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Inglés

**EVOLUCIÓN DE LA DIDÁCTICA DE LAS LENGUAS.
TENDENCIAS ACTUALES DE LA DIDÁCTICA DEL INGLÉS
LENGUA EXTRAJERA.
LOS ENFOQUES COMUNICATIVOS.**

Topic 1

Topic 1 Index

0. Introduction.
1. Development Of Language Teaching.
 - 1.1. Ancient Times.
 - 1.2. Early Stages.
 - 1.3. The Grammar-Translation Method.
 - 1.4. Language Teaching Innovations in the 19Th Century: The Reform Movement.
 - 1.5. The Direct Method.
2. Current Trends in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language.
 - 2.1. Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching.
 - 2.2. Audiolingualism.
 - 2.3. Total Physical Response.
 - 2.4. The Silent Way.
 - 2.5. Community Language Learning.
 - 2.6. The Natural Approach.
 - 2.7. Suggestopedia.
3. The Communicative Approaches.
 - 3.1. The Beginnings of Communicative Language Teaching.
 - 3.2. Communicative Language Teaching Principles.
 - 3.3. Activities and Materials for Communicative Language Teaching.
4. Conclusion.
5. Bibliography.

0. Introduction

Notes

This unit aims to provide a detailed account of the evolution of language teaching from its origins to the current trends in the teaching of a foreign language.

In order to do so, the different sections in the unit will enable us to know about the different methods, approaches and language acquisition theories on the teaching of English as a foreign language in various periods, paying special attention to the communicative approaches present nowadays.

1. Development of Language Teaching

Notes

1.1 Ancient Times

Throughout history foreign language learning has always been an important issue. Today, English is the most widely studied foreign language but, for many years Latin was the dominant language for education, religion, commerce and government.

It was in India, around the 5th century B.C. that the early states of language were written down as a set of rules. In early Greece we find that the main aim in learning a foreign language was to prepare young people intellectually in order to take leading roles in the activities of the state and society. In Rome, they considered the teaching of oratory and rhetoric important, giving special attention to the development of character. Rome were taught Greek by teacher-slaves. The normal methodology followed the classical order – lectio, disputatio – were texts were read and then discussed.

Language study and, therefore, language teaching was promoted in subsequent centuries through the fields of philosophy, logic, rhetoric, sociology, and religion. This was basically in order to study and understand the general principles upon which all languages are based and in doing so, teach them better. Some of these methodological and theoretical aspects, principles, and ideas are still used in modern linguistics nowadays.

1.2 Early Stages

In the Middle Ages Latin was the most important language, usually used as a second language. It was the dominant language of education, government, and commerce. It was taught in the monastic schools through rote learning of grammatical rules and translation. It was important because it gave access to the works by classical writers. By the end of the Middle Ages, vernacular languages displaced Latin, although it maintained certain importance since its grammar and rhetoric became the main model for foreign language study and it was to be studied as mental gymnastics and as the basis for higher education.

The teaching of modern languages began in England at the end of the Middle Ages when English replaced French as the first language and French became a second language that had to be learnt. The first manual for the teaching of French was written in 1396. It was a collection of everyday dialogues and was the first of a number of similar manuals that appeared during the 15th and 16th centuries.

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To the Tudors, English was the language of the nation. French was seen as an accomplishment necessary for people with ambition towards culture, and Latin remained the mark of a properly educated person. Going to school meant learning Latin grammar (neither French nor English had a proper grammar yet).

In the absence of grammatical descriptions of the language, early language teaching material relied mainly on texts and the dialogue forms. This was called the catechist technique whereby texts had to be learnt by heart and questions were used as prompts to the memory.

Double-manuals, aimed to teach English to French-speakers and vice versa, started to appear at the end of the 15th century. The first of these manuals was a short book of dialogues and other texts prepared by William Caxton. It was severely practical in its aims and contains no linguistic information about either French or English.

There were other signs of a growing interest in learning English in the early 16th century such as its inclusion in polyglot dictionaries and phrasebooks.

