

# A Retrospect of the Foreign Language Teaching Methods and Approaches in the Last One Hundred Years

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**Abstract**—This study reviewed most of the foreign language teaching methods and approaches from grammar-based period to the latest task-based period. Analysis, conclusion of the characteristics and critical comments about these teaching methods and approaches were conveyed in the present study. The general description of the Chinese college English teaching situation and problems were also mentioned within the specific measures to improve.

**Keywords**—foreign language teaching; teaching methods and approaches; Chinese college English teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

Pedagogy means a profession, science, or theory of teaching which included the method or strategy of teaching practice. It is also about how a teacher approaches his or her methods of teaching and can include a deep understanding of different learners needs. General speaking, a foreign language teacher should aware of the content of teaching, how students learn and how to manage the learning process. Briggs and Sommefeldt (2002: 32) associate pedagogy, “with the skills teachers use to instruct or impart knowledge”, and acknowledge the challenge presented to teaching by “the technological revolution”.

Anyway, teaching approaches and methods have played a central role in the developmental of foreign language teaching and it is useful for students to become familiar with the major teaching approaches and methods.

## II. REVIEW OF THE MAIN TEACHING METHODS

### A. The Grammar-based Era

Grammar-based teaching methods dominated foreign language teaching from 1840s to 1940s, which were known as pre-scientific period. During this period, grammar-translation method and reading oriented methods were widely practiced to language teaching. The simple translation and free composition tests were popular though it is difficult to score objectively and unfair to students. What's more, there is no literature that offers neither a rationale nor statistical techniques applied for it or that tends to relate it to linguistic, psychology, or language testing theory.

The main features of the Grammar-Translation Method were including as following. It first analyzes in detailed the grammar rules, and then applies the knowledge of grammar to translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. In addition, reading and writing are the major focus, rather than the speaking and listening competences. And vocabulary selection is based only on the reading texts, words are taught through bilingual word lists, dictionary study, and rote memorization. Besides, sentence is regarded as the basic unit of teaching and language practice. And Students are expected to attain high accuracy in translation, but not fluency. Grammar is taught deductively, that is, by study of grammar rules, which are then practiced through translation exercises. And native language is the medium of instruction.

### B. The Era of Alternative Approaches and Methods

The period from the 1970s to 1980s witnessed a major paradigm change in language teaching. Mainstream language teaching embraced the growing interest in communicative approaches to language learning. The communicative movement sought to move the focus from grammar to language as communication and make the classroom an environment for authentic communication. This period also was known as integrative period in which communicative language ability was measured.

Communicative competence is the core component. Chomsky's (1965) distinction of competence and performance as the former as an ideal speaker-listener's knowledge of the rules of the language and the latter is the actual use of language in concrete situations. Hymes's (1972) proposal of communicative competence is the ability of native speakers to use their language in ways that are not only linguistically accurate but also socially appropriate. Canale & Swain's (1980) framework of communicative competence mentioned that grammatical competence is the mastery of the language code such as morphology, lexis, syntax, semantics and phonology.

### C. Current Communicative Approaches

We enter in the integrative-sociolinguistic period now. And more and more pedagogical scholars think highly of

communicative language ability which included organizational, grammatical, textual, pragmatic, illocutionary and sociolinguistic competence. Cloze test, dictation and test communicatively have adopted since then.

Communicative Language Teaching marks the beginning of a major paradigm shift within language teaching in the twentieth century. Main characteristics of CLT: first, an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language; second, the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation; third, the provision of opportunities for learners to focus, not only on the language but also on the learning process itself; fourth, an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning; fifth, an attempt to link classroom language learning with language activation outside the classroom.

Although it can be successfully argued that the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach does enable learners to interact, it is possible that the activities undertaken in the classroom may be perceived by learners as being too abstract. Despite teachers' best efforts, classroom activities are not actually real-life, and it can be difficult to reproduce truly authentic language use and to facilitate genuine interaction. It may also be a difficult method to use in very large classes, where it may be easier to monitor and guide students by adopting a more didactic approach. Students with low levels of proficiency in the target language may find it difficult to participate in oral communicative activities and, if the exams used by an institution are grammar based, communicative fluency may not be appropriate. According to my experience, it is also worth considering that CLT may not be appropriate in EFL classrooms where English is rarely heard or used outside of the classroom.

Cooperative Learning refers to a systematic instructional method in which students work together in small groups to accomplish shared learning goals.

Cooperative language learning shares some characteristics with communicative language teaching. They both give high light to the interaction and communication between students and students and teachers, take teachers' role as guider, facilitator, and negotiator, and stress the autonomy and centrality of the students in classroom. They both consider healthy relationships with other classmates are more conducive to learning, and respect the integrity of learners, allowing for personal growth and responsibility, etc. The communicative function of language can also find its way in cooperative language learning.

Content-Based Instruction refers to an approach to second language acquisition that emphasizes the importance of content. Different to other approaches or methods, language learning is not centered around the language itself but on subject matters. Nevertheless, the approach aims to develop the students' language and academic skills. Content is central to and the main focus of the approach. In addition, the language acquisition process may be more efficient and the language learners more motivated. Therefore, it may be essential within the Content-Based approach to include

learners in the choice of topics and activities. Another characteristic of Content-Based Instruction is the use of communication. The principles of communicative Language Teaching may also be applied to the Content-Based approach.

However, a major difference between Communicative Language Teaching and Content-Based Instruction. Whereas Communicative Language Teaching is a language-driven approach, focusing on the language, Content-Based Instruction is content-driven and teachers may not be qualified enough.

