Evolution of Approaches and Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages

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Abstract

Foreign language teaching is a complex process, in addition to involving the main subjects of teaching -students and teachers- as well as the teaching and learning activities generated between them, it also includes an extremely complex element: language. Since it encompasses aspects of complexity, human knowledge about it necessarily depends on the level and general methods of understanding the world. The question of the nature of language is essential for foreign language teaching, as it directly influences the principles, objectives, and design of teaching. Language teaching methods have evolved, from traditional approaches to communicative methods. In this study, we briefly present some of the main methods and approaches to language teaching so that we can understand better their nature and to adopt a panoramic and scientific perspective on our teaching.

Keywords: foreign language teaching, principles, objectives, design of teaching, methods

1. Introduction

Throughout the history of foreign language teaching, teachers have attempted to construct a foreign language teaching process through a series of methodological principles that establish the objectives, content, and procedures of language lessons. As a result, many approaches and methods have emerged that plan language teaching in practice. This development can be summarized in three main stages [1]. The structuralist stage was characterized by an emphasis on grammatical rules and sentence structure, reflected in methods such as the grammar translation and audio-lingual methods. Subsequently, the cognitive and communicative stages emerged, in which attention shifted to the actual use of language and the cognitive processes of students, promoting approaches such as the natural approach and the communicative approach. In the post-method era, the limitations of following a single method were abandoned, promoting instead a flexible adaptation of teaching strategies according to the specific needs of students and the educational context. This methodological evolution is not linear, because methodological trends overlap over time, and entirely different methodological trends coexist in the same period. In other words, the development of methods takes place within a specific historical, sociocultural, and sociolinguistic context and more or less reflects the positions and expectations of teachers and students.

2. Concept of the Terms "Approach" and "Method"

To begin, the definition of the term "method" must be clarified. In the linguistic sense and in foreign language teaching, the term "method" refers to the systematic and organized approaches followed to teaching a language. "Method" is the level at which theory is put into practice and where decisions are made about the specific skills taught, the content taught, and the order in which this content is presented. Anthony [2] distinguishes three key levels within a method: approach, method, and technique. Among them, approach refers to a series of conceptions about the nature of language, learning and teaching, and occupies the highest level of the three. Method is a general and systematic plan for language teaching, formulated from the selected approach, and is located at an intermediate level within the teaching process. It guides teachers' actions and provides a framework for decision-making in the classroom. The approach is axiomatic in nature, while the method is procedural. Technique, on the other hand, corresponds to a series of specific activities and resources applied in the classroom, which are implementational in nature. These activities must be consistent with the method and approach.

A method is a specific teaching design or system based on a specific theory of language and language learning. The method specifies the content, the roles of teachers and students, and the teaching procedures and techniques. Based on Anthony's model, Richards and Rodgers expanded and systematized it into three layers: approach, design, and procedure. Approach refers to linguistic theories, learning, and objective. Design includes components such as design, content selection, types of activities, teacher and student roles, and teaching materials. Procedure encompasses sequences of activities, forms of interaction, and feedback. Different methods can be developed from

an approach, since it is the level at which assumptions about language and language learning are specified. In other words, the selection of the method influences the outcome of the teaching process. Therefore, choosing the right method for teaching a foreign language is a crucial consideration for teachers. However, in the classroom and over time, teachers can integrate elements of various methods to create a more eclectic and personalized approach to language teaching, depending on students' needs and classroom circumstances.

3. Evolution of Approaches and Methods in Teaching Foreign Languages

3.1 Traditional Method

The traditional method, also known as the grammar-translation method, began to be developed and used primarily from the 19th century onwards. As its name suggests, it focuses on grammatical explanation and vocabulary learning, using translation as the main teaching medium and aiming to develop students' reading and translation skills, as well as to pass written exams. Its classroom teaching is completely teacher-centered, and the activity is unidirectional, with the teacher instilling knowledge in the students, naturally becoming the absolute authority in the classroom.

The traditional method neglects both listening comprehension and speaking. It does not encourage interaction between students and the teacher, nor between the students themselves. It does not consider the needs of the student: the why and the purpose of studying [3]. However, this method continues to be used in classrooms in China to varying degrees, especially in primary and secondary school, although its use is declining as communicative approaches are gradually being adopted in language teaching.

