vocabulary, etc. that she/he is teaching, since learning activities and materials are carefully controlled.

5. Cognitive Code (A reaction to the behaviorist features of the audiolingual approach)

- a. language is viewed as rule acquisition not habit formation
- b. emphasis is on being able to use the language
- c. instruction is often individualized; learner is responsible for his own learning
- d. grammar can be taught deductively as well as inductively, i.e., explicit rules can be stated
- e. pronunciation is de-emphasized; perfection is viewed as an unrealistic goal
- f. reading and writing are once again as important as speaking and listening
- g. errors are viewed as inevitable, something that should be used constructively in the learning process
- h. meaning (comprehension) is very important, basic to progress
- i. the teacher's role is to help students refine their control of the target language and to become more native-like in successive stages
- j. the teacher is expected to have good general proficiency in the target language as well as an ability to analyze the target language.

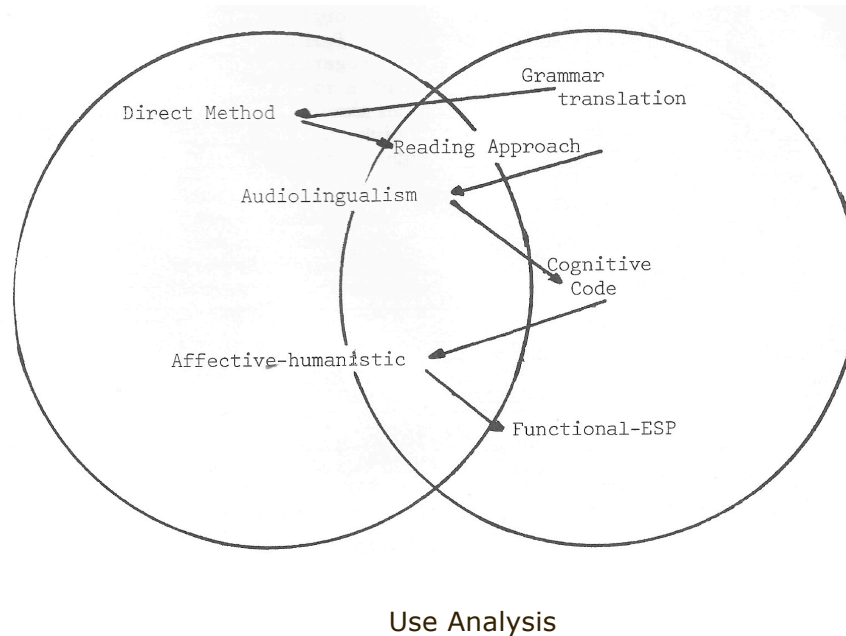
6. Affective/humanistic Approach (A reaction to the general lack of affective considerations in both Audiolingualism and cognitive code. In other respects it is compatible with much of cognitive code.)

- a. emphasizes communication that is meaningful to the learner
- b. emphasizes respect for the individual (each student, the teacher) and for his/her feelings
- c. instruction involves much work in small groups
- d. translation is permitted and often used heavily in the initial stages and then phased out
- e. class atmosphere is viewed as more important than method or materials
- f. peer support and interaction is needed for learning
- g. learning a foreign language is viewed as a self-realization experience
- h. the teacher is viewed as a counselor or facilitator
- i. the teacher should be bilingual in the native language of the students and in the target language.

7. Functional/ESP Approach

- a. the focus is on relevance—i.e., what the students need the language for
- b. careful survey work is carried out to assess students' needs (social situations, linguistic context, area of specialization, communicative functions, etc.)
- c. materials and teaching procedures are developed in keeping with the needs analysis
- d. authentic (i.e., unsimplified) language materials are used for teaching
- e. the skill(s) the students need get practiced (i.e., for reading—reading is emphasized for the outset (i.e., one doesn't have to speak a language to read it.)
- f. the native language is used for explanation and discussion when useful
- g. the teacher should have good basic knowledge of the learner's field of specialization (i.e., medicine, economics, electrical engineering, etc.)
- h. the teacher should be fluent in the students' native language as well as having excellent control of the target language.

