Methods of teaching foreign languages

There are many methods of teaching languages. Some have had their heyday and have fallen into relative obscurity; others are widely used now; still others have a small following, but contribute insights that may be absorbed into the generally accepted mix.

1. The grammar translation method

The grammar translation method instructs students in grammar, and provides vocabulary with direct translations to memorize. It was the predominant method in Europe in the 19th century. Most instructors now acknowledge that this method is ineffective by itself. It is used by many Latin teachers, allegedly because a dead language is usually only written. However, this method is ineffective for written languages too, and Latin only became dead after the grammar translation method was introduced. Up to the XVIII century, when Latin was spoken, it was not taught like this. Recent experiments in the University of Cadiz, in which Latin is taught as if it were a living language, have proved to be as effective with Latin as with any other language (All languages that are not dead are considered modern languages.)

At school, the teaching of grammar consists of a process of training in the rules of a language which must make it possible to all the students to correctly express their opinion, to understand the remarks which are addressed to them and to analyze the texts which they read. The objective is that by the time they leave college, the pupil controls the tools of the language which are the vocabulary, grammar and the orthography, to be able to read, understand and write texts in various contexts. The teaching of grammar examines the texts, and develops awareness that language constitutes a system which can be analyzed. This knowledge is acquired gradually, by traversing the facts of language and the syntactic mechanisms, going from simplest to the most complex. The exercises according to the program of the course must untiringly be practiced to allow the assimilation of the rules stated in the course. That supposes that the teacher corrects the exercises. The pupil can follow his progress in

practicing the language by comparing his results. Thus can he adapt the grammatical rules and control little by little the internal logic of the syntactic system. The grammatical analysis of sentences constitutes the objective of the teaching of grammar at the school. Its practice makes it possible to recognize a text as a coherent whole and conditions the training of a foreign language. Grammatical terminology serves this objective. Grammar makes it possible for each one to understand how the mother tongue functions, in order to give him the capacity to communicate its thought.

2. The direct method

The direct method, sometimes also called natural method, is a method that refrains from using the learners' native language and just uses the target language. It was established in Germany and France around 1900. The direct method operates on the idea that second language learning must be an imitation of first language learning, as this is the natural way humans learn any language - a child never relies on another language to learn its first language, and thus the mother tongue is not necessary to learn a foreign language. This method places great stress on correct pronunciation and the target language from outset. It advocates teaching of oral skills at the expense of every traditional aim of language teaching.

According to this method, printed language and text must be kept away from second language learner for as long as possible, just as a first language learner does not use printed word until he has good grasp of speech. Learning of writing and spelling should be delayed until after the printed word has been introduced, and grammar and translation should also be avoided because this would involve the application of the learner's first language. All above items must be avoided because they hinder the acquisition of a good oral proficiency.

3. The audio-lingual method

The audio-lingual method has students listen to or view tapes of language models acting in situations. Students practice with a variety of drills, and the instructor

emphasizes the use of the target language at all times. The audio-lingual method was used by the United States Army for "crash" instruction in foreign languages during World War II. Despite the documented success of these programs, audio-lingual methods are no longer common.

4. Communicative language teaching

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is an approach to the teaching of languages that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language. Despite a number of criticisms, it continues to be popular, particularly in Europe, where constructivist views on language learning and education in general dominate academic discourse.

5. Language immersion

Language immersion puts students in a situation where they must use a foreign language, whether or not they know it. This creates fluency, but not accuracy of usage. French-language immersion programs are common in Canada in the state school system as part of the drive towards bilingualism.

6. Minimalist/Methodist [Paul Rowe's minimalist/methodist approach]

This new approach is underpinned with Paul Nation's three actions of successful ESL teachers. Initially it was written specifically for unqualified, inexperienced people teaching in EFL situations. However, experienced language teachers are also responding positively to its simplicity. Language items are usually provided using flashcards. There is a focus on language-in-context and multi-functional practices.

7. Directed practice

Directed practice has students repeat phrases. This method is used by U.S. diplomatic courses. It can quickly provide a phrasebook-type knowledge of the language. Within

these limits, the student's usage is accurate and precise. However the student's choice of what to say is not flexible.

8. Learning by teaching (LdL)

Learning by teaching is a widespread method in Germany (Jean-Pol Martin). The students take the teacher's role and teach their peers. An important target is developing web-sensibility.

9. Other methods

The Pimsleur language learning system is based on the research of and model programs developed by American language teacher Paul Pimsleur. Over a dozen audio-tape programs now exist to teach various languages using the Pimsleur Method.

Several methodologies that emphasise understanding language in order to learn, rather than producing it, exist as varieties of the comprehension approach. These include Total Physical Response and the natural approach of Stephen Krashen and Tracy D. Terrell.

10. Silent Way

The Silent Way is a discovery learning approach, invented by Caleb Gattegno in the 50s. It is often considered to be one of the humanistic approaches. It is called The Silent Way because the teacher is usually silent, leaving room for the students to talk and explore the language. It is often associated with Cuisenaire rods and wall charts where words are colour-coded; each phoneme a different colour.

