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Second-Language Teaching Methods (Part I)

Introduction

Second-language teaching is a field that provides an excellent ground for the many theoretical and practical aspects of psycholinguistics to come together. Language-teaching methods may be characterized according to three principal dimensions: **(1) Language Focus, Meaning Learning and (3) Grammar Learning**. These dimensions involve theories which have been realized in second-language teaching methods.

1.Language Focus: Speech Communication vs. Literature

Methods can be divided into two categories of focus, those that teach language through the speech of the target language (the ‘target language’ being the language to be learned) and those that approach the target language through reading and writing. Except for Grammar–Translation, which focuses on reading, writing, and the translation of written words, most other methods focus on speech and the use of speech in communication. A principal aim of Grammar–Translation is often to get students to be able to read, and, ultimately, to read literary works and documents. Other proponents of the method see literacy as a foundation and a means for approaching speech communication. The problem with starting out with literacy when the goal is speech is that students may never get to the speech stage unless they go to a school where they may come into contact with fluent instructors. Even at a university, though, the focus may remain on literacy, as is the case in Japan and Russia, for example.

Generally, the proponents of speech-based methods regard Grammar– Translation (GT) as their ultimate enemy, since they consider communication through speech to be primary in the learning of language. Speech-based methods attempt to provide a speech environment in which

students may learn the target language. Reading and writing may be used, but only to reinforce what is initially learned in speech.

2. Meaning Learning: Direct Experience vs. Translation

In providing the meaning of target language items, translation may be used, as is commonly the case with the GT method. For example, English-speaking students studying Italian may be told that 'libro' means 'book', or that '¿Come sta?' means 'How are you?' Thus, the native language (in this case, English) is used to provide the meaning for the target language (Italian).

The meanings of single vocabulary items and entire phrases and sentences may be learned in this way. This is very different, though, from acquiring meaning by being exposed to actual objects, events, or situations in which the target language is used. For example, the learner can be shown a book and hear the teacher say 'libro', or see two persons meet, with one saying to the other '¿Come sta?' The meaning here is to be learned through direct experience and not by the use of the native language to provide translation.

3. Grammar Learning: Induction vs. Explication

Explication involves explanation, in the native language, of the grammatical rules and structures of the second language. For example, a teacher can explain to Japanese students in the Japanese language that English has a Subject + Verb + Object ordering of basic sentence constituents (Japanese has a Subject + Object + Verb ordering.) In learning the same by induction, however, students would have to discover the order of constituents on their own. It would be necessary for them to hear sentences of the sort, 'Mary caught the ball', while experiencing a situation in which such an action (or a picture of the action) occurs. In this way they would discover for themselves, through self-analysis, i.e. induction, that English has a Subject + Verb + Object ordering.

I. Traditional Methods

With the above three dimensions in mind, let us now examine some major second-language teaching methods. Since the 1980s little that is new has happened in teaching methods. Some theorists, such as H. Douglas Brown, even contend that the age of methods has passed. Under the

heading of Traditional Methods, we shall consider the following: (1) the Grammar–Translation Method, (2) the Natural Method, (3) the Direct Method, and (4) the Audiolingual Method.

A. The Grammar–Translation Method

Features of GT Grammar–Translation (GT) essentially involves two components: (1) the explicit explanation of grammatical rules using the native language, and (2) the use of translation, in the native language, to explain the meaning of vocabulary and structures. Translation is the oldest of the components and is probably the oldest of all formal teaching methods, having been used in ancient Greece and Rome and elsewhere in the ancient world. The grammar aspect of GT was rather limited in those times since grammatical knowledge itself was limited. It was later in Europe, particularly in the seventeenth century, that intensive and detailed studies of various languages were conducted.

