

# THE HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF LANGUAGE TEACHING – A BRIEF STUDY

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**Abstract:**The article discusses the various methods in Language Teaching as language plays a pivotal role in this Globalised world. It discusses the historical origin of language teaching and the method which has to be followed in the classroom to improve the communicative skills of the students especially related to the Engineering scenario.

The language teaching has a historical background. The approaches and methods in language teaching that we are likely to discuss here require a brief understanding over the history of language teaching. About 60% of today's world population speak diverse languages. "From both a contemporary and historical perspective bilingualism or multilingualism is the norm rather than the exception" (Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers).

Throughout the history, alien language learning is always an important problem. Today English is the world's most widely learned language. Five hundred years ago Latin was the dominant language of Education, Commerce, Religion and Government in the West. In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, French, Italian and English acquired an importance owing to numerous political changes in Europe. Thus, Latin is gradually replaced by these languages in speaking and writing in particular.

With the status of Latin diminishing in its importance, English has taken its place. From the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries though Latin was the model for foreign language study when children joined various grammar schools for getting rigorous training in Latin grammar, English as a modern language has made a steady existence in most of the European countries. The main reason for this is that English is a blend of several elements of foreign languages like Latin, Greek, French, Scandinavian and Celtic. However, the influence of Latin has continued for many years leading to the evolution of different approaches and methods in language teaching.

The approach to the foreign language teaching is initially known as the Grammar Translation Method.

As a result we have various methods of grammar teaching such as:

- Grammar Translation Method
- The Reformative Method
- The Direct Method

Grammar Translation Method:

"Grammar Translation was the offspring of German scholarship, the object of which, according to it one of its less charitable critics, was to know everything about something rather than the thing itself" (W.H.D. Rouse).

Grammar Translation was infact first known in the United States as the Prussian Method. The main characteristics of the Grammar Translation Method are enumerated here under:

1. Grammar Translation is a way of studying a language through analysis of its grammar rules. The knowledge of grammar is applied in translating sentences and texts into and out of target language. "The first language is maintained as the reference system in the acquisition of the second language" (Stern – 1983: 455)
2. Under Grammar Translation method, reading and writing are the main focuses and speaking or listening is given a very little importance.
3. The selection of vocabulary is based mainly on reading the original text. To teach the meaning of the words, the bilingual method is adopted. In a grammar translation text, the grammar rules are presented and exemplified. A list of vocabulary items is

presented with their translation equivalents and translation exercises are prescribed.

4. The sentence is a basic unit and a fundamental requirement of teaching and language practice. Most of the lesson that is taught is devoted to translating sentences into and out of the target language. Thus the focus on the sentence is a distinctive characteristic of this method. Previous approaches to alien language study used grammar as an aid to the study of texts in a foreign language. But this was felt to be very difficult for the students in secondary schools. The focus of the sentence was thus an attempt to make language learning easier.
5. Emphasis is laid on accuracy. Students are to attain high standards in translation because a high priority is given to the standards to be maintained because it is a pre condition for the success in any formal written examination. (Howatt : 1984 – 132)
6. The deductive method is adopted in teaching grammar. By deductive method it means a rule is studied and presented and then an example is given. In most of the grammar translation texts a syