LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODS: A CRITIQUE

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Abstract

Language learning is a basic necessity for all humans since different people have the need to learn the grammars of languages other than theirs and acquire both grammatical and communicative competence. This imperativeness gives rise to language teaching where different methods are employed based on the different views or orientations on language teaching. Given the imperativeness of language learning, the need to formally device workable methods of teaching language becomes inevitable. In language teaching, the approach, the method and the technique are interrelated but the approach receives much more prominence because it is the approach that determines what method to be chosen and then, the actual activity or technique to be employed to enhance the teaching of language. This paper sets out to draw a critique on the methods of language teaching, touching on their various techniques and their different theoretical underpinnings as well as their weaknesses and strengths. The work also proffers useful suggestions as to which method should be more thoroughly emphasized in teaching language without an outright condemnation of the already existing methods. Rather, the work spells out how the available methods can be meaningfully employed in the classroom based on the different aspects of the target language under study.

Keywords:

1.1. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching according to Crystal (1971), “is as old as the study of language.” Central to this process was the emergence of the concept “method of language teaching” which may be regarded as the systematic set of teaching practices based on a particular theory of language. Throughout the 20th Century, according to Howatt (1984), the quest for better methods for the teaching of language preoccupied teachers and applied linguists. This means that language teaching is not an exercise that is done arbitrarily without an aim and a concise way of achieving the aim; different methods which are relevant to particular aspects of language teaching had to be adopted to enhance effective teaching of languages.

Given the interwoven nature of the concepts of method, approach and technique which are sometimes misused because of their interrelatedness, it is important to explain them in separate terms in this paper in order to facilitate a better understanding of the concepts for better application. Approach in language teaching refers to language teaching philosophies that can be interpreted and applied in a variety of ways in the classroom. In other words, the areas of emphasis that one chooses in teaching a language and the way he takes to implement this approach is what is called methods of language teaching. It is in this light that Howatt (1984) posits that method in language teaching refers to the fixed teaching systems with presented techniques and practices systematically arranged based on specific language theories. Before Howatt’s account,
Ubahakwe and Obi (1979) had defined method as “a recognized and systematic way of performing the task of language teaching – a process which is seen as a sequence of steps or techniques”. This explains the fact that method is distinctively different from “technique” and “approach” in the sense that while approach and technique are concerned with a chosen area of language teaching, and specific practices employed in the language teaching class respectively, method chiefly concerns itself with a systematically arranged concept based on language theories. The technique in language teaching refers to the particular or exact activity carried out or adopted in the classroom for the achievement of the aim of language teaching. This means that it is method that determines technique. For example, the audio-lingual method uses drilling technique where learners are thoroughly drilled in the correct pronunciation, intonation and structures used in real life situations. In this paper, we shall do a critical X-ray of a number of language teaching methods with a view to ascertaining their viability and effectiveness in language teaching and learning in the classroom.

2.1. Methods of language teaching

Language teaching methods have been characterized in a variety of ways. A more or less classical formulation suggests that language teaching method is that which links theory and practice. Theory statements could include theories of what language is and how language is learnt or more specifically, theories of second language (L2) acquisition (SLA). Such theories are linked to various design features of language teaching. These design features in turn are linked to actual teaching practices otherwise known as techniques used in the classrooms. Different language teaching methods have been devised at different periods by different scholars but many have failed to meet the classroom needs for effective language teaching. In this section, we shall discuss a number of language teaching methods in a critical manner.

3.1. Grammar – translation method

The grammar-translation method is an old method which was originally used to teach dead languages. This explains why it focuses mainly on the written form at the expense of the oral form. According to Larsen-Freeman (1986:4) ‘the method was used for the purpose of helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature’. This method was believed to have helped the mind in logical theory. It was also meant to enable students become more familiar with the grammar of their mother tongue (MT) as they get acquainted with the grammar of the target language (TL) and that this familiarity would help them speak and write their native language (Offorma, 2002:219). Offorma further explains that the teacher who uses this method employs such a technique as presentation of a list of words to be memorized by the learner and to translate sentences or texts from TL to MT. In this method, there is so much use of the mother tongue in the class while deemphasizing speech work. The primary skills being developed here are reading and writing. Little attention is paid to listening and speaking and almost none to pronunciation. This method does not really give attention to developing the ability to communicate in the TL.

