

# LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY AND SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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## Summary

The first part of the article focuses on language teaching. After a historical overview of foreign language teaching methods, the key issues in language teaching are outlined. A special section is devoted to communicative language teaching, the current approach to foreign language teaching, and two important aspects that reflect tendencies in modern language pedagogy: learner-centeredness and use of information technology (IT). This is followed by sections on the content that is actually taught (e.g. pronunciation, grammar etc.), on teaching the four foreign language skills, role and types of language syllabi and teaching materials, and the issue of language assessment. The rest of the first part looks at language teaching from different perspectives: those of the language learner, the context of learning (the language classroom) and the language teacher.

The second part of the article is devoted to second language acquisition (SLA). Following the definition and the goals of this new discipline within applied linguistics, the authors offer an overview of its development throughout its relatively short history that traces it back to the times of contrastive analysis and error analysis. The section on current research issues offers also an insight into recent interests and foci of second language acquisition experts. The last section focuses on SLA research methodology and current SLA theories.

## **1. Introduction**

Foreign language teaching (FLT) and second language acquisition (SLA) are two subfields of applied linguistics that are quite different in historical and research terms. For a large part of its long history FLT relied mostly on intuitive approaches of both theoreticians and practitioners. Nowadays, language teaching draws heavily on insights that are validated by the research into the teaching process in all its complexity. The content of language teaching (e.g. vocabulary, grammar), its aims (e.g. communicative competence), its protagonists (e.g. learners, teacher) as well as elements of the process itself (e.g. language learning and acquisition, classroom interaction) have each contributed to and benefited from a number of disciplines that focus, exclusively or in part, on this important human activity. With a recent insistence on learner and the learning process, FLT is slowly beginning to be informed by SLA, a discipline that studies language learning as a uniquely human, cognitive process and can potentially offer a better understanding of the very nature of the human mind and intelligence. Although SLA researchers generally consider applied aspects of their research to be of secondary importance, the relevance of their findings in such areas as age constraints, crosslinguistics interaction, and the role of input etc. is undeniable.

It may be fair to say that FLT and SLA can contribute much to a better global understanding of the human nature and to a further development of intercultural communication.

## **2. Language teaching methodology**

### **2.1. Historical overview of foreign language teaching (FLT) methods**

Language teaching methodology has gone a long way from being based on dogmatic beliefs about the only good way of teaching to being based on insights into processes of second language acquisition and the dynamics of the language classroom itself.

First conceptualizations of language teaching were based on teaching Latin. From the sixteenth century onwards European vernacular languages came to be studied as foreign languages (FLs) too. Once they became school subjects they were taught in the same way as Latin – by the grammar-translation method.

The grammar-translation method was the dominant method for many centuries and was best exemplified by the formal teaching of the classical languages (Latin and Greek). Language analysis, memorizing paradigms and complex grammar rules in order to be able to read and translate literary texts and to learn to write similar texts were supposed

to train the mind of the student. The FL was hardly ever used in class and no language communication skills were developed.

By the end of the nineteenth century opposition to the grammar-translation method became very strong and got articulated in a number of new methods. Their common philosophy was based on the belief that a language is learned by direct association of foreign words with the objects and actions they denote and not through the mother tongue. The new methods were called by the common term - the direct method. Insistence on the FL as the medium of instruction and the development of phonetics as a discipline at the time stimulated the importance of pronunciation. Grammar was taught inductively, which made the student an active participant of the teaching process. It was also taught functionally, that is the choice of the grammar structures taught depended on what was used most frequently in speech. Speaking preceded reading, and reading was dealt with so as to encourage guessing meaning from context. Some experts consider that having the student active was the most important advantage of the method. A number of modifications on the direct method throughout time kept it alive for a long time.

Originating in the United States, the reading method was based on the pragmatic assessment of what could really be mastered during the short, usually two-year period that learners on average spent learning FLs. Language teaching experts concluded that the most a learner could be expected to do was develop an ability to read and understand texts in the FL without having to translate. They believed that mastering the reading comprehension skill to a certain extent would enable learners to go on learning by themselves. However, the method was mostly used in language courses that were too short to equip learners with enough language competence to manage authentic reading texts.