Thus we can see that certain features of each approach outlined above arose in reaction to perceived inadequacies or impracticalities in an earlier approach or approaches. Also, in terms of the Use-Analysis dichotomy noted earlier, certain groupings emerge (the arrows are used to reinforce an approximate historical sequence):



Four Current methods compatible with the Cognitive, Affective, or Functional Approaches

Each of the language teaching approaches discussed above developed in response to trends in psychology or linguistics or to perceived social or political needs. They were shaped and influenced by several people or large groups of individuals over a period of time. Methods, however, are very specific. They tend to be developed and defined by one (or by very few) person(s). This person, in turn, gathers disciples who accept their prophet's method as axiomatic and who help him spread the word. The following methods are typical of this tendency (the originator of the method is given in parentheses):

- Suggestology or Suggestopedia (Lozanov)
- Total Physical Response (Asher)
- Community Language Learning (Curran)
- Silent Way (Gattegno)

Each method is compatible with the Cognitive Code, the Affective/humanistic Approach, or the Functional Approach and is currently being touted as "the" way to learn a language by its disciples—if not by the prophet himself. Each will be briefly described below and a relevant current reference will be provided should the reader be interested in learning more about any of these methods:

Suggestology

This is a method used to teach all academic subjects, to just languages. It was developed by Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian psychiatrist, who designed this method to counteract fear. He believes that fear of incompetence or mistakes and apprehension regarding that which is new and unfamiliar are the factors that constrain learning rather than one's native intelligence. In this method a child-like trust in the teacher (i.e., infantilization) is fostered in each student. The

setting must be comfortable and relaxing (i.e., soft carpets, easy chairs, pleasant colors). The arts—music, painting, theater—are aesthetic reinforcers of this physical comfort and pleasure. One takes on a new identity and is given a new name to encourage loss of inhibitions. When used to teach a language, Suggestology makes use of lengthy dialogs. These dialogs are read, translated, and reread by the teacher at different rates and with different intonations. Each lesson lasts six hours and for homework students are asked to reread the latest dialog at bedtime and after rising in the morning. As the method progresses, communication is emphasized and grammar and pronunciation are de-emphasized.

A recent book by Lozanov (1978) should be consulted by those interested in learning more about the man and his method.

Total Physical Response

James Asher, a learning psychologist, developed a method for language teaching that incorporates many things we know to be true of child language acquisition. The teacher gives commands in the target language, such as "Stand up", "Sit down" and after first performing the activity himself to demonstrate the meaning of each command, his students then carry out these commands as they are spoken, first in groups and then individually. The inventory of commands moves from simple to complex and grows from a few to many. There is no pressure to speak. Students speak when they are ready to do so. Experimentation has shown that there is near perfect retention of what is learned with this method over a long period of time.

A recent publication by Asher (1977) will provide the interested reader with more background and some good research data.

Community Language Learning

This method was developed by the late Charles Curran, a Jesuit priest with background in Clinical Psychology and Counseling. It reflects his general teaching strategy, Counseling Learning, which has been adapted in Community Language Learning specifically to the teaching of foreign languages. Students are viewed as clients, and teachers are considered counselors. There is not much concern for technique as such. Human relationships are what really matter. The needs of both the client and the counselor must be considered, and the clients themselves decide what it is that they want to learn. A class starts with the clients sitting in a circle with the counselor outside the circle. They begin to say things in their native language and the teacher-counselor translates these utterances into the target language. The student-client then repeats what has been said in the target language. Errors are corrected by the counselor merely repeating without error any faulty utterance that a client has produced in the target language. There are five stages involved in the teaching-learning process going from the dependent (or embryonic stage) to the fully independent stage. Thus learning is viewed as a maturation process.

The details of this method are described more fully in Curran's 1976 volume on the use of Community Language Learning in language teaching.

Silent Way

Like Suggestology and Counseling Learning, the Silent Way is a teaching method that is not restricted to language teaching. It was developed by Caleb Gattegno, an educational jack-of-all-trades who heads a commercial organization called *Educational Solutions, Inc.* in New York City. In this method no use of the native language is permitted. A set of austere wooden (or plastic) rods of varying length and color are used to introduce the syntactic and phonological structure of the language within a restricted vocabulary. The teacher models a word or structure only once and then the students must recall, imitate, and apply what they have learned. The students take over almost immediately and periods of silence—during which students try to recall what has

been said—are typical. Color-coded charts are used to teach and correct pronunciation and grammar so that much of the time, the teacher merely points to the chart instead of speaking. Later many different kinds of materials such as worksheets, readers, and films are used to take students beyond the elementary level.