The final example of early handbook for the teaching of English to foreigners was a manual discovered by Alston Called "A very profitable book to learn the Manner of Reading, Writing and Speaking in English and Spanish". It was a double-manual but both languages had been translated from different earlier editions, the Spanish from Flemish and the English probably from Latin.

The first textbooks solely designed to teach English as a foreign language didn't appear until the late 16th century.

The next stage in the development of English language teaching was determined by major events in the mainstream of late 16th century religious politics.

Throughout the 17th century the teaching of modern languages remained a small-scale enterprise, usually with a private tutor or in small classes. The main concern of schools was the teaching of Latin and Greek and until the early 18th century the classical curriculum was dominant and unchallenged. When young children reached school age all they learnt were Latin grammar rules and definitions.

However, there were occasional attempts to promote alternative approaches to education. Montaigne and Roger Ascham in the 16th century and Comenius and John Locke in the 17th century made specific proposals for curriculum reform and for changes in the way of teaching Latin but, since Latin (and Greek) had for so long been regarded as the classical and most ideal form of language, it was normal that the ideas about the role of language study in the curriculum reflected the long-established status of Latin. It was said to develop intellectual abilities and the study of Latin grammar became an end in itself.

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When “modern” languages began to enter the curriculum of European schools in the 18th century, they were taught using the same procedures as those used for teaching Latin.

Textbooks consisted of statements of abstract grammar rules, lists of vocabulary, and sentences for translation. Oral practice was limited to students reading aloud the sentences they had translated. These sentences had no relation to the language of real communication since they were constructed to illustrate the grammatical system of the language.

By the 19th century this approach based on the study of Latin had become the standard way of studying foreign languages in schools. A textbook in this century consisted of lessons organized around grammar points. This approach became known as the Grammar-Translation Method.

1.3 The Grammar-Translation Method

It was first known in the United States as the Prusian Method. Its leading exponents were J. Seidenstücker, Karl Plötz, H.S. Ollendorf, and J. Meidinger. The principal characteristics of the Grammar-Translation Method were these:

- The goal of foreign language study is to learn a language in order to read its literature or to benefit from the mental discipline and intellectual development that result from foreign language study. Grammar Translation is a way of studying a language that approaches the language first through detailed analysis of its grammar rules, followed by application of this knowledge to the task of translating sentences and texts into and out of the target language. Language learning consists of little more than memorizing rules and facts in order to understand and manipulate the morphology and syntax of the foreign language.
- Reading and writing are the major focus; little or no attention is paid to speaking or listening.
- Vocabulary selection is based on the reading texts used and words are taught through bilingual word lists, dictionary study, and memorization. In a typical Grammar-Translation text, the grammar rules are presented, a list of vocabulary items are presented with their translation equivalents and translation exercises are prescribed.
- The sentence is the basic unit of teaching and language practice. Much of the lesson is devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language, and it is this focus on the sentence that is a distinctive feature of the method.

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- Accuracy is emphasized. Students are expected to attain high standards in translation.
- Grammar is taught deductively – that is, by presentation and study of grammar rules, which are then practiced through translation exercises.
- The student's native language is the medium of instruction. It is used to explain new items and to enable comparisons to be made between the foreign language and the student's native language.

This method dominated European and foreign language teaching from the 1840s to the 1940s.

In the mid- and late 19th century, opposition to the Grammar-Translation Method gradually developed in several European countries. This Reform Movement, as it was referred to, laid the foundations for the development of new ways of teaching languages and raised controversies that have continued to the present day.

1.4 Language Teaching Innovations In The 19Th Century: The Reform Movement

Towards the mid 19th century, several factors contributed to a questioning and rejection of the Grammar-Translation Method. The increasing opportunities for communication among Europeans created a demand for oral proficiency in foreign languages so language teaching specialists turned their attention to the way modern languages were being taught.

In many parts of Europe new approaches to language teaching were developed by language teaching specialists.

C. Marcel (1793-1896) referred to child language learning as a model for language teaching, emphasized the importance of meaning in learning, proposed reading as the main skill, and tried to locate language teaching within a broader educational framework.