3.2 Direct Method

Until the end of the 19th century, against the backdrop of rapid industrial development in Europe, international trade and the movement of people experienced rapid growth, but the language barrier between countries became a direct obstacle to exchange. As a result, the language teaching method based on grammar and translation no longer met the needs, and reform in language teaching became indispensable. The direct method is the product of this reform, which contrasts with the traditional method in both theory and practice. This method holds the theory that foreign language learning should be similar to language acquisition the first a language by children. It focuses on the direct connection between language and the surrounding environment and promotes the use of inductive approaches to derive linguistic rules. It provides learners with direct listening and speaking training through extensive repetition and simulation, thereby improving their practical foreign language skills, especially in listening and speaking.

However, due to its absolute rejection of the use of the mother tongue and the lack of clarity in grammatical explanation, students may find it difficult to understand and master grammatical knowledge and some more abstract meanings. The direct method requires that the teacher's fluency in the language reach the level of a native speaker and requires a teaching model in small groups with high intensity, which is why it is limited to its use in some places, such as Berlitz schools. After a period of popularity, its influence has gradually decreased. Despite this, the direct method has revealed the problems that existed, thus to channel research and pave the way for foreign language teaching.

3.3 Audiolingual Method

The audiolingual method emerged in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s, especially during World War II, when there was an urgent need to quickly teach foreign languages to the military. It was the first approach to language teaching based on a theoretical conception of language grounded in structuralism and a learning theory derived from behaviorism. It also incorporated contributions from contrastive analysis and techniques specific to the audiolingual method.

The type of activities used in this method is usually dialogues, which present contextualized structures in communicative situations elaborated in a structural manner. These are repeated, simulated, and memorized, practicing with the large number of activities through drills or controlled repetition exercises. These exercises can be divided into two groups: meaningless and meaningful[4]. Meaningless exercises focus on grammatical form and pronunciation. Within this category, three types are identified:

Substitution: where an element within the structure is changed (e.g., I like music > I like people).

Mutation: involves an internal change in the construction (e.g., the red house > the red houses).

Transformation: where the grammatical structure is modified (e.g., knows how to speak German > does not know how to speak German).

On the other hand, meaningful exercises seek to relate linguistic content to semantic comprehension. These include lexical implication (e.g., her father eats a lot > her father is fat), lexical combination, and other exercises based on synonyms and antonyms. These allow students to develop a certain level of communicative competence, albeit within a fairly controlled framework.

This method is suitable for training grammar, sentence patterns, or pronunciation in the basic stage, where students practice them through intensive and repeated exercises. However, this model is so mechanical that passive memorization of sentence patterns lacks flexibility and creativity, and can therefore be limited in the development of practical communicative skills. Therefore, it is often used with other, more open-ended teaching methods.

3.4 Situational Method

The situational method emerged in the 1930s in the United Kingdom as a product of the evolution of the oral approach. According to Sánchez Pérez [5], one of the reasons that contributed to the development of the situational method was the fact that France and England were reluctant to simply accept the audio-oral method. This method is based on linguistic structuralism, considering language as a system composed of grammar and sentence structure. Like the audiolingual method, it emphasizes the training of listening and speaking skills before developing reading and writing skills, focusing on improving language accuracy through repeated practice of basic sentence patterns.

Teachers enable students to learn and use language in specific situations by constructing real-life or simulated situations, making language use more natural and realistic. These situations use visual and physical cues to help students understand the meaning of language. The situational method laid the foundation for later language teaching methods, such as the communicative approach. In modern English teaching, this method is still considered an important teaching method, especially in speaking and listening skills, particularly in primary and secondary school classrooms.

3.5 Audiovisual Method

The audiovisual method which emerged in France in the 1950s and 1960s, is a teaching method that focuses on language learning through audiovisual materials. It emerged as an evolution of direct methods and as a response to the need for more effective and modern teaching methods for language learning. This method was based on learning theories from behavioral and cognitive psychology, emphasizing the use of the ears, eyes, brain, and other sensory organs to perceive language materials as a whole.