With this spirit of the Renaissance came an interest, too, in the understanding and teaching of ordinary vernacular (non-Classical) languages. The teaching of grammar went hand in hand with translation for the teaching of a second language, with both relying on the use of the native language to impart knowledge. With the growth of grammatical knowledge, however, the grammatical component played a greater role in teaching, eventually dominating the translation aspect. By the end of the eighteenth century in Europe it had become a full partner in the method. The growth of the grammatical component continues to the present day. Rules are explained by the teacher, then memorized, recited, and applied by the student. Typically, textbooks using GT have lessons that include a reading passage in the target language, a list of vocabulary items and their translations, and an explanation in the native language of important points of grammar exemplified in the text. The lesson often ends with a series of exercises, ranging from straight translation to questions on points of grammar.

Translation is typically done from the target language into the native language, with reverse translation (from the native language into the target language) seldom being done. The teacher will spend most of the class time explaining the grammar points, while occasionally questioning students about a particular translation or having students read aloud and explain the meaning of what they have read.

a. Advantages of GT

Despite the method's indifference to speech and oral communication, the GT method has enjoyed and continues to enjoy acceptance in many countries around the world. This may seem a mystery, until one looks at the important advantages of GT:

1. Non-fluent teachers can teach large classes: The method can be applied by teachers (1) who lack verbal fluency in the target language, both in terms of understanding and producing speech, and by teachers (2) who have an incomplete knowledge of the language. This situation is common in many countries, typically underdeveloped ones, where knowledgeable teachers are scarce. It is not uncommon in such countries for teachers to be placed in a class with 40, 50, and more students. In effect, language learning is treated as a mass lecture course where, typically, students only meet once a week.

2. possibility of Self-study: The method also lends itself well to self-study. By using books, students can study on their own outside the classroom. There is much that they can learn from studying and reading on their own. Of importance, too, is the fact that the method is appropriate for all levels of learners. From the introductory to the very advanced, there is an abundance of materials available for classroom use.

3. Adaptation to changing linguistic and psychological theories: One of GT's strongest points is its capacity to adapt to ever-changing linguistic and psychological theories. The distinguishing feature of the method, the explication of grammar, can easily be adapted to new ideas and theories. Grammatical explanations can be couched in the linguistic theory of the day. Whether a grammatical point is to be explained according to Chomsky's or Bloomfield's theory of grammar is of no concern to the method – GT is neutral with respect to any specific grammar. Whatever grammar it is fed, that is the grammar it will explain. Similarly, GT is neutral about whether a behaviorist or a Mentalist psychological theory is applied. In this way, GT need never become obsolete from a linguistic or psychological point of view. The fact that it thrived under Structural linguistics and Behavioristic psychology did not prevent it from thriving under Mentalism and Mentalistic linguistics.

b. Success and Failure

Almost everyone who has theorized second-language teaching methods has criticized GT. They believe that there must be a better way to teach language. Yet, despite sustaining centuries

of attack by opposing methods GT survives. Although we, too, are members of the opposition we do recognize that GT is not a failure. It could not be a failure and last for hundreds of years. It is a fact that many students can learn an important part of a second language through GT. Where GT fails, however, relates to its secondary treatment of communicative oral skills. Students who pass through many years of strict GT training often come out unable to comprehend or utter sentences at a level that allows them to engage in even simple conversations. Then, too, GT cannot be used with young children: young children cannot read or write and are unable to understand grammatical explanations. Perhaps this is a blessing in disguise for countries that are predisposed to GT, such as Japan. Since Japanese children in the early grades are often taught English and other languages, and since this cannot be done through GT, more natural speech communication- based techniques are going to have to be used.

B. The Natural Method

The Natural Method as a product of the Enlightenment (NM) developed as a reaction to Grammar–Translation and was the outgrowth of scientific thought on the nature of language and language learning. Such knowledge flowered in Europe with inspiration from the work of Comenius (1568), Rousseau (1780), and other theorists such as Pestalozzi (1801). The philosophy of the Enlightenment during the eighteenth century was particularly concerned with the natural state of human beings. Questions about the natural development of humans and their language became of great interest.