Another aspect of this method worthy of note is that it is teacher dominated; the activities are teacher-centered. The effect of this kind of teaching method, as observed by Krashen (1981) in Brumfit (1991:128), is that ‘objective conscious learning of language rules and structures had little effect on the actual acquisition of true linguistic competence’. This implies that learners under this method would tend to be more of ‘grammarians’ than fluent communicators in the TL.

They will learn the language but cannot communicate in the TL. Grammar-translation method has two main goals; (1). To enable students read and translate literature written in TL. (2).To further students general intellectual development. In achieving these goals, the method dwells chiefly on translation as a very important tool with which the MT is normally translated and this facilitates the learning of the TL.

3.2. Techniques in grammar-translation method

Memorization is the chief technique employed in this method. Learners are confronted with the task of memorizing grammar rules and then practice the rules by carrying out grammar drills and translating sentences to and from the target language. More attention is paid to the sentences being translated than to their content, but at advanced
stages, students translate texts. It is expected that as the learners get acquainted with this, they will be able to gain mastery of the TL. In this method, errors are frowned at since the learners are expected at this level of their mastery of the TL to communicate without errors. The teacher at this point may assess the learners by giving them text to translate, sentences with errors to correct as well as exercises containing conjugation of verbs, diagramming and so on. On the whole, rote learning is the basic technique for learning the new or TL in this method. Even parts of speech (nouns, verbs, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections) are memorized. It is by so doing that the learner would be able to identify same in the TL. The question is ‘Do all languages have these in the same way?’

3.3. The theory underlying grammar-translation method

The basic theories underlying this method are empiricism and rationalism. While empiricism believes in experience as the source of all human knowledge, rationalism claims that reason, accruing from the human mind is the source of all human knowledge. The rational theory dictated that the body and mind were separate and the mind consisted of three parts; the will, emotions and intellect. It believes that the intellect could be sharpened enough to eventually control the will and emotions. The way to do this was through learning classical literature of the Greeks and Romans. Based on this, the rationalist believed that all languages were of the same structure and the universal laws of thought should inform every linguistic fact (Rivers, 1981). They therefore believed that every new language would have its structures the same with the already established universal categories. This perhaps suggests why Latin grammar was the yardstick for discussing any new language.


Grammar – translation method as earlier discussed dwells solely on the written language at the expense of spoken aspect. This means that listening and speaking as basic language skills are almost completely ignored by this method. Over dependence on translation and memorization of vocabulary lists with equivalents in the learner’s mother tongue decontextualizes information, and information is taught out of context, not related to real life (Brown, 2006).

It is also of paramount importance to note that, this method ends up teaching about the language instead of teaching the language. All efforts channeled towards memorization cannot ensure in-depth knowledge of the language, so as to help the learner cultivate a substantial communicative competence in the language. At best, the learner may just have descriptive knowledge of the language.

Another issue worthy of note in this method is the total blackout given to the area of communicative competence. Every normal human being first acquires speech in childhood and may or may not learn to write it later. This is because speech is primary and writing is secondary (Anasiodu, 2002:15). Only a dumb human being would boast of having knowledge of a language he can only write but cannot speak. Finally, the tasking nature of the method makes it tedious and boring.

This method, above all, does not afford students the opportunity to play active role in the classroom since very little attention is paid to communication which would have been a motivation to students in the class.

4.1. Audio –lingual method

This method is based on behaviourist theory and it professes that certain threats of living things, and in this case, humans could be trained through a system of reinforcement; correct use of threat would receive positive feedback while incorrect use of that threat would receive negative feedback. This method advised that learners be taught a language directly without using the learner's native language to explain new words or grammar in the target language. This method didn't focus on teaching vocabulary; rather, the teacher drilled students in the case of grammar. It believed that learning a language means acquiring habits. There is much practice of dialogues on everyday situation. In this method, a new language is heard and extensively drilled before putting it in written form. Even though the primacy of speaking is highly emphasized in this method as a medium of communication, writing and reading the language are not ignored. The audio-lingual method is a method of language teaching which emphasizes the teaching of listening and
speaking before reading and writing. It uses dialogue as the main form of language presentation, and drills as the main training technique. In this method, mother tongue is discouraged in the classroom. This method was developed in the United States of America during the Second World War when the US government commissioned American university teachers to develop a foreign language programme for military personnel.

4.2. Technique in audio-lingual method

The major technique used by this method is the drilling exercise where learners are intensively drilled in the correct pronunciation, intonation and structures of the TL in real life situations. Different kinds of drill exercise such as expansion drill, repetition drill and chain drill are employed in the classroom to enhance development of mastery in all the four basic language skills beginning with listening and speaking, for subsequent use as a basis for the teaching of reading and writing.