#### *D. Comments*

From the review of the above language teaching methods and approaches development in three periods, we know that different methods were adopted to pay attention to different language teaching objectives, and the methods of the three periods experienced the shift from teaching language knowledge to teaching language skill and then to teaching communicative ability. The trend of changes from early grammar-based methods to present communicative approaches shows us that teaching methods pay more and more emphasis on the use of a language and students' involvement in class activity as time went by. While teacher become more and more as a facilitator rather than a controller in class.

### III. APPLICATION OF TEACHING METHODS TO CURRENT COLLEGE ENGLISH CLASS

I think that current communicative approaches are a main stream for foreign language teaching, especially for high level language learners. However, for most of time, it is the examination system decided that what method or approach should be adopted. For instance, when college students learn English, almost all of them are test-oriented, they learn English only for getting the certificate of CET-4 or CET-6, so in order to satisfy their needs, no matter the college English teachers or the training school teachers have to drill them in certain imitate exercises. Therefore, our teachers still adopt the behaviorism approaches in class, that is, teach the isolated grammatical rules or vocabulary which is destroying students' interesting towards English completely.

So I confirm that it is quite impossible to use tasked-based method for freshman and sophomore students, since a new era of learning English should be opened for them. Besides, rote memorizing and pattern drills are proved to be ineffective. What's more, teachers still adopt Audio-lingual Approach for listening and speaking purpose. For a large class with almost 200 students, it is still possible to divide them into small groups and do group work. And for high English level students such as English majors and post graduates, current communicative approaches are more appropriate and necessary, for they are more student-centered and could involve student' full engagement in classroom activity.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) refers to an approach based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in language teaching. It is the further development of CLT, which uses activities that the

learners have to do as opportunities for language learning. Tasks are distinct from other activities to the degree that they have a no instructional purpose and a measurable outcome. Tasks are a way of bringing the real world into the classroom. The purpose of task-based learning is to use learner's real-life needs and activities as learning experiences. With a given task (either a role-play or pair works), students are given a chance to use the knowledge they already have to express whatever they want to say. Through this process, students can learn different opinions from each other, and when each group is asked to report briefly to the whole class, everyone can compare their finding with others', or begin a survey. From above process, we can easily see that TBLT offers students more opportunities to practice English in class by emphasis on "learning by doing", and students could also get greater improvement in other fields besides just language. They are not linguistics in the traditional sense of just focusing on grammar or phonology, but by maintaining the centrality of functions like greeting people, expressing opinions, requesting information, etc., the course goals center on learners' pragmatic language competence which is easily arouse students' interesting.

Language teaching profession now has emerged into an era of understanding a vast number of language teaching contexts, varying goals and learner needs. All in all, no one method is the solution to the problems of the language learning. It would be better for us to take fruitful techniques from each method depending on our students' level, age and needs.

#### IV. PROSPECT

Nowadays in China, foreign languages, especially English, is not only a tool for people to exchange and communication, but more importantly it's an international competitive weapon. In recent years, China's higher education, especially in foreign language teaching has made considerable progress. Economic development and social progress of the personnel training set higher requirements. However, the prevalence of college English teaching in China, "time-consuming and more, the effect is lower", the time and costs, and unsuited to the problem of teaching effectiveness. After graduation the students cannot communicate properly in English. Therefore, to further improve the quality of college English teaching growing louder and louder, and deepen the reform of foreign language teaching has become essential.

Teaching beliefs and teaching content is still more focus on the teaching of contempt capacity-building. In many schools teaching a single student's reading ability has improved, but many students do not improve the listening and speaking ability, and social needs are quite different. The main reasons for these are: many schools engage in the examination of teaching, through the CET4 and graduation certificates linked to the students concerned about is the final score, rather than learn the true knowledge of English. The formation of teachers say class of knowledge, more talk about grammar, the students after class, mainly in the back the word, do exercise, neglecting the improvement of

English language skills which result in "deaf English", "dumb English" generation.

In the consideration under the conditions of teaching, teachers must actively change 'monologue-type' knowledge-based teaching methods to teach, to carry out task-based teaching methods to enable students to obtain communicative competence rather than just foreign language knowledge or language ability namely, linguistic competence. In the task-based teaching, teachers will be the real material into the learning environment, as much as possible to provide students with a large number of rich and wide-ranging information. The activities and tasks involved in the process, through the communicative and purposeful interactions have mastered the language and learn communication; do not cling to a single, conservative teaching methods, and explore teaching seminars, case teaching, reflective teaching, research teaching and "virtual teaching" and other diverse teaching methods for students to develop diverse cultural backgrounds as possible to provide support and guidance on learning strategies; the use of network technology support, focusing on communication and interaction with the students, so that students develop ways of thinking analysis of the use of foreign languages problems and problem-solving ability.

#### V. CONCLUSION

Although approaches and methods have played a central role in the developmental of foreign language teaching and it is useful for students to become familiar with the major teaching approaches and methods, the individual differences, reality and personal teaching experiences are more crucial for language teaching. That is to say, we students need to be able to use approaches and methods flexibly and creatively based on our own understandings and experiences. During this process, we should be encouraged to transform and adapt the methods we used to make our own. As we gain teaching experience and practical knowledge, we will begin to develop an individual approach or personal method of teaching, one that draws on an established approach or method but that also particularly exposes our individual beliefs, values, principles, and experiences. Therefore, there is much more to us to develop rather than just learn how to use different approaches and methods of teaching.

Besides, in nowadays, new applications of information technology have provided a variety of choices not only about what is taught and learned, but also about how it is taught and learned. During recent years, there has been much excitement about the new opportunities to use information technology to meet the varied needs of learners more effectively which indicates a new stream of language teaching. However, "good teaching may overcome a poor choice of technology, but technology will never save bad teaching". The different approaches and methods provide teachers an opportunity to explore and develop our own beliefs, principles, and practices is more important than to develop an initial practical knowledge base in teaching.

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