T. Prendergast (1806-1886) observed that children use contextual and situational cues to interpret utterances and that they use memorized phrases and "routines" in speaking. He proposed the first "structural syllabus", advocating that learners be taught the most basic structural patterns occurring in the language.

F. Gouin (1831-1896) developed an approach to teaching a foreign language based on his observations of children's use of language. He believed that language learning was facilitated through using language to accomplish events consisting of a sequence of related actions. His method used situations and themes as ways of organizing and presenting oral language. Gouin's views later became part of such approaches and methods as Situational Language Teaching and Total Physical Response.

Notes

Educators recognized the need for speaking proficiency rather than reading comprehension, grammar, or literary appreciation. But the ideas and methods of Marcel, Prendergast, Gouin and other innovators were developed outside the context of established circles of education and hence lacked the means for wider dissemination, acceptance and implementation.

At the end of the 19th century teachers and linguists began to write about the need for new approaches to language teaching, and through their pamphlets, books, speeches, and articles, the foundation for more widespread pedagogical reforms was laid. This effort became known as the Reform Movement in language teaching.

Marcel, Prendergast, and Gouin's ideas failed to receive widespread support or attention but, from the 1880s, Henry Sweet, W. Viëtor, and Paul Passy began to provide the intellectual leadership needed to give reformist ideas greater credibility and acceptance.

Linguists emphasized that speech, rather than the written word, was the primary form of language. Therefore, the International Phonetic Association was founded in 1886, and its International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) was designed to enable the sounds of any language to be accurately transcribed. One of the earliest goals of the association was to improve the teaching of modern languages. It advocated:

- The study of spoken language.
- Phonetic training in order to establish good pronunciation habits.
- The use of conversation texts and dialogues to introduce conversational phrases and idioms.
- An inductive approach to the teaching of grammar.
- Teaching new meanings through establishing associations within the target language rather than with the mother tongue.

Henry Sweet (1845-1912), in his book "The Practical Study of Languages", set four principles for the development of teaching methods:

1. Careful selection of what is to be taught.
2. Imposing limits on what is to be taught.
3. Arranging what is to be taught in terms of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing.
4. Grading materials from simple to complex.

W. Viëtor (1850-1918) argued that training in phonetics would enable teachers to pronounce the language accurately. Speech patterns, rather than grammar, were the fundamental elements of language. In 1882 he published his views in "Language Teaching Must Start Afresh", in which he strongly criticized the inadequacies of Grammar-Translation and stressed the value of training teachers in the new science of phonetics.

Notes

Viëtor, Sweet, and other reformers in the late 19th century believed that:

- The spoken language is primary and this should be reflected in an oral based methodology.
- The findings of phonetics should be applied to teaching and to teacher training.
- Learners should hear the language first, before seeing it in written form.
- Words should be presented in sentences, and sentences should be practiced in meaningful contexts.
- The rules of grammar should be taught only after the students have practiced the grammar points in context – that is, grammar should be taught inductively.
- Translation should be avoided, although the mother tongue could be used in order to explain new words or to check comprehension.

These principles reflect the beginnings of the discipline of applied linguistics. But parallel to the ideas put forward by members of the Reform Movement was an interest in developing principles for language teaching out of naturalistic principles in language learning, such as are seen in first language acquisition. This led to what came to be known as the Direct Method.

1.5 The Direct Method

Among those who tried to apply natural principles to language classes in the 19th century was L. Sauveur (1826-1907), who used intensive oral interaction in the target language, employing questions as a way of presenting and eliciting language.

Sauveur and others believers in the Natural Method argued that a foreign language could be taught without translation or the use of the learner's mother tongue if meaning was conveyed directly through demonstration and action.

The Direct Method, which became widely known in the United States through its use by Sauveur and M. Berlitz, stood for the following principles and procedures:

- Classroom instruction was conducted exclusively in the target language.
- Only everyday vocabulary and sentences were taught.
- Oral communication skills were built up in a carefully graded progression organized around question-and-answer exchanges between teachers and students in small and intensive classes.
- Grammar was taught inductively.
- New teaching points were introduced orally.

Notes

- Concrete vocabulary was taught through demonstration, objects, and pictures; abstract vocabulary was taught by association of ideas.
- Both speech and listening comprehension were taught.
- Correct pronunciation and grammar were emphasized.

The Direct Method was quite successful in private language schools but difficult to implement in public secondary school education. By the 1920s, use of this method in non-commercial schools in Europe had consequently declined. The British applied linguist Henry Sweet recognized its limitations. It offered innovations at the level of teaching procedures but lacked a thorough methodological basis.

In the 1920s and 1930s applied linguist systematized the principles proposed before by the Reform Movement and so laid the foundation for what developed into the British approach to teaching English as a foreign language. Subsequent developments led to Audiolingualism in United States and The Oral Approach or Situational Language Teaching in Britain.

2. Current Trends In The Teaching Of English As A Foreign Language

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2.1 Oral approach and situational language teaching

The Oral Approach or Situational Language Teaching was developed by British applied linguists from the 1930s to the 1960s. Its impact has been long lasting and it has shaped the design of many EFL/ESL textbooks and courses.

In the 1920s and 1930s Harold Palmer and A.S. Hornby, two of the most prominent figures in British 20th century language teaching, attempted to develop a more scientific foundation for an oral approach to teaching English than was evidenced in the Direct Method. The result was a systematic study of the principles and procedures that could be applied to the selection and organization of the content of a language course.

One of the first aspects to receive attention was the role of vocabulary. There was a general consensus among language teaching specialists, such as Palmer, that vocabulary was one of the most important aspects of foreign language learning. This led to the development of principles of vocabulary control, which were to have a major practical impact on the teaching of English in the following decades. Harold Palmer, Michael West, and other specialists produced a guide of the English vocabulary needed for teaching English as a foreign language, "The Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection", based on frequency as well as other criteria.

Together with the interest in developing rational principles for vocabulary selection was a focus on the grammatical content of a language course. Palmer had emphasized the problems of grammar for the foreign learner so much of his work was directed toward developing classroom procedures suited to teaching basic grammatical patterns through an oral approach. However, his view of grammar was very different from the abstract model of grammar seen in the Grammar-Translation Method. Palmer viewed grammar as the underlying sentence patterns of the spoken language.

With the development of systematic approaches to the lexical and grammatical content of a language course and with the efforts of such specialists as Palmer, West, and Hornby in using these resources as part of a comprehensive methodological framework for the teaching of English as a foreign language, the foundations for the British approach in TEFL were firmly established.

Notes

The main characteristics of the approach were:

- Language teaching begins with the spoken language. Material is taught orally before it is presented in written form.
- The target language is the language of the classroom.
- New language points are introduced and practiced situationally.
- Vocabulary selection procedures are followed to ensure that an essential general service vocabulary is covered.
- Items of grammar are graded following the principle that simple forms should be taught before complex ones.
- Reading and writing are introduced once a sufficient lexical and grammatical basis is established.

The third principle became a key feature of the approach in the 60s, and it was then that the term situational was used increasingly in referring to the Oral Approach.

Situational Language Teaching adopts an inductive approach to the teaching of grammar. The meaning of words or structures is not to be given through explanation in either the mother tongue or the target language but is to be induced from the way the form is used in a situation.

The objectives of the Situational Language Teaching are to teach a practical command of the four basic skills of language. The skills are approached through structure. Accuracy in both pronunciation and grammar is regarded as crucial, and errors are to be avoided at all costs. Control of basic structures and sentence patterns is fundamental to reading and writing skills, and this is achieved through speech work.

Situational Language Teaching employs a situational approach to presenting new sentence patterns and a drill-based manner of practicing them. The practice techniques employed generally consist of guided repetition and substitution activities, including chorus repetition, dictation, drills, and controlled oral-based reading and writing tasks. Sometimes other oral-practice techniques are used, such as pair practice and group work. Classroom procedures vary according to the level of the class, but procedures at any level aim to move from controlled to freer practice of structures and from oral use of sentence patterns to their automatic use in speech, reading, and writing.