4.3. The theory underlying audio-lingual method

The theory underlying audio-lingual teaching method is behaviourism which emphasizes the fact that language is habit governed. This means that language learning can be likened to habit formation. This theory is empirical in nature and does not believe in any special internal human capacity for language learning. This theory therefore relies solely on people’s utterances and the context in which they are uttered. Error occurrence here is not tolerated and in case of its accidental occurrence, it cannot be reinforced to avoid a reoccurrence. Learners are therefore exposed only to the right responses.

4.4. Criticisms on the audio-lingual method

As earlier discussed, the audio-lingual language teaching method is anchored on behaviourism as its underlying theory and this presupposes action/activity. The so much drilling or practice in the TL actually encourages and enhances learners’ speaking competence but it lacks the capacity to plant an in-depth knowledge of the TL into the learner. This method does not really develop the learner’s grammatical competence which should have served as the foundation on which communicative competence would be built. The learner therefore gains the surface spoken knowledge of the language only.

Also, there is little or no grammatical explanations provided and grammar is taught inductively, therefore vocabulary is strictly limited and learned in context. This method is not a suitable one for all learners because of its nature; it can only solve the need of beginners. Another issue is that the method is teacher dominated and learners have little control over their learning such that even the materials for learning are teacher oriented. This method also permits the use of MT by the teacher but discourages it among and by students. Much as emphasis is shifted from MT to learning the TL, there is a tendency to focus on manipulation of the MT and to disregard content and meaning.

5.1. The Direct Method

This method emanated in opposition to the grammar translation method which emphasizes memorization of prescriptive rules and dwells so much on reading and writing of grammar to the detriment of listening and speaking skills. The direct method argued that no foreign language would ever be learnt simply by committing to memorizing long lists of disconnected words. The emphasis of direct method was on correct pronunciation of the TL right from the beginning. This method did not encourage writing at the early stage of learning rather, spoken words and abundant practice of complete sentences encouraged. In order to present the sound system of the language to the learner before the written form, this method suggested the use of phonic script instead of conversational orthography of the language.

Unlike grammar translation method, translation in the direct method class was forbidden so that the learner would quickly forget the use of MT and think in the TL as soon as possible to avoid interference. This method completely debunked the use of translation and considered it harmful and detrimental to the language learning process. It further agreed that language can be learnt without the formal rules of grammar, so grammar should rather be taught by inductive method.

5.2. Techniques in the direct method

The prominent techniques used in the classroom where this method operated were loud reading, questions and answers exercises, self correction by students, conversation, gap
filling exercises, dictation, map drawing and labeling. These techniques were used to enhance effective learning of the pronunciation of the TL which was to be worked on, right from the beginning of language learning. In order for learners to use language in real contexts, lessons in this method employed conversational drills. With those techniques, sentences were studied or learnt in full rather than memorizing word lists. This enhanced the acquisition of the vocabulary of the TL in a more natural way. This method believed that the main purpose of language is for communication. Therefore, students should be made to ask and answer questions as only this would enable them to think in the language they are learning.

5.3. The theory underlying the Direct Method

The direct method, like the audio-lingual method can be said to anchor on the theory of behaviourism. This theory does not believe in any internal human capacity or endowment for language acquisition. It simply believes that language acquisition is a matter of cultivating a habit; it can be learnt and developed like any other habit. To this end, learners are exposed straight to all the aspects of TL in order to facilitate learners’ communicative competence. In this regard, certain principles including reading in the TL and speaking using objects in the classroom to enable learners to get the meaning are employed. The use of demonstration and illustration is established by the teacher creating a common and direct link between the structures in the TL and their meaning.

5.4. Criticisms on the direct method

This method aims at enabling the learner to learn and acquire the L2 as he did the L1. This aim seems unrealistic because the time and the opportunity the learner has to learn the TL are too limited as compared to his L1 acquisition. Whereas the learner had all the time right from birth to his L1, he is faced with limited number of minutes on the school timetable to learn the L2, the rate of learning cannot be the same. In his criticism of this method, Dodson (1967) equates one year’s contact with the foreign language in the classroom to a week’s contact in the natural L1 environment. Corroborating Dodson, Widdowson (1990) observes that classroom learners of L2 cannot acquire the foreign language as they did the mother tongue. There is no enough time. In a similar vein, Hammerly (1991) agrees with Widdowson pointing out in his analysis of the errors of Canadian French Immersion students that after 7,000 of such input, they were still not competent speakers of the L2.