NM began to be formed early in the nineteenth century and by the latter part of that century the method had become firmly established through the writings of Sauveur (1878) and Gouin (1880). Gouin observed children learning language and noticed that this occurred within the context of meaning-related situations. This observation of children’s language learning was then applied to second-language teaching methods for children and adults.

1.Natural Order of Language Learning

The approach to language learning, where ‘natural is best’, so to speak, led to a method of teaching that stressed the value of introducing a second language to a learner exactly as the native language had been experienced. The model for the Natural Method of second-language learning was the child learning its native language. This meant adherence to the natural sequence of the child’s acquiring its first language, i.e. (1) speech comprehension, (2) speech production, and,

much later, (3) reading and (4) writing. Grammar was not taught directly. Rather, grammatical rules and structures were to be learned through induction (self-analysis) by experiencing speech in a situational context. Meaning was to be gained through experience and exposure to objects, situations, and events; translation was to be avoided.

Typically, teachers would not use prepared situations or material. Learning was through ‘spontaneous’ conversation and demonstration, all of which was done in the target language and supported with gestures and actions. The teacher used language appropriate to the students’ level of understanding, much in the way parents would with a child. The method was totally oriented towards the acquisition of oral skills. Student participation in situational activities was the essence of this kind of second-language learning.

2. Advantages and Disadvantages

The great advantage of NM was that by exposure to natural language in a natural context, learners could acquire a speech capability both in understanding and production. However, one problem for this method is that it requires the teacher to create interesting situations so that students may be naturally exposed to language. This, and the reliance on spontaneous speech, places an extremely heavy burden on even the best of teachers. Besides possessing an undue amount of ingenuity teachers must, of course, be fluent in the target language. Such a demand cannot always be met, particularly if mass education is involved.

Class size, too, could be a problem, since the number of students must be quite small, usually less than 15. Actually, the problems mentioned here are not unique to NM. Indeed, all speech-based methods have similar problems, given their emphasis on exposure to natural speech and student participation in a variety of communicative situations.

C. The Direct Method

The Direct Method (DM), appearing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, developed from the Natural Method. Like the Natural Method, it emphasized the learning of speech, acquiring meaning in environmental context, and learning grammar through induction. The advocates of DM, while approving of the Natural Method, sought to improve upon it by providing systematic procedures based on scientific knowledge of linguistics and psychology. For example, in psychology, Franke in the 1880s argued for the exclusive use of the second language in the classroom and discussed the importance of the direct connection between meaning and form

in the second language. The native language was not to be used as an intermediary in any way. The name, Direct Method, incidentally, refers to this direct connection between the second language and meaning.

DM theorists believed that by applying scientific knowledge from psychology and linguistics, language learning could be made more efficient, with the result that students would learn faster than they would under the spontaneous and unplanned lessons of the Natural Method. Harold Palmer (1922) was perhaps its most articulate and eminent advocate. DM advocates natural learning but with graded materials. Like the Natural Method, DM is mentalistically oriented since it presumes that the learner is a thinking being who can learn abstract language ideas.

Also, like the Natural Method, DM relies on learning the language by induction. However, unlike the Natural Method, language materials for teaching in DM are explicitly preselected and graded on the basis of linguistic complexity. Simple sentences, for example, precede those with relative clauses or in the passive construction. All of this is done for the purpose of making the acquisition task easier for the learner. While there is still much spontaneous use of speech by the teacher, it is considerably less than is the case for the Natural Method. Dialogue and action materials. Lessons in DM are mainly devoted to oral communication and follow (as with NM) the acquisition order of the first language. Thus, speech understanding precedes speech production, which is then followed by reading and then by writing.

Elementary social dialogues are introduced almost immediately: 'How are you?', 'Fine, thanks', as are questions: 'Where is . . .?', 'When is . . .?', 'Who is . . .?', and commands for action: 'Stand up', 'Sit down', and 'Give the book to Mary'. (The similarity here to the fundamentals of the Total Physical Response Method, which was proposed some 50 years later, is important to note and will be discussed later.)