The audiovisual media are educational to the extent that they influence what individuals learn and how they learn [6]. They highlight, for example, their influence on their knowledge and understanding and on their relationship with knowledge. Actions are needed that promote the development of skills for accessing and using digital tools and products, as well as the inclusion of visual languages and forms of expression, whether still or moving images, so that they allow students to interpret and rework the information at their disposal [7].

3.6 Natural Approach

The natural approach emerged in response to the perceived limitations of more traditional language teaching methods and began to be adopted in some schools and educational programs as an alternative to older methods, such as the grammar-translation method. It has some similarities with the direct method in terms of its teaching objectives and principles. It emphasizes listening comprehension, or comprehensible input, as Krashen [8] indicated, and language acquisition naturally, similar to that used in learning one's native language.

Learning takes place in a natural environment and immersive in the target language. The characteristic of this approach is that students are exposed to language that is relevant and meaningful to them. This can include conversations and practical contexts. Furthermore, real-life situations are used to teach the language. with progressive development, which helps them relate the new language to their previous experiences and knowledge. However, this approach depends heavily on the teacher's language skills and teaching techniques, and since it focuses on natural language use, traditional assessment (such as testing) may not assess students' true language competence.

3.7 Nociofunctional Approach

The nociofunctional approach began to develop in the early 1970s. Instead of teaching the rules, structures, and forms of language, the nociofunctional approach emphasizes the development of communicative competence. In other words, within the nociofunctional approach, texts become more authentic, activities more real, classes more interactive, and learning is more productive. This nociofunctional approach was the starting point of the communicative approach, which we focus on in the present work. Wilkins [9] analyzes the elements underlying

the communicative use of language and proposes two categories: the notional category and the functional category. The first includes semantic-grammatical components, for example, tense, order, frequency, or quantity. The second category includes pragmatic components and is related to the speaker's communicative intentions to resolve real-life tasks, for example, booking tickets, writing letters, negotiating, asking for favors, introducing oneself, complaining, etc.

3.8 Communicative Approach

In the 1970s, significant criticisms of methods based on the structuralist approach began to emerge. These criticisms focused on the rejection of both linguistic structuralism and psychological behaviorism, which were considered insufficient to explain the complexity of the language acquisition process. In this context, a dimension of language that had been ignored or underestimated by previous approaches began to be recognized: its functional and communicative dimension. Therefore, with the growing advance of sociolinguistics and psycholinguistics, as well as the formation of independent disciplines in applied linguistics and language acquisition research, the communicative method emerged, which mainly develops from the situational method and continues to set the trends in the development of foreign language teaching today.

This approach emphasizes that language learning should focus on meaning making and communication needs in real-life contexts, highlighting the essence of language as a tool for social communication. The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses, and the fundamental units of language are not just grammatical and structural elements but also the categories of functional and communicative meaning as they manifest in discourse.

3.9 Task- Based Approach

The communicative method has given rise to several approaches and methods that share its emphasis on communication and the practical use of language, such as the task-based approach (also called the communicative approach through tasks or teaching through tasks) that emerged in the 1990s. Estaire and Zanón [10] conclude that teaching through tasks is the point of arrival of four evolutions: i) evolution of the curriculum design; ii) evolution of the concept of communicative competence; iii) evolution of communicative methodology ; iv) research on learning mechanisms of a foreign language in the classroom.

Based on the critical structural scheme, the scheme of the ideological function and the teaching model of the 3P program: presentation, practice, production [11]. Its theoretical basis is mainly the theory of teaching the law of communication, as well as the theory of second language acquisition. The objective of this approach is the completion of the task itself, and this is what determines the learning content. The task-based approach is the proposal of a language learning program whose units consist of language use activities, and not in syntactic structures or notions and functions. They require students to perform language processing during the completion process and reflect real-world language usage situations as much as possible, thereby enhancing the practicality and authenticity of language habits.

A robust communication theory experiment conducted by Prabhu in Bangalore, South India, proposed a range of views on content learning design in various communicative classroom teaching tasks, enabling students to learn through tasks. He defined a task as an activity that enables students to think about and draw conclusions from the vast amount of information they provide. This activity enables students to regulate their thinking process. He divided activities into four types: rule-based activities, form-based activities, core activities, and meaning-based activities. Meaning-based activities are the most important activities in task-based teaching because these activities enable students to subconsciously internalize the language system in meaningful learning activities [12].