Another weakness of this method is that the mechanical repetitive drills which were outwardly done may not impart the thoughts of the learners. Also, this kind of method requires a very competent teacher of the TL who is richly endowed with the fluency and proficiency of the TL otherwise teaching cannot be effectively done using this method.


Cognitive code method is geared towards debunking the observational methods that dwell so much on what can be outwardly seen and done. It places its emphasis on the mind of man, where the ability to think lies since man is a thinking being. This method sees the need to fully involve the human mind in the language learning process. It argues that speech is part of the thought life of the speaker.

6.2. Technique in the cognitive code method

This method chiefly uses immersion technique to achieve its major goal which is to equip the learner with the ability to read and understand structures in the TL. In this method, language is said to have been learnt if the learner is able to read and understand and meaningfully interpret a given passage in the language. When the learner is able to read and understand what he has read and gives correct interpretation to it, learning is said to have taken place in the TL. The key thing here is the passage in the TL which the learner is confronted with. He has to read and understand and process all the information on it. At this point therefore, questions are provided about the passage which the learner is expected to answer in order to prove his understanding of the passage.

6.3. The theory underlying the cognitive mode method

Since this method emphasizes the involvement of the mind in language learning recognizing the fact that the thought life of the speaker is instrumental in his language learning task, it therefore anchors on the theory of mentalism. This theory explains that human beings acquire or learn because of the internal
endowment inherent in them to do so. The proponents of this theory argue that language is not an activity that can be acquired or learnt outwardly like any habit because of its complex nature. The acquisition and the learning of a language can only be possible through an internal mechanism/device. This according to them explains why language can only be acquired, learnt and used by humans. Based on this theory, this method regards language as a rule-governed activity which is carried out gradually following a stage –by – stage process until the learner masters it.

This theory however opens up to two main levels of language teaching – the mental and the physical levels. On the mental level, there are rules underlying the use of the language which must be learnt, and this is called the deep structure, while the physical level has the utterance that the learner makes which is called the surface structure. It is the deep structure that signifies that the learner has learnt and internalized the knowledge of the language being learnt-competence. Surface structure on the other hand signifies the learner’s ability to use the language in speech-performance. In further explanation of this, Anasiudu (2000:19) posits that “the term cognitive theory is often used for this philosophical position entitled mentalism. The former seems more popular as an educational theory”. In any case, whatever the nomenclature, the idea is that the mind plays a significant role in language learning.

6.4. Criticisms on the cognitive method

This method encompasses the two levels of mental and physical interplay in language learning and it uses a workable technique of immersion which keeps the learner actively involved in problem solving, thereby enhancing his intellectual capability. Even so, one is left to wonder if this method is really beneficial to the beginner at all. Since it emphasizes reading and writing, the beginner who cannot yet read is out of it completely. In a similar vein, the so much emphasis placed on reading and writing causes a total deviation from or neglect of the listening and speaking skills which the learner needs to be taught, thereby rendering learning at this point incomplete.

This method like other methods afore-discussed has left out the issue of motivation which a learner needs to be able to learn the new language. Hemay see the need to learn the language from his mind quite well, the environment may also require that he learns it but without motivation he may not give himself to it.

7.1. Communicative method

The focus of this method is to enable the learner to communicate effectively and appropriately in the various situations he would likely find himself in. Here, emphasis is shifted from grammatical competence to communicative competence. Grammatical competence should therefore serve as a foundation on which communicative competence is built. This method emphasizes role playing because it is here that the learner uses language and develops communicative competence. Children are allowed to use language in order to acquire communicative skills.

Communicative method also stresses a means of organizing a language syllabus. Emphasis is placed on breaking down the global concept of language into units of analysis in terms of communicative situations in which they are used. The method employs the four basic language skills and pays attention to registers and styles in terms of situation and participants. With the afore-mentioned activities, this method aims at developing autonomous language learners.