With the rapid development of technology, social changes and new communication needs in the 1920s and 1930s, the oral skills took precedence over written skills. The method that appeared at the time - 'the audio-lingual method' - was based on and inspired by insights developed by structural linguists (e.g. L. Bloomfield) and behaviorists (e.g. B. F. Skinner). A descriptive approach to language combined with the belief that language learning was a culturally and socially determined activity of habit formation. This resulted in new ideas about teaching FLs stressing the primacy of speech over writing, the supreme authority of the native speaker, the importance of teaching the language itself rather than about the language, the need to keep in mind that languages are different and to look at language learning as habit formation. Some teaching experts at the time made the visual element (mostly in the form of picture) prominent, using it as the carrier of meaning and context. This trend led to the development of the audio-visual method. Another structuralism-based method was prominent in some parts of Europe for a couple of decades. It was the audio-visual-global structural (AVGS) method developed by Petar Guberina of Zagreb and Paul Rivenc of Saint-Cloud. This method was based on the assumption that a foreign language is best acquired when it is presented via global language structures (chunks of language) by simultaneous auditive and visual stimuli.

However, with Chomskyan ideas about language and the emerging importance of

cognitive psychology a new method appeared – the cognitive code learning. Rejecting the passive recipient stance of behaviorism, proponents of the new approach insisted that language learning implied rule governed creativity. The process of learning was supposed to be a matter of problem solving through seeking the rules that show how the language functions. This implied that the learner was an active participant in the process and had control over it. Although cognitive code learning is not recognized as an especially prominent language teaching method, it is important as a reaction to an era in language teaching that was marked by the great impact of audio-lingualism, and as the possible cause of another reaction – the so-called alternative methods of the 1970s that were humanistically-oriented.

Humanistic approaches stressed the impact of affective factors such as attitudes, motivation or language anxiety. Several methods based on humanistic tenets gained popularity during the 1970s. Community language learning (CLL) (or counselling-learning) is based on the work of Charles Curran, who insisted on group cohesiveness and trust between teacher and learners as guarantees of the desirable emotional climate in which learners would not be defensive but receptive to learning. Gattegno's silent way is based on the belief that teaching should be learner-centred and subordinated to learning because the inner state of the learner is of paramount importance. The method makes use of colored rods that are to help teacher speak very little and let learners speak increasingly a lot.

Suggestopedia is based on the idea of holistic learning. It can be achieved, according to the method's founder Lozanov, if learners are brought to a state of deep relaxation. This can be reached by rhythmic breathing and listening to FL texts against and synchronized to special music that activates relevant parts of the left hemisphere of the brain. Asher's total physical response is based on insights from first language acquisition. It involves starting with a latent period that precedes speaking. During this period learners are exposed to great amounts of comprehensible input and evidence their comprehension by performing commands issued by teacher.

The natural approach was designed by Krashen and Terrell in the early 1980s. The method reflects what is sometimes called second language acquisition tradition and is based on Krashen's monitor theory. Among the fundamental tenets of the theory is the principle that the only valuable knowledge of a language can be obtained through acquisition, an unconscious process that is the same as first language acquisition. Since negative feelings can interfere with acquisition and can present themselves as an affective filter, they can cause serious problems and teaching should take this into account. Within the natural approach teacher should provide learners with comprehensible input that is fine-tuned to a level a little above the learners' current level of competence. The focus of classroom activities should be on meaning, not form, and classroom atmosphere should be positive so as to keep the affective filter low.

## **2.2. The present**

### **2.2.1. Communicative language teaching (CLT)**

CLT refers to a number of approaches that are based on the belief that language is not

just a system of rules but a resource for creating meaning. A distinction is made between knowing language rules and being able to use them effectively and appropriately in communication. This has led to the belief that the aim of FLT should be to allow learners to be able to use the FL for communication with others. Syllabi were proposed that suggested that the main purpose of the classroom should be to develop the learner's communicative ability. In the beginning the insistence on meaning instead of form ousted grammar teaching from the classroom. The early advocates of CLT believed that focus on meaning would make possible automatic acquisition of structures too. Later proponents of CLT came to see value in form-focused activities as well. Second language research and, in particular, insights from studies on learning styles suggested learner-centredness as one of the key concepts.