Notes

2.2 Audiolingualism

The appearance of the Audiolingual Method resulted from the increased attention given to foreign language teaching in the United States toward the end of the 1950s. Language teaching specialists set about developing a method that was applicable to conditions in U.S. colleges and university classrooms. Audiolingualism claimed to have transformed language teaching from an art to a science, which would enable learners to achieve mastery of a foreign language effectively and efficiently. It was widely adopted for teaching foreign languages in North American colleges and universities. It provided the methodological foundation for materials for the teaching of foreign languages at college and university level in the United States and Canada.

The more central principles of Audiolingualism are the following:

- Foreign language learning is basically a process of mechanical habit formation. Good habits are formed by giving correct responses rather than by making mistakes. By memorizing dialogues and performing pattern drills the chances of producing mistakes are minimized. Language is verbal behavior – that is, the automatic production and comprehension of utterances – and can be learned by inducing the students to do likewise.
- Language skills are learned more effectively if the items to be learned in the target language are presented in spoken form before they are seen in written form. Oral training is needed to provide the foundation for the development of language skills.
- Analogy provides a better foundation for language learning than analysis. Analogy involves the processes of generalization and discrimination. Explanations of rules are therefore not given until students have practiced a pattern in a variety of contexts and are thought to have acquired a perception of the analogies involved. Drills can enable learners to form correct analogies. Hence the approach to the teaching of grammar is essentially inductive rather than deductive.
- The meanings that the words of a language have for the native speaker can be learned only in a linguistic and cultural context and not in isolation. Teaching a language thus involves teaching aspects of the cultural system of the people who speak the language.

Audiolingualists demanded a complete reorientation of the foreign language curriculum. They advocated a return to speech-based instruction with the primary objective of oral proficiency, and dismissed the study of grammar or literature as the goal of foreign language teaching.

Notes

Brooks distinguished between short-range and long-range objectives of an audiolingual program. The former objective include training in listening comprehension, accurate pronunciation, recognition of speech symbols as graphic signs on the printed page, and ability to reproduce these symbols in writing. The latter objectives “must be language as the native speaker uses it... There must be some knowledge of a second language as it is possessed by a true bilingualist” (Brooks, 1964).

Oral proficiency is equated with accurate pronunciation and grammar and the ability to respond quickly and accurately in speech situations. The teaching of listening comprehension, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary are all related to development of oral fluency. Reading and writing skills may be taught, but they are dependent upon prior oral skills.

Audiolingualism is a linguistic, or structure-based, approach to language teaching. The language skills are taught in the order of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Dialogues and drills form the basis of audiolingual classroom practices and are used for repetition and memorization. Correct pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation are emphasized. After a dialogue has been presented and memorized, specific grammatical patterns in the dialogue are selected and become the focus of various kinds of drill and pattern-practice exercises.

The focus of instruction is on immediate and accurate speech; there is little provision for grammatical explanation or talking about the language. As far as possible, the target language is used as the medium of instruction and translation or use of the native tongue is discouraged. Classes of ten or less students are considered optimal.

Audiolingualism reached its period of most widespread use in the 1960s.

2.3 Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response is a language method built around the coordination of speech and action. It attempts to teach language through physical activity. It was developed by James Asher and draws on several traditions such as developmental psychology, learning theory, and humanistic pedagogy, as well as on language teaching procedures proposed by Harold and Dorothy Palmer in 1925.

Asher stated that “most of the grammatical structure of the target language and hundreds of vocabulary items can be learned from the skillful use of the imperative by the instructor” (Asher, 1977). He viewed the verb, particularly the verb in the imperative, as the central linguistic motif around which language use and learning are organized.

Notes

Asher also referred to the fact that language can be internalized as wholes or chunks, rather than as single lexical items.

The general objectives of Total Physical Response are to teach oral proficiency at a beginning level. Comprehension is a means to an end, and the ultimate aim is to teach basic speaking skills. Specific instructional objectives are not elaborated, for these will depend on the particular needs of the learners. Whatever goals are set, they must be attainable through the use of action-based drills in the imperative form.