7.2. Techniques in the method

Communicative language teaching method uses almost any activity that engages learners in authentic communication. Functional communication activities in which communication is involved and social interaction activities such as conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays are also employed. In a bid to ensure communicative and social interaction activities, the teacher plays the role of facilitating communication in the classroom and he also acts as adviser and a guide. Students on the other hand act as communicators in the classroom. They actively engage themselves in making themselves understood and in understanding others. The use of MT can be employed, however, whenever possible, the use of the TL should be encouraged (Larsen- Freeman, D. 2000). According to Littlewood in Anasiudu(2000), the methodological framework of techniques in communicative methods can be diagrammatically represented thus:
Anasiudu (2002) emphasize isolated treatment of structural forms as a means of building grammatical competence in further explains that a sub category of the communicative activities are structural ones that the learner. He (the learner) learns the grammatical forms of the TL to enable him to produce acceptable sentences. It is clear in this method that the goal is simply effective communication, even though with inaccurate linguistic forms, communication can still be effected and in a similar manner, communication can still fail even when the structures are grammatical. This method makes room for motivation by providing for the activity of role play where the learner is given the opportunity to express himself.

7.3. The theory underlying communicative method

This method believes that a learner develops his communicative abilities right from inside- the mind. Every external influence only works out an enhancement of the internal process within. So, both the internal and the external processes come to play for language learning to take place. On the basis of the above therefore, this method is a product of mentalist theory. This theory focuses mainly on meaning which is the crux of communication. Because of the importance it attaches to meaning, errors are not frowned at, rather, they are seen as facilitators to learning and they guide the learner in taking corrections.

7.4. Criticisms on the communicative method

This method is very essential in language teaching because it is more liberal than all the other methods and it is the method that achieves the goal of communicative competence. It is also the only method that emphasizes the teaching of the four basic language skills –listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, the unfortunate thing about this method is that it cannot effectively take place in this part of the world. This means that the nature of facilities required for its effective implementation and the classroom situation where fewer students are expected to be in the class are grossly lacking, particularly in the Nigerian educational system. Another weakness of this method is that because of its emphasis on role play, children are kept in groups while the teacher goes round supervising. The absence of the teacher in a particular group at a time may give room for the perpetuation of an error. They may even revert to MT when they encounter a problem in the teacher’s absence. Also, this method requires reasonable time for any meaningful achievement to be made in a lesson. The little time allotted for lessons in our educational system is not enough to effectively administer a lesson using this method.

8.0. RECOMMENDATIONS

Given the complex nature of language and most especially, the complex nature of man who is to be taught a second language, and above all, the deficiencies each of the available methods has, it becomes difficult to pin down any one particular method of language teaching to be adopted by all language teachers everywhere. It is therefore pertinent to suggest that each of the methods could be made use of where and when applicable. For instance, when it comes to oral or spoken English lesson the applicable method should be employed and when it comes to teaching reading and writing, the most appropriate method can then be used.

Anasiudu (2002) expresses a similar view by suggesting a method known as “eclectic method” which suggests that all the methods are relevant and applicable depending on the aspect of language the teacher chooses to teach at a time. In his opinion, eclectic method is more flexible, this makes it more suitable when the right combination is determined by the purpose of the lesson and the practicability of the chosen method in the particular classroom for the lesson. In line with the above assertion, Ogunsiji and Olanrewaju (2010) stress that the best method teachers can conveniently use is however an integrated approach. According to them this method is an eclectic one and should be experimented by teachers as are appropriate for different skills. This can be explained to mean that by using eclectic method, the teacher is not restricted to only one method but many methods can be used at a particular time for the teaching of a
single topic. The teacher should allow the situation at any given time to determine the method or combination of methods to be used. The flexibility of the eclectic method allows the teacher to keep moving from one method to another so as to bring effective understanding.

It is therefore clear that there is no rigidity in the application of those teaching methods. The eclectic method which is also called an integrated approach is therefore very functional and is hereby recommended by the writer as the best method and approach for effective language teaching.

9.0. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In this paper, the researcher has done a critique on five language teaching methods-grammar translation, direct method, audio-lingual, cognitive code and communicative methods of language teaching to ascertain their strengths and weaknesses. In each case, the strengths and the weaknesses have been carefully drawn out so as to determine how far each of them can be effectively used in language teaching and the theory upon which it rests. This, the writer believes would help the language teacher to make the right choice of which method to employ for any particular aspect of language to be taught at a time.

In conclusion, the recommendations made are believed to be of immense help to the language teacher in making appropriate use of all the available methods without completely discarding any one of them for want of merit at a particular time. Language teachers are hereby advised to be mindful of what aspect of the TL they are going to teach and determine what method would be appropriate before choosing it in order to avoid misuse of the methods so as to obtain valid results in the language teaching task.

REFERENCES