

History of English Language Teaching

The changing winds and shifting sands in the history of ELT

- The English language teaching tradition has been subject to tremendous change, especially throughout the twentieth century.
- Perhaps more than any other discipline, this tradition has been practiced, in various adaptations, in language classrooms all around the world for centuries.
- While the teaching of Maths or Physics, that is, the methodology of teaching Maths or Physics, has, to a greater or lesser extent, remained the same, this is hardly the case with English or language teaching in general.
- As will become evident in this short paper, there are some milestones in the development of this tradition, which we will briefly touch upon, in an attempt to reveal the importance of research in the selection and implementation of the optimal methods and techniques for language teaching and learning.

The Classical Method

- In the Western world back in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, foreign language learning was associated with the learning of Latin and Greek, both supposed to promote their speakers' intellectuality.
- At the time, it was of vital importance to focus on grammatical rules, syntactic structures, along with rote memorisation of vocabulary and translation of literary texts.
- There was no provision for the oral use of the languages under study; after all, both Latin and Greek were not being taught for oral communication but for the sake of their speakers' becoming "scholarly?" or creating an illusion of "erudition."

- Late in the nineteenth century, the Classical Method came to be known as the Grammar Translation Method, which offered very little beyond an insight into the grammatical rules attending the process of translating from the second to the native language.
- It is widely recognized that the Grammar Translation Method is still one of the most popular and favourite models of language teaching, which has been rather stalwart and impervious to educational reforms, remaining a standard and sine qua non methodology.
- With hindsight, we could say that its contribution to language learning has been lamentably limited, since it has shifted the focus from the real language to a “dissected body” of nouns, adjectives, and prepositions, doing nothing to enhance a student’s communicative ability in the foreign language.

Gouin and Berlitz – The Direct Method

- The last two decades of the nineteenth century ushered in a new age. In his *The Art of Learning and Studying Foreign Languages* (1880), Francois Gouin described his “harrowing” experiences of learning German, which helped him gain insights into the intricacies of language teaching and learning.
- Living in Hamburg for one year, he attempted to master the German language by dint of memorising a German grammar book and a list of the 248 irregular German verbs, instead of conversing with the natives. Exulting in the security that the grounding in German grammar offered him, he hastened to go to the University to test his knowledge.
- To no avail. He could not understand a word! After his failure, he decided to memorise the German roots, but with no success. He went so far as to memorise books, translate Goethe and Schiller, and learn by heart 30,000 words in a dictionary, only to meet with failure.

- Upon returning to France, Gouin discovered that his three-year-old nephew had managed to become a chatterbox of French – a fact that made him think that the child held the secret to learning a language.
- Thus, he began observing his nephew and came to the conclusion (arrived at by another researcher a century before him!) that language learning is a matter of transforming perceptions into conceptions and then using language to represent these conceptions.
- Equipped with this knowledge, he devised a teaching method premised upon these insights. It was against this background that the Series Method was created, which taught learners directly a “series” of connected sentences that are easy to understand. For instance,

I stretch out my arm. I take hold of the handle. I turn the handle. I open the door. I pull the door.

- Nevertheless, this approach to language learning was short-lived and, only a generation later, gave place to the Direct Method, posited by Charles Berlitz.
- The basic tenet of Berlitz’s method was that second language learning is similar to first language learning.
- In this light, there should be lots of oral interaction, spontaneous use of the language, no translation, and little if any analysis of grammatical rules and syntactic structures.
- In short, the principles of the Direct Method were as follows:

The Audio-lingual Method

- The outbreak of World War II heightened the need for Americans to become orally proficient in the languages of their allies and enemies alike.
- To this end, bits and pieces of the Direct Method were appropriated in order to form and support this new method, the “Army Method,” which came to be known in the 1950s as the Audiolingual Method.
- The Audio-lingual Method was based on linguistic and psychological theory and one of its main premises was the scientific descriptive analysis of a wide assortment of languages.
- On the other hand, conditioning and habit-formation models of learning put forward by behaviouristic psychologists were married with the pattern practices of the Audio-lingual Method.
- The following points sum up the characteristics of the method:
 - Dependence on mimicry and memorisation of set phrases
 - Teaching structural patterns by means of repetitive drills (??Repetitio est mater studiorum??)
 - No grammatical explanation
 - Learning vocabulary in context
 - Use of tapes and visual aids
 - Focus on pronunciation
 - Immediate reinforcement of correct responses
- But its popularity waned after 1964, partly because of Wilga Rivers’s exposure of its shortcomings.
- It fell short of promoting communicative ability as it paid undue attention to memorization and drilling, while downgrading the role of context and world knowledge in language learning.