Total Physical Response requires initial attention to meaning rather than to the form of items. Grammar is taught inductively. Grammatical features and vocabulary items are selected according to the situations in which they can be used in the classroom and the ease with which they can be learned.

Imperative drills are the major classroom activity in Total Physical Response. They are used to elicit physical actions and activity on the part of the learners. Conversational dialogues are delayed until after about 120 hours of instruction. Other class activities include role plays, centered on everyday situations, and slide presentations, used to provide a visual center for teacher narration followed by commands and questions to students. Reading and writing activities may also be employed to further consolidate structures and vocabulary, and as follow-ups to oral imperative drills.

Total Physical Response typically deals with only the very beginning stages of learning. Asher himself stressed that it should be used in association with other methods and techniques.

2.4 The Silent Way

The Silent Way is a method of language teaching devised by Caleb Gattegno. It is based on the premise that the teacher should be silent as much as possible in the classroom and the learner should be encouraged to produce as much language as possible.

The Silent Way takes a structural approach to the organization of language to be taught. Language is seen as groups of sounds arbitrarily associated with specific meaning and organized into sentences or strings of meaningful units by grammar rules. Language is taught through artificial situations and lessons follow a sequence based on grammatical complexity. Gattegno sees vocabulary as a central dimension of language learning and its choice as crucial.

Silence is considered the best vehicle for learning, because silence students concentrate on the task to be accomplished and the potential means to its accomplishment. Silence, as avoidance of repetition, is an aid to alertness, concentration, and mental organization.

Notes

The general objective of the Silent Way is to give beginning level students oral and aural facility in basic elements of the target language. The general goal set for language learning is near-native fluency in the target language, and correct pronunciation and mastery of the prosodic elements of the target language are emphasized.

The Silent Way adopts a basically structural syllabus, with lessons planned around grammatical items and related vocabulary. Typically, the imperative is the initial structure introduced. Vocabulary is selected according to the degree to which it can be manipulated within a given structure and according to its productivity within the classroom setting.

Learning tasks and activities in the Silent Way have the function of encouraging and shaping student oral response without direct oral instruction from the teacher. Charts, rods, and other aids may be used to elicit learner responses. Responses to commands, questions, and visual cues constitute the basis for classroom activities.

The innovations in Gattegno's method derive primarily from the manner in which classroom activities are organized, the indirect role the teacher is required to assume, the responsibility placed upon learners, and the materials used to elicit and practice language.

2.5 Community Language Learning

Community Language Learning is the name of a method developed by Charles A. Curran and his associates. It draws on the counseling metaphor to redefine the roles of the teacher (the counselor) and learners (the clients) in the language classroom.

Community Language Learning interactions are of two distinct and fundamental kinds: interactions between learners, which are unpredictable in content but said to involve exchanges of affect, and interactions between learners and knowers, which are initially dependent.

Community Language Learning is most often used in the teaching of oral proficiency. It does not use a conventional language syllabus. Instead, the course progression is topic based, with learners nominating things they wish to talk about and messages they wish to communicate to other learners. Specific grammatical points, lexical patterns, and generalizations will sometimes be isolated by the teacher for more detailed study and analysis.

This method combines innovative learning tasks and activities with conventional ones. They include: translation, group work, recording, transcription, analysis, reflection and observation, listening, and free conversation.

Notes

Critics of Community Language Learning question the appropriateness of the counseling metaphor, while supporters of the method emphasize the positive benefits of a method that centers on the learner.

2.6 The Natural Approach

In 1977, Tracy Terrell outlined a proposal for a new philosophy of language teaching which he called the Natural Approach. It was an attempt to develop a language teaching proposal that incorporated the “naturalistic” principles researchers had identified in studies of second language acquisition. There is an emphasis on exposure, or input, rather than practice.

Stephen Krashen and Terrell see communication as the primary function of language. Language is viewed as a vehicle for communicating meaning and messages.