Learning strategies

Code switching

Code switching, that is, changing between languages at some point in a sentence or utterance, is a commonly used communication strategy among language learners and bilinguals. While traditional methods of formal instruction often discourage code switching, students, especially those placed in a language immersion situation, often use it. If viewed as a learning strategy, wherein the student uses the target language as much as possible but reverts to their native language for any element of an utterance that they are unable to produce in the target language, then it has the advantages that it encourages fluency development and motivation and a sense of accomplishment by enabling the student to discuss topics of interest to him or her early in the learning process -- before requisite vocabulary has been memorized. It is particularly effective for students whose native language is English, due to the high probability of a simple English word or short phrase being understood by the conversational partner.

Blended learning

Blended learning combines face-to-face teaching with distance education, frequently electronic, either computer-based or web-based. It has been a major growth point in the ELT (English Language Teaching) industry over the last ten years.

Some people, though, use the phrase 'Blended Learning' to refer to learning taking place while the focus is on other activities. For example, playing a card game that requires calling for cards may allow blended learning of numbers (1 to 10).

Private tutoring

Tutoring by a native speaker can be one of the most effective ways of learning. However, it requires a skilled, motivated native tutor, which can be a rare, expensive commodity. That tutor may draw on one or several of the above methods.

Language education in Europe

Foreign language education

1995 European Commission's White Paper "Teaching and learning – Towards the learning society", stated that "upon completing initial training, everyone should be proficient in two Community foreign languages". The Lisbon Summit of 2000 defined languages as one of the five key skills.

In fact, even in 1974, at least one foreign language was compulsory in all but two European countries (Ireland and the United Kingdom, apart from Scotland). By 1998 nearly all pupils in Europe studied at least one foreign language as part of their compulsory education, the only exception being the Republic of Ireland, where primary and secondary schoolchildren learn both Irish and English, but neither is considered a foreign language. Pupils in upper secondary education learn at least two foreign languages in Belgium's Flemish community, Denmark, Netherlands, Germany, Luxembourg, Finland, Sweden, Switzerland, Greece, Cyprus, Estonia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia and Slovakia.

On average in Europe, at the start of foreign language teaching, pupils have lessons for three to four hours a week. Compulsory lessons in a foreign language normally start at the end of primary school or the start of secondary school. In Luxembourg, Norway, Italy and Malta, however, the first foreign language starts at age six, and in Belgium's Flemish community at age 10. About half of the EU's primary school pupils learn a foreign language.

English is the language taught most often at lower secondary level in the EU. 93% of children there learn English. At upper secondary level, English is even more widely taught. French is taught at lower secondary level in all EU countries except Slovenia. A total of 33% of European Union pupils learn French at this level. At upper secondary level the figure drops slightly to 28%. German is taught in nearly all EU

countries. A total of 13% of pupils in the European Union learn German in lower secondary education, and 20% learn it at an upper secondary level.

Many Europeans learn foreign languages at a much faster rate than American students because their language education is more intensive and may start at a younger age.

Despite the high rate of foreign language teaching in schools, the number of adults claiming to speak a foreign language is generally lower than might be expected. This is particularly true of native English speakers: in 2004 a British survey showed that only one in 10 UK workers could speak a foreign language. Less than 5% could count to 20 in a second language, for example. 80% said they could work abroad anyway, because "everyone speaks English." In 2001, a European Commission survey found that 65.9% of people in the UK spoke only their native tongue.

Since the 1990s, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages has tried to standardize the learning of languages across Europe (one of the first results being UNIcert).

Bilingual education

In some countries, learners have lessons taken entirely in a foreign language: for example, more than half of European countries with a minority or regional language community use partial immersion to teach both the minority and the state language.

In the 1960s and 1970s, some central and eastern European countries created a system of bilingual schools for well-performing pupils. Subjects other than languages were taught in a foreign language. In the 1990s this system was opened to all pupils in general education, although some countries still make candidates sit an entrance exam. At the same time, Belgium's French community, France, the Netherlands, Austria and Finland also started bilingual schooling schemes. Germany meanwhile had established some bilingual schools in the late 1960s.
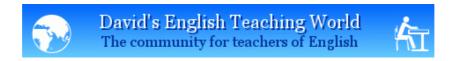
Language education in the United States

Most students start learning a foreign language in high school or late middle school. Students are sometimes required to take a certain amount (on average two years) of foreign language study in order to graduate; in some states or school systems, this is a requirement only of certain graduation plans (e.g. college preparatory).

The most popular language is Spanish, due to the large number of recent Spanish-speaking immigrants to the United States (see Spanish in the United States). Other popular languages are French, German, and Japanese. Latin used to be more common, but has fallen from favor somewhat. During the Cold War, the United States government pushed for Russian education, and some schools still maintain their Russian programs. Other languages recently gaining popularity are Chinese (especially Mandarin) and Arabic.

With the vast number of immigrants in the United stated today however, the fastest growing area of language education is ESL or ELL. In June 2000 Edward Bodnar helped pioneer the movement of faith based ESL classes through churches in Nashville, TN. This movement based wholly on the Let's Start Talking program that teaches conversational English using the Bible, started by Mark and Sherrylee Woodward. This program in Nashville has now helped over 3000 immigrants from over 30 countries learn to converse in English in Nashville alone.