According to Brown (2001) CLT, as it is conceived and practiced today, can be described as based on the following tenets: classroom goals reflect the main aim of language teaching – communicative competence; teaching should promote authentic, pragmatic use of language; both fluency and accuracy are developed; learners are prepared to use language productively and receptively; language teaching should make learners aware of learning styles and strategies so that they become autonomous learners; teachers take on the role of facilitators.

### **2.2.2. Task-based language learning**

Task-based language learning represents a new approach to language learning that, in many ways, stands on the opposite end of form-based language learning. It is informed by SLA research that points to the fact that language learning is influenced by natural developmental processes which make the assumed direct link between input and intake improbable. In contrast to form-focused approaches to language learning relying on accumulation of discrete language items which learners master through practice and thus make them available for spontaneous language production, task-based learning specifies the language learning process in terms of communicative tasks, activities that focus on meaning rather than form, that will help learners to, first of all, develop a meaning system while the language system will be developed as a result and consequence of language use. Thanks to their inner ability to find ways of expressing meaning learners are able to adjust the language input they are exposed to to fit their communicative purpose. Within this framework language use directs the study of language forms, which has only a subsidiary role. The basic principles of task-based learning include organizing the syllabus in terms of tasks that reflect the outcomes of language use, and relating form and meaning through tasks based on language use in order for language learning to be effective. Research on how language learning occurs through tasks has not yet come up with unanimous conclusions. Factors such as timing, learners' understanding of the aim of the task and previous experience with the topic have been highlighted as relevant. Still, a general consensus has been reached on the need for using a form in a meaningful way before it can be internalized by learners.

### **2.2.3. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL)**

Developments in our understanding of the language learning process that resulted in communicative approaches to FLT went hand in hand with research on the effects of

modern technology on language learning. The benefits of CALL have been looked into in a number of studies. Investigations that have attempted to compare CALL classes with conventional classes have not come up with significant insights because it is not always easy to find teaching activities that could be considered as comparable variables, since different tasks are usually done in CALL classes and conventional classes. A more promising research avenue is reflected in studies that look into how CALL can enhance the effects of teaching at the language and skills levels.

CALL has been confirmed as having a great motivational value. It enables shy learners to practice by speaking up and not feeling anxious as they, for instance, do speech-recognition activities on the computer by themselves. Among the greatest benefits of CALL are the opportunities learners get for immediate feedback and the fact that they can work at their own pace and beyond the classroom. The plethora of information available to learners on the Internet requires help from teachers in organizing learning from it. Access to authentic materials on the Internet, opportunities to perform in authentic tasks, e.g. through writing e-mails to key-pals, are very stimulating for FL learners.

## **2.3. Content of language teaching**

### **2.3.1. Pronunciation**

Teaching pronunciation includes teaching sounds, stress and rhythm, and intonation. Achieving the native speaker (NS) level is considered by many as not quite possible or even desirable: some learners feel that they would be giving up their identity if they had a NS accent. Difficulties in mastering foreign pronunciation can be attributed to sounds that are non-existent in learners' L1, to sounds that exist in L1 but as allophones, and to interference from L1 at the stress or intonation levels. Perception of correct pronunciation is the first necessary step. Activities such as explanation of pronunciation rules, imitation drills, comparison of learners' pronunciation with NSs' etc. can help learners master native-like pronunciation. It is still an open issue whether and how pronunciation should be taught. It is generally considered that, although pronunciation can be picked up intuitively, it is still useful to teach it explicitly, since there is some evidence that explicit training can improve it. Normally, the standard accent of a FL is taught. However, when several standards exist, social and pragmatic criteria prevail and usually the standard is chosen according to which speakers are to be the likely interlocutors of learners. Some aspects of pronunciation (e.g. stress and rhythm) are best taught as part of teaching other language aspects (e.g. vocabulary). The sound-symbol correspondence is usually mastered through learning the alphabet of the FL and, in case of some languages, a host of extra rules about different combinations of sound-symbol correspondences. Pronunciation error correction is considered to be necessary in case of errors causing incomprehension.