- After all, it was discovered that language was not acquired through a process of habit formation and errors were not necessarily bad or pernicious.

The reading method

- The reading method developed entirely for pragmatic reasons.
- Michael West, who taught in India, argued that for Indians, the ability to read fluently in English was more important than speaking in English.
- To this end, he developed the reading method.
- After studying the American High School scene, Coleman decided that the only practical way to teach a language was to concentrate on the reading skills.
- It is interesting to note here, that whereas West's ideas continue to find a place in our language policies (English as a library language), they were thrown out quite early in America, before the World War.
- The criticism of the reading method below sums up the reaction in America:
- It is very doubtful whether students of short courses in high schools were ever able to read ungraded material with ease and direct comprehension at the end of the course.
- As soon as they encountered ungraded material they were forced back into deciphering with the aid of a dictionary, and valuable training in the reading skill was wasted.
- As a justification for short language courses, the reading aim was thus spurious... the reading method for the most part produced students who were unable to comprehend and speak the language beyond the very simplest of exchanges.
- The Indian reaction, in West's centenary year was, however, different.

- For ELT in India today, however west work is appears to have three lessons which we would like to draw in three brief statements.
- First, that good ELT must risk allowing theory to be judged in ordinary classroom.
- Secondly, that curriculum renewal is a problem in education as a whole and not just language education and it therefore has to be based on neutral studies of the educational system in all its essentials.
- And lastly, that the four areas West singled out for deep study and analysis, namely, Indian multilingualism, reading and its teaching.
- Vocabulary studies and word teaching and materials design and development, ought to be focused as much today as they were by him in his day; in this centenary year of West's birth there is once again the need to address the priorities in English Language Teaching.
- The objective of the reading method was to make learners fluent readers.
- Comprehension and not reproduction was the aim.

Syllabus and methodology

- In a reading method class, the first few weeks were spend in oral work so that a strong bond between sound and print could be created to facilitate inner speech.
- Then the reading text was introduced. Oral work of some sort continued, for the teacher or learners would often read aloud from texts in the class.

Texts The reading texts were graded in terms of vocabulary. The texts were divided into two kinds.

The texts were taught and practiced through strategies such as inferring meaning from the context, anaphora, etc, and grammatical points were discussed.

Comprehension was checked mainly through questions and answers.

Here speed and overall comprehension was the aim. Learners read these texts at their own pace.

- As in the direct method, translation was not encouraged.
- The learner was encouraged to infer the meaning from contextual clues.

Features of the reading method

- The development of the reading method introduced some new features into the English language teaching field.
- The notion of vocabulary grading, which is even today the basis of graded readers produced by publishing companies.
- The creation in a systematic way of graded readers.
- The concept of extensive or 'rapid' reading in a foreign language.
- The idea that techniques to teach one skill of language (reading) could be developed comprehensively. Also, that such courses could be taught.

The bilingual method

- THE BILINGUAL METHOD proposed by C.J. Dodson tried to incorporate different aspects of the direct method and the grammar-translation method to evolve an effective second language teaching method.
- Dodson believes that, In some emergent countries, where a major world language is being taught as a second language to young children by the direct method...if this type of teaching were successful...
- The vernacular would disappear within a few generation.
- It is only possible to teach a second language by direct-method techniques at the expense of the first language and it is sheer hypocrisy to claim that the final aim of such teaching philosophies is bilingualism.
- So, in the bilingual method, the use of the mother tongue is allowed (but strictly controlled and limited to concept translation).

Syllabus and methodology

- The bilingual method is built around situations. All language skills are considered equally important and no skill is ‘postponed’ to a later time.
- Fluency in language skills is achieved in each situation. Mastering of skills is not seen as a long term, painful process.
- The focus is, in the early stages, on oral or conversational proficiency, and this is to be achieved in each situation, whatever its range.