Sometimes oral pattern drills and memorization of dialogues were also included in DM lessons. Such techniques were devised and applied for the purpose of giving practice in speech production. Interestingly, these same techniques later came to be used (perhaps more accurately overused) by proponents of the Audiolingual Method. Sometimes, too, translations might be given verbally, as might grammatical explanations. However, these were used sparingly. For the most part, DM is typified by its reliance on natural speech in context and on the students' mental powers of induction.

1. Teacher Fluency and Class Size

The structured nature of the Direct Method is such that, in the hands of a good teacher, it can be used in relatively large classes of 30 or even 40 students, with teachers getting students to speak in chorus. Still, like the Natural Method, DM requires a teacher with some inventiveness and high fluency in the second language.

2. Demise of DM

With the advent of the Audiolingual Method, DM was crushed. However, after a few decades, DM was reincarnated in the form of some current methods such as Total Physical Response and the Natural Approach. These methods reflect many of the essential ideas of DM.

D. The Audiolingual Method

Popularity of American linguistics and psychology and the rise of the Audiolingual Method (ALM) was due to the popularity of the new American linguistic and psychological theories which it incorporated into its foundations. The great popularity and influence of America itself in the world, following the end of the Second World War, is a factor here. The language analyses provided by American Structural linguists, particularly Charles Fries and the stimulus and response learning psychology provided by American Behaviorists endowed ALM with great credibility. The Direct Method, which implied a Mentalist psychology, went out of fashion, except in Continental Europe.

ALM incorporates Structural Linguistics Structural linguists such as Fries who regarded sentences as sequences of grammatical word classes or phrases. New sentences would be created by substituting words within a word class. For example, a sequence such as Article + Adjective + Noun + Verb + Article + Noun could yield a large number of sentences such as 'The rich boy bought a car' and 'The friendly girl kissed the cat', by substituting members of the same grammatical class. Because Behaviorist psychologists, too, regarded sentences as the simple association of key words (Skinner) or word classes (Staats), it was not much of a step for ALM to adopt sentence patterns as the learning fundamentals for language. Unfortunately for the theory, substitution cannot prevent the creation of sequences like 'The happy dust memorized the table', or 'A poor mountain elapsed the wine', which also fit the pattern for the sentence 'The rich boy

bought a car'. There were other more serious problems with the theory, which Chomsky (1957, 1959) pointed out.

ALM incorporated Behaviorist psychology (Watson, 1924; Thorndike, 1932; Skinner 1957), which was the dominant school of psychology in America for most of the first half of the twentieth century. Behaviorist psychology regarded mind and thinking to be irrelevant for the understanding and production of speech. Language learning was regarded as no different from other types of learning in which a stimulus and response paradigm was operating. Repetition and mechanical drills involving words as stimuli and responses were considered to be the essence of learning.

The defects of such a view concerning language and psychology were demonstrated by Chomsky during the 1950s and served as the basis for the subsequent collapse of Structural linguistics in the 1960s, the downfall of Behaviorism, and a rise of Mentalism as the principal explanation for linguistic behavior in the 1970s.

1.Features of ALM

The Audiolingual Method incorporated into its methodology many of the same features that the Direct Method had developed, namely, planned situations, graded materials, and such techniques as pattern drills and dialogue memorization (Brooks, 1964). In contrast with DM, the Audiolingual Method almost entirely dropped the use of natural situations and spontaneous speech. There was even a tendency for some ALM advocates to reduce the meaningfulness of the speech that was taught – a practice that was frowned on by Fries, one of the founders of ALM.

2.Demise of ALM

In its time ALM generated an enormous amount of enthusiasm. Teachers everywhere lined up to teach second languages according to principles that reflected the latest scientific word on how humans learn language. However, the fact is that ALM failed to produce the fluent communicating speakers it had promised. All that remains of ALM today is the occasional use of Pattern Practice drills as an auxiliary exercise.