Language education in Australia

Prior to European invasion and settlement, there were hundreds of Aboriginal languages, taught in a traditional way. The arrival of a substantial number of Irish in the first English convict ships meant that European Australia was never perfectly monolingual. When the goldrushes of the 1850s trebled the white population, it brought many more Welsh speakers, who had their own language newspapers through to the 1870s, but the absence of language education meant that these Celtic variations away from English never flourished.

Waves of European migration after World War II brought "community languages," sometimes with schools. However, from 1788 until modern times it was generally expected that immigrants would learn English and abandon their first language (Clyne, 1997). The wave of multicultural policies since the 1970s has softened aspects of these attitudes.

In 1982 a bipartisan committee of Australian parliamentarians was appointed and identified a number of guiding principles that would support a National Policy on Languages (NPL). Its trend was towards bilingualism in all Australians, for reasons of fairness, diversity and economics.

In the 1990s the Australian Languages and Literacy Policy (ALLP) was introduced, building on the NPL, with extra attention being given to the economic motivations of second language learning. A distinction became drawn between priority languages and community languages. The ten priority languages identified were Mandarin, French, German, Modern Greek, Indonesian, Japanese, Italian, Korean, Spanish and Aboriginal languages.

However, Australia's federal system meant that the NPL and ALLP direction was really an overall policy from above without much engagement from the states and territories. The NALSAS strategy united Australian Government policy with that of the states and territories. It focused on four targeted languages: Mandarin, Indonesian, Japanese and Korean. This would be integrated into studies of Society and Environment, English and Arts.

By 2000, the top ten languages enrolled in the final high school year were, in descending order: Japanese, French, German, Chinese, Indonesian, Italian, Greek, Vietnamese, Spanish and Arabic. In 2002, only about 10% of Year 12 included at least one Language Other Than English (LOTE) among their course choices.

Language study holidays

An increasing number of people are now combining holidays with language study in the native country. This enables the student to experience the target culture by meeting local people. Such a holiday often combines formal lessons, cultural excursions, leisure activities, and a homestay, perhaps with time to travel in the country afterwards. Language study holidays are popular across Europe due to the ease of transportation and to the small geographical distances. Many individuals travel to the UK alone to learn English.

With the increasing prevalence of international business transactions, it is now important to have multiple languages at one's disposal. This is also evident in businesses outsourcing their departments to Eastern Europe.

Language education on the internet

The internet has emerged as a powerful medium to teach and learn foreign languages. Websites that provide language education on the internet may be broadly classified under 2 categories:

Language Exchange websites

Language exchange facilitates language learning by placing users with complementary language skills in contact with each other. For instance, User A is a native Spanish speaker and wants to learn English] User B is a native English speaker and wants to learn Spanish. Language exchange websites essentially treat knowledge of a language as a commodity, and provide a market like environment for the commodity to be exchanged.

From the user's perspective, the effectiveness of such websites in learning a language from the start is very questionable. Attempts like "I want to learn Japanese" do not frequently elicit any positive reaction from seasoned users of the site.

There is also the view that these services provide a good tool to aid language learning at a language school, rather than act as alternatives to real world language schools. Users typically contact each other via chat or email.

In 2000 Edward Bodnar developed one of the first internet based English classes linking students with teachers in real time using Voip and video so that the student and teacher could see each other. This project helped pave the way for the future of education everywhere by proving that the student and teacher need not be at the same place at the same time in order for learning to occur. Soon students from all over the world will be learning from teachers in countries different from their own, making outsourcing of instruction the next big trend in education today.

In 2007 Second Life started to be used for foreign language tuition [1]. Both Second Life and real life language educators have begun to use the virtual world for language tuition. English (as a foreign language) has gained a presence through several schools, including the British Council, which has focused on the Teen Grid. Spain's language and cultural institute "Instituto Cervantes" has an island on Second Life. A list of educational projects (including some language schools) in Second Life can be found on the SimTeach site.

Portals that provide language content

There are a number of internet portals that offer language content, some in interactive form. Content typically includes phrases with translation in multiple languages, text to speech engines (TTS), learning activities such as quizzes or puzzles based on language concepts. While some of this content is free, a large fraction of the content on offer is available for a fee, especially where the content is tailored to the needs of language tests such as TOEFL, for the United States.

In general, language education on the internet provides a good supplement to real world language schooling. However, the commercial nature of the internet, including pop-up and occasionally irrelevant text or banner ads might be seen as a distraction from a good learning experience.

Common acronyms and abbreviations

CALL: Computer-assisted language learning

CLL: Community language learning

DELF: Diplôme d'études en langue française

L1: First language, mother tongue

L2: Second language (or any additional language)

LDL: Lernen durch Lehren (Learning by teaching)

SLA: Second language acquisition

TELL: Technology-enhanced language learning

TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language N.B. This article is about travel-teaching.

TEFLA: Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Adults

TPR: Total Physical Response

TPRS: Total Physical Response Storytelling

UNIcert: A European language education system of many universities based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

CLIL: Content and Language Integrated Learning

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