The “Designer” Methods of the 1970s

- The Chomskyan revolution in linguistics drew the attention of linguists and language teachers to the “deep structure” of language, while psychologists took account of the affective and interpersonal nature of learning.
- As a result, new methods were proposed, which attempted to capitalize on the importance of psychological factors in language learning.
- David Nunan (1989: 97) referred to these methods as “designer” methods, on the grounds that they took a “one-size-fits-all” approach. Let us have a look at two of these “designer” methods.

Suggestopedia

- Suggestopedia promised great results if we use our brain power and inner capacities. Lozanov (1979) believed that we are capable of learning much more than we think.
- Drawing upon Soviet psychological research on yoga and extrasensory perception, he came up with a method for learning that used relaxation as a means of retaining new knowledge and material.
- It stands to reason that music played a pivotal role in his method. Lozanov and his followers tried to present vocabulary, readings, role-plays and

drama with classical music in the background and students sitting in comfortable seats. In this way, students became “suggestible.”

- Of course, suggestopedia offered valuable insights into the “super learning” powers of our brain but it was demolished on several fronts.
- For instance, what happens if our classrooms are bereft of such amenities as comfortable seats and Compact Disk players? Certainly, this method is insightful and constructive and can be practiced from time to time, without necessarily having to adhere to all its premises.
- A relaxed mind is an open mind and it can help a student to feel more confident and, in a sense, pliable.

The Silent Way

- The Silent Way rested on cognitive rather than affective arguments, and was characterized by a problem-solving approach to learning.
- Gattegno (1972) held that it is in learners’ best interests to develop independence and autonomy and cooperate with each other in solving language problems.
- The teacher is supposed to be silent – hence the name of the method – and must disabuse himself of the tendency to explain everything to them.
- The Silent Way came in for an onslaught of criticism.
- More specifically, it was considered very harsh, as the teacher was distant and, in general lines, the classroom environment was not conducive to learning.

Strategies-based instruction

- The work of O'Malley and Chamot (1990), and others before and after them, emphasised the importance of style awareness and strategy development in ensuring mastery of a foreign language.
- In this vein, many textbooks and entire syllabi offered guidelines on constructing strategy-building activities. Below there is an example of a list of the "Ten Commandments" for good language learning (taken from Brown, H. D. (2000: 137):

<u>Teacher's Version</u>	<u>Learner's Version</u>
Lower inhibitions	Fear not!
Encourage risk-taking	Dive in
Build self-confidence	Believe in yourself
Develop intrinsic motivation	Seize the day
Engage in cooperative learning	Love thy neighbour
Use right-brain processes	Get the BIG picture
Promote ambiguity tolerance	Cope with the chaos
Practice intuition	Go with your hunches
Process error feedback	Make mistakes work FOR you
Set personal goals	Set your own goals

- These suggestions cum injunctions are able to sensitise learners to the importance of attaining autonomy, that is, taking charge of their own learning, and not expecting the teacher to deliver everything to them.

Communicative Language Teaching

- The need for communication has been relentless, leading to the emergence of the Communicative Language Teaching.
- Having defined and redefined the construct of communicative competence; having explored the vast array of functions of language that learners are supposed to be able to accomplish; and having probed the nature of styles and nonverbal communication, teachers and researchers are now better equipped to teach (about) communication through actual communication, not merely theorising about it.
- At this juncture, we should say that Communicative Language Teaching is not a method;
- it is an approach, which transcends the boundaries of concrete methods and, concomitantly, techniques. It is a theoretical position about the nature of language and language learning and teaching.

Let us see the basic premises of this approach:

- Focus on all of the components of communicative competence, not only grammatical or linguistic competence. Engaging learners in the pragmatic, functional use of language for meaningful purposes.
- Viewing fluency and accuracy as complementary principles underpinning communicative techniques
- Using the language in unrehearsed contexts.

Conclusion

- From all the above we can see that the manageable stockpile of research of just a few decades ago has given place to a systematic storehouse of information.
- Researchers the world over are meeting, talking, comparing notes, and arriving at some explanations that give the lie to past explanations.
- As Brown (2000: ix) notes, “Our research miscarriages are fewer as we have collectively learned how to conceive the right questions”. Nothing is taken as gospel; nothing is thrown out of court without being put to the test.
- This “test” may always change its mechanics, but the fact remains that the changing winds and shifting sands of time and research are turning the desert into a longed-for oasis.