Gattegno's 1976 publication on the use of the Silent Way in language teaching is recommended to the reader who wishes to have more details regarding the method.

Having briefly surveyed these four methods, I feel that I must now add some words of caution. First of all, all four methods—to a degree—ignore the fact that there are individual differences among learners in terms of cognitive style and social preferences. This fact precludes that any one of these methods will be 'the' method to use with all learners in all circumstances. Yet that is precisely the claim I have heard made by a disciple or two about each one of these methods. Also, to varying degrees, these four methods are commercial: books are sold, workshops are given for a fee, etc. Thus the prophet and disciples alike often have some degree of profit motive, i.e., a financial stake in the success of the method.

Peter Strevens, a well-known British expert on English language teaching, agrees with the healthy skepticism I am encouraging the reader to develop. In a recent publication he states:

...the complex circumstances of teaching and learning languages—with different kinds of pupils, teachers, aims and objectives, approaches, methods and materials, classroom techniques and standards of achievement—make it inconceivable that any single method could achieve optimum success in all circumstances. (Strevens, 1977, p. 5)

My own conversation with language learners corroborates what Strevens says. Although I have met enthusiastic consumers of all four methods described above, I have also met detractors. People have told me that they couldn't take the pressure or lack of teacher support in the Silent Way and dropped out. Others described the lack of 'structure' in Community Language Learning classes or were annoyed by the T-group type atmosphere. Others would never take a Total Physical Response course because they refuse to run around and jump up and down while learning a language. Yet others say that Suggestopedia is not for them: they do not feel a change of identity would facilitate language learning and they claim that they would not submit to such subconscious type techniques anymore than they would agree to be hypnotized.

Implication for the ESL Classroom

In spite of the detractions noted above, there has been enough experimentation done to show that all four of the methods I have discussed work well if done intensively with small groups of students under ideal conditions, foremost among which are that the teacher be well-trained and proficient in the target language.

However, what about the real-world EFL classroom where the following conditions often prevail?

- A two-hour session twice a week or a one-hour session three times a week
- Crowded classes with 40 or more students
- Desks nailed to the floor
- Inadequate textbooks, if any
- No AV equipment or materials

Under such conditions we cannot use any of the above methods *in toto*, but we can extract useful ideas and techniques which we can then adapt to our own purposes.

Let me tell you some of the things I have adapted for my classes after studying these methods. Suggestology has taught me that if the student can relax sufficiently and get rid of his worst fears and inhibitions, much can be learned quickly through exposure to the target language (i.e., the human brain has tremendous subconscious powers of learning if they are allowed to

operate.) The Total Physical Response Method has taught me that listening comprehension is primary and that if that skill is present, other skills can develop spontaneously. Also meaningful physical activity can be an important adjunct to internalizing a language—we learn by doing, not just by sitting and listening. Community Language Learning has taught me that the feelings and emotions of the students and the teacher are very important; that without mutual trust, learning is impossible. In addition, it has convinced me that in certain situations I should let my students generate the syllabus, i.e., let them decide what they are going to learn. Finally, the Silent Way has taught me that language learning is a heavily cognitive process and that the student should be made responsible for his/her learning. In other words, teaching must be subordinated to learning. Another insight is that I am no longer afraid of those periods of silence that occur from time to time in my language classes; I can wait for the students to talk without jumping in to fill the void.

Conclusion

What is the solution for the ESL teacher, given this abundance of methods? The only way to make wise decisions is to learn more about these and other methods. This paper has just scratched the surface. Further information is available in books, journal articles, at professional conferences, and at professional workshops. There are also three other things the teacher has to do to make a good decision concerning the choice of a method:

1. Assess student needs: why should they learn English? For what purpose(s)?
2. Examine instructional constraints
 - Time (hours per week, number of days per week)
 - Class size (nature of enrollment)
 - Materials (set or free syllabus) etc.
3. Determine needs, attitudes, and aptitudes of individual students to the extent that this is possible (see Peck, 1979)

Having done all these, the teacher will be in a position to derive useful techniques or principles by studying the above four and other methods. A former professor and current colleague of mine sums up the professional ESL teacher's responsibility nicely:

Adapt: don't adopt. (Clifford Prator, personal communication)

I submit that a teacher is in a better position to follow this advice if she/he is familiar with the history of our profession.

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