### **2.3.2. Grammar**

The two basic types of grammar, formal and functional, are reflected in the two approaches to teaching grammar. Until the 1970s the formal approach prevailed resulting in a belief that grammatical structures and lexical units should first get

internalised through practice and this will enable learners to communicate. During the 1970s, this bottom-up approach was replaced by a focus on language use stressed in the newly emerged communicative approach in FLT: learners should first master the rules of verbal interaction, that is learners should learn how to communicate first, and this will lead to a natural development of form mastery. In contemporary FLT the two approaches are usually combined. Within a structurally oriented approach grammar is focused on, but is taught through communicative tasks and in a communicative way. The initial form-focused tasks are extended to include a focus on the communicative purpose that particular structures may serve. As a reaction from SLA researchers about grammatical structures not being acquired linearly, modern FLT spirals the syllabus and learners deal with the same structure more than once and in increasingly complex ways. Within a communicatively oriented approach, the starting point is learners' understanding of content which, then, leads on to their being able to perform communicative tasks. Focus on form is brought in only when there are grammar-related problems. After the initial noticing phase learners engage in activities that focus on particular problematic grammar points.

Other approaches to teaching grammar also exist. Input processing and consciousness-raising stimulate learners to become aware of grammatical structures through tasks that require them to induce grammatical rules themselves through collaborative work with other learners. In this particular approach the stress is on learner awareness of the grammatical structure and not on producing it. In contrast, some experts insist on the productive phase, since they believe that grammatical structures need to be internalized through practice so that they are later available for automatic use by learners, whose attention is left free to focus on communication. Some experts suggest that successful mastery of grammar implies mastery of form, which is achieved through practicing at the production level, through mastery of meaning, achieved through associative learning, and mastery of appropriate use, which is achieved through raising sensitivity to context. In the contemporary approach to teaching grammar feedback on accuracy of grammatical structures used is an issue still widely debated. The options discussed range from encouraging learners to make errors freely so that teachers correct them to eliciting self-repair.

### **2.3.3. Vocabulary**

In FLT, vocabulary acquisition can be assisted in direct and indirect ways. When teachers supply word lists or semantic networks of words they employ direct ways of teaching vocabulary. Indirect ways imply exposing learners to vocabulary in context of texts, either oral or written. It is generally accepted now that vocabulary teaching needs to foster and integrate different levels at which a word needs to be processed in order to be acquired: the phonological, graphological, grammatical, and semantic levels. Recently, the teaching of vocabulary has to a large extent been informed by vocabulary acquisition studies. Some researchers advocate implicit learning approaches, which imply that vocabulary is mainly acquired unconsciously or with a certain extent of consciousness of a word being new. Others are proponents of explicit learning and stress that learners learn vocabulary by taking an active part in the process and using different language learning strategies, such as inferential and metacognitive strategies. There seems to be an agreement among teaching experts that different kinds of

vocabulary knowledge and different proficiency levels may be related to different vocabulary learning strategies.

Recently, syllabus designers have been able to make use of word frequency counts and word patterns obtained from a number of contemporary lexical corpora. Within the lexical approach developed by Lewis, teachers are advised to focus on teaching lexicogrammatical patterns as language chunks and take usefulness to the learner as a more important criterion than frequency.

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Integrates theory and practice in an original way. Offers thought-provoking, ready-to-use ideas for raising awareness of the language teaching process]

### **Biographical Sketches**

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**Marta Medved Krajnovic** holds an MA in applied linguistics and a PhD in SLA. She is assistant professor in the TEFL Section of the University of Zagreb English Department. Her major research interests include early second language acquisition in natural and institutionalized context, psycholinguistic and educational aspects of childhood bilingualism and crosslinguistic interaction. In the area of applied linguistics she is mainly interested in the testing and evaluation of second language learners communicative competence.