

A Comparative Study of Language Teaching Methods

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Abstract: Language teaching method is a subject that studies second language teaching practice and teaching theories. In this essay, there are mainly three language teaching methods. In general, the grammar-translation method concentrates more on grammatical structures in written texts and is still used widely in different countries for a second language learning. The audio-lingual method, however, focuses on listening and speaking skills in dialogues or conversations which requires mass memorization and mimicry with grammar as a hidden root. As for the communicative approach which is most popular in the current language teaching, the grammar is second to communicative ability to which is attached great importance and there is no systematic teaching of grammar.

Keywords: grammar-translation method, audio-lingual method, communicative approach

Introduction

Richards and Rodgers (2014)^[8] say that "debate and discussion within the teaching profession have often centered on issues such as the role of grammar in the language curriculum, the development of accuracy and fluency in teaching, the choice of syllabus frameworks in course design, the role of vocabulary in language learning." Important factors in teaching foreign language which include teacher's teaching method, student's learning method and the way in which teachers and students interact with each other in the classrooms can help to complete certain teaching tasks. The teaching method, which can adapt to the specific social environment, fit the teaching environment, serve the teaching objects and meet the requirements of the teaching purpose, can be called as the optimal teaching method. Therefore, when choosing the teaching method, the objective factors such as school teaching environment, equipment constructions, students' overall levels and teachers' strengths need to be considered, combining the teaching objectives and teaching content.

1. Grammar-translation method

1.1 The background of grammar-translation method

The grammar-translation method is a traditional teaching method which uses the native language to translate and teach the written texts of a foreign language. It originated in Europe in the 15th century. In the 17th century, after experiencing the Renaissance, European countries produced modern language teaching such as English, French and Italian teaching in order to promote the teaching of national languages which was the initial form of the grammar-translation method. The use of grammar-translation method reached its peak in Europe in the 18th century and the mid-19th century. It was introduced into China at the same time. For more than 200 years, it always dominated the field of foreign language teaching methods until the mid-20th century.

1.2 Previous Researches on Grammar-translation Method

According to Austin (2003)^[1], "As a teacher, I liked using the grammar translation method because I could assume the intelligence of my students; I could talk to them like the intelligent people that they are, and we could talk about the grammar and vocabulary that I was teaching." Cunningham (2000)^[3] indicates that translation can still play a part in language teaching even though it has negative effects. Chang (2011)^[4] also agrees that "Without grammar, words hang together without any real meaning or sense. In order to be able to speak a language to some degree of proficiency and to be able to say what people really want to say, some grammatical knowledge must be grasped." Malone (2012)^[6], however, says that "not surprisingly, this method was difficult to implement in a meaningful and interesting way for the learners". Peyton, Moore and Young (2010)^[7] also express the same view that grammar-translation method is more like teacher-centered and structure-based approach which may be boring for teachers to teach and bored for learners to learn.

2. Audio-lingual method

2.1 The background of audio-lingual method

In the 20th century, communication began to be the focus in language teaching since the countries connected with each other more often in business, culture or diplomacy. Thus, the language emphasis shifted from reading to oral skills which promoted the development of audio-lingual method. According to Alemi and Tavakoli (2016)^[2], the armies had to communicate with their allies and enemies which meant that they needed to learn a foreign language orally in a short time with the outbreak of World War II. And that was why the audio-lingual method was ever called the Army Method. With the development of Leonard Bloomfield's as well as Charles C. Fries's structuralism who was considered to be the creator of the audio-lingual method and B. F. Skinner's behaviourism, the audio-lingual teaching method gradually became the trend in the 20th-century society.

2.2 Previous researches on audio-lingual method

Linguistics in America proposed the audio-lingual method and according to Malone (2012)^[6], "The behaviorist theory-simplified-predicts that any human behavior can be learned and performed through a process of stimulus, response and reinforcement." And Alemi and Tavakoli (2016)^[2] say that behaviorism theory assumes that "Correct behavior receives positive feedback, while errors receive negative feedback." The audio-lingual method is like the direct method which concentrates on speech and teaches foreign language only in the target language without the help of the native language. And these two language teaching methods both emphasize language learning through the activities and visualization with no explanation or translation. But the direct method concentrates more on vocabulary than grammar and the audio-lingual method puts more emphasis on drilling grammar with grammar points as hidden roots. According to Alemi and Tavakoli (2016)^[2], "the emphasis was not on the understanding of words, but rather on the acquisition of structures and patterns in common everyday dialogue. These patterns are elicited, repeated and tested until the responses given by the student in the foreign language are automatic."

3. The communicative approach

3.1 The background of the communicative approach

In the late 1960s, just as situational language teaching or called the oral approach prevailed in language teaching in Britain, American linguists began to reconsider about the theories of the audio-lingual method. And the cognitivism which concentrated on exploring human mental constructions like thinking and problem-solving gradually took the place of the behaviorism in 1960s. The communicative approach existed in Chomsky's theories which concentrated on competence in language learning but was improved in Michael Halliday's functional linguistics and Hymes's wider communicative competence theory. And the communicative language teaching was born and spread widely to different countries.

3.2 Previous researches on the communicative approach

According to Jabeen (2014)^[5], "Communicative approach is considered as the most effective theoretical model in English language teaching since early 1970s. The underlying concept of this approach is that language carries not only functional meaning, it carries social meaning as well. So, it is not only important to learn the linguistic forms but also to understand their potential communicative functions and social meanings." However, Malone (2012)^[6] expresses the opinion that the communicative approach is not very suitable to use if the learners do not live in the target language dominant environment and do not have enough chances to communicate in L2 which means that they lack real-life interactions. However, Peyton, Moore and Young (2010)^[7] hold different views that the communicative approach is learner-centered and meaning-based approach which can improve students' engagement and is relevant to their real life outside the classroom. Thornbury (2003)^[9] agrees and says that "Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) values, among other things, learner-centeredness, which is, giving the learners more responsibility and involvement in the learning process. This is often achieved through discovery learning activities and through group work as opposed to the traditional teacher-fronted lesson."

4. Conclusion

In this essay, there are mainly three language teaching methodologies which are the grammar-translation method, the audio-lingual method and the communicative approach being discussed about their background, short related literature review, advantages and disadvantages as well as own experience as a second language learner or teacher. All these teaching methods have own strengths and weaknesses so in practical language teaching, choosing appropriate teaching methods related to the certain teaching environment while not sticking to a changeless teaching method is the best way to teach language.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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