The Natural Approach is for beginners and is designed to help them become intermediates. Since it is offered as a general set of principles applicable to a wide variety of situations, specific objectives depend upon learner needs and the skill and level being taught.

From the beginning, emphasis is on presenting comprehensible input in the target language. Learners are not required to say anything until they feel ready. Once they are ready to begin talking in the new language, the teacher provides comprehensible language and simple response opportunities. Techniques recommended by Krashen and Terrell are often borrowed from other methods and adapted to meet the requirements of Natural Approach theory. These include command-based activities, mime, gestures, and even situation-based practice of structures and patterns.

The greater claim to originality of this approach lies not in the techniques it employs but in their use in a method that emphasizes comprehensible and meaningful practice activities, rather than production of grammatically perfect utterances and sentences.

2.7 Suggestopedia

Suggestopedia is a method developed by the Bulgarian psychiatrist-educator Georgi Lozanov. It is a specific set of learning recommendations derived from Suggestology, which Lozanov describes as a “science... concerned with the systematic study of the nonrational and/or nonconscious influences” that human beings are constantly responding to”.

Notes

The most noticeable characteristics of Suggestopedia are the decoration, furniture, and arrangement of the classroom, the use of music, and the authoritative behavior of the teacher.

The emphasis on memorization of vocabulary pairs – a target language item and its native language translation – suggests a view of language in which lexis is central and in which lexical translation rather than contextualization is stressed.

Suggestopedia aims to deliver advance conversational proficiency quickly. It bases its learning claims on student mastery of lists of vocabulary pairs.

A Suggestopedia course lasts 30 days and consists of ten units of study. Classes are held four hours a day, six days a week. The central focus of each unit is a dialogue consisting of 1200 words or so, with an accompanying vocabulary list and grammatical commentary. The dialogues are graded by lexis and grammar.

There is a variety of activities including imitation, question and answer, and role play. The type of activities that are more original to Suggestopedia are the listening activities, which concern the text and text vocabulary of each unit.

Suggestopedia has probably received the most enthusiastic and the most critical response of any of the so-called new methods. It would be useful to try to identify and validate those techniques from Suggestopedia that appear effective and that harmonize with other successful techniques in the language teaching inventory.

3. The Communicative Approaches

Notes

3.1 The Beginnings of Communicative Language Teaching

The origins of Communicative Language Teaching are found in the changes in the British language teaching tradition from the late 1960s. It began with the criticisms that the American linguist Noam Chomsky had leveled at structural linguistic theory and at the Situational Language Teaching in his book "Syntactic Structures". Chomsky himself and some other British applied linguists saw the need to focus on language teaching on communicative proficiency rather than on mere mastery of structures.

The British linguist D.A. Wilkins proposed a functional or communicative definition of language that could serve as the basis for developing communicative syllabuses for language teaching. He attempted to demonstrate the systems of meanings that lay behind the communicative uses of language. He described two types of meanings: notional categories – concepts such as time, quantity, location, frequency – and categories of communicative function – requests, denials, complaints, and offers.

The Council of Europe, one of whose major areas of activity was education, incorporated Wilkins' analysis into a set of specifications for a first-level communicative language syllabus. This work of the Council of Europe together with the writings of Wilkins, Widowson, Brumfit, and other British applied linguists came to be known as the Communicative Approach or Communicative Language Teaching.

Since the mid 70s the scope of Communicative Language Teaching has expanded and both American and British proponents see it as an approach that aims to make communicative competence the goal of language teaching and to develop procedures for the teaching of the four language skills that acknowledge the interdependence of language and communication.

D. Hymes, in 1972, introduced the term "communicative competence" for the first time into linguistics in his article "On Communicative Competence". He defined this notion not only in terms of grammatical competence, but also in terms of the knowledge of the appropriateness of the message to the context of communication.

Notes

M. Canale and M. Swain's article "Theoretical Bases of Communicative Approaches to Second Language Teaching and Testing" established two main points:

- Communicative competence is understood as the underlying system of knowledge and skills required for communication.
- Communicative competence has four components: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discursive, and strategic.