The Bangalore experiment is the prototype of a task-based teaching method. First, in the selection of teaching content, the experiment abandons the traditional structural framework and adopts a program structure composed of tasks to provide students with classroom communication tasks. Prabhu believes that his framework explains the question of what to do in the classroom rather than what part to learn. He identified three types of tasks: information gap, reasoning gap, and opinion gap, which made communication activities have an obvious purpose and attracted students' attention to complete the task. The tasks here are of basic characteristics such as meaning first, related to students' lives and social problems that need to be solved. Grammar teaching uses tasks to enable students to understand the rules of the language by completing tasks.

Later, Breen and Candlin [13] improved Prabhu's early theory from the perspective of curriculum design and proposed the process schema theory in the process of criticizing the comprehensive schema. They give course designers a more difficult task, which is to provide students with optional activities and tasks in teaching.

4. Post-Method Pedagogy

In the 1990s, the foreign language teaching community engaged in extensive reflection on the concept of method, which had long been considered the central pillar of language teaching and teacher training. However, problems exposed in actual teaching effects and teacher development have led to this concept being heavily challenged. Researchers have gradually realized that there is no "optimal" teaching method waiting to be discovered. On the one hand, the mechanical separation of teaching theory and practice often does more harm than good, making it difficult for teachers to effectively reflect and adjust in actual teaching. On the other hand, if teacher training is separated from the teaching environment and only imparts a certain framework of teaching methods, it is very likely that teachers lack practical coping skills.

At the same time, the diversification of learning motivation and learning needs, as well as the continuous changes in teaching situations and teaching models, also pose challenges to traditional teaching methods. In response to this change, scholars have called for more flexible and effective teaching strategies [14], as well as more practical and adaptive paths to teacher professional development.

In this context, post-method pedagogy gradually emerged as a critical teaching concept systematically proposed by applied linguist Kumaravadivelu in 1994, becoming a representative theory in this field. Kumaravadivelu advocates that we should abandon our reliance on the universal teaching method and It emphasizes that teachers must develop their own teaching theory and practical strategies based on specific teaching situations. The core of this teaching philosophy is no longer the choice and implementation of methods, but rather the autonomy of teachers and students.

From the students' perspective, the post-method teaching method emphasizes triple autonomy [15]: (1) academic autonomy: students can manage learning themselves; (2) social autonomy: the willingness and ability to collaborate and interact as members of the learning community; (3) liberatory autonomy: the ability to think critically and realize personal potential. As for teachers, the post-method concept advocates that they no longer passively implement systems of methods formulated by others, but as professional people with reflective capacity, actively construct and adjust theoretical and practical structures that fit their own teaching situation. Later, Kumaravadivelu [16] proposed three principles of post-method teaching methods:

(1)Particularity emphasizes that teaching must be rooted in a specific social and cultural context. (2) Practicality argues that teachers' experience and practice are key to teaching design. (3) Possibilities reflect the critical dimension of teaching and encourage teachers to pay attention to the social change function of education.

Language pedagogy should respond to the needs of specific teachers and students, pursuing clear objectives within a defined institutional and sociocultural environment. The postmethod does not deny the value of the "method", but advocates building a new teaching paradigm with "autonomy, criticality, and contextualization" as its core. This theory changes the relationship between teachers and teaching methods and presents higher requirements for personalization, reflection, and social responsibility in teaching practice. It remains one of the important theoretical frameworks in the field of language teaching.

5. Conclusions

With the progress of society and the development of human cognition, the environment and people's needs for learning foreign languages today have changed greatly, and a single teaching method can no longer meet these developments and changes. The focus of foreign language teaching has shifted from how to teach to how to learn, and teaching methods have gone from singularity to diversification and eclecticism. While each method responds to different historical contexts, social needs, and learning theories, they all share a common goal: to improve the quality of teaching and facilitate more effective learning adapted to the student. In this sense, methodological evolution should not be understood as a simple succession of fads, but as a constant search for more effective strategies that respond to the real challenges of the classroom and the comprehensive development of the learner. Therefore, selecting the appropriate teaching method is one of the basic points that every teacher must consider, since the result of the teaching process largely depends on the choice of method.

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