Howatt, in his book "A History of English Language Teaching" differentiates two versions of the Communicative Approach:

- The weak version: it "stresses the importance of providing learners with opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes and, characteristically, attempts to integrate such activities into a wider program of language teaching. It could be described as 'learning to use' English." (Howatt, 1984)
- The strong version "advances the claim that language is acquired through communication, so that it is not merely a question of activation an existing but inert knowledge of the language, but of stimulating the development of the language system itself. It entails 'using English to learn it'". (Howatt, 1984)

Common to all the ways of interpretation that we can find on Communicative Language Teaching, we can say that it is a theory of language teaching that starts from a communicative model of language and language use, and that seeks to translate this into a design for an instructional system, for materials, for teacher and learner roles and behaviors, and for classroom activities and techniques.

3.2 Communicative Language Teaching Principles

Communicative Language Teaching has a rich theoretical bases. Some of the characteristics of this communicative view at the level of language theory are the following:

- Language is a system for the expression of meaning.
- The primary function of language is for interaction and communication.
- The structure of language reflects its functional and communicative uses.
- The primary units of language are not merely its grammatical and structural features, but categories of functional and communicative meaning as exemplified in discourse.

If we focus on a theory of learning rather than on a language theory, some elements can be discerned in some Communicative Language Teaching practices. They address the conditions needed to promote second language learning, rather than the processes of language acquisition. These are:

Notes

- Communication principle: activities that involve real communication promote learning
- Task principle: activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning.
- Meaningfulness principle: language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process.

3.3 Activities and Materials for Communicative Language Teaching

The range of exercise types and activities compatible with a communicative approach is unlimited, provided that such exercises enable learner to attain the communicative objective of the curriculum, engage learners in communication, and require the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction.

W. Littlewood (1981) distinguishes between “functional communication activities” and “social interaction activities” as the major activity types in Communicative Language Teaching.

- Functional communication activities include tasks such as learner comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences; working out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures, discovering missing features in a map or picture; one learner communicates behind a screen to another learner, giving instructions on how to draw a picture or shape, or how to complete a map; following directions; and solving problems from shared clues.
- Social interaction activities include conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations, skits, improvisations, and debates.

Regarding materials, a wide variety have been used to support communicative approaches to language teaching. Materials are seen as a way of influencing the quality of the classroom interaction and language use. They have the primary role of promoting communicative language use. The main kinds of material currently used in Communicative Language Teaching are:

- Text-based materials: there are numerous textbooks designed to direct and support Communicative Language Teaching. Some of them are written around a largely structural syllabus, with slight reformatting to justify their claims to be based on a communicative approach. Others look very different from previous language teaching texts, where we can find none of the usual dialogues, drills, or sentence patterns and instead use visual cues, taped cues, pictures, and sentence fragments to initiate conversation.

Notes

- Task-based materials: a variety of games, role plays, simulations, and task-based communication activities have been prepared to support Communicative Language Teaching classes. These typically are: exercise handbooks, cue cards, activity cards, pair-communication practice materials, and student-interaction practice booklets.
- Realia: many proponents of Communicative Language Teaching have advocated the use of “authentic”, “from-life” materials in the classroom. These might include language-based realia, such as signs, magazines, advertisements, and newspapers, or graphic and visual sources around which communicative activities can be built, such as maps, pictures, symbols, graphs, and charts.

4. Conclusion

Notes

On revising all these language teaching theories we can get a sense of the wide range of proposals made from the ancient times to the present, all with their weaknesses and strengths. We have gone through methods based only on translating sentences and learning grammar rules by heart to more natural and communicative approaches where communication is the base and the main element in order to learn a foreign language. We have also seen that whereas some centuries ago, the mother tongue was fundamental and widely used in the teaching of a foreign language, nowadays, it is simply not used in foreign language classes.

Still, we shall add that there is a constant preoccupation for teachers and linguists to find more efficient and effective new methods in the teaching of a foreign language and that we have to be very aware of the new theories and ideas that come to light in order to teach our students in the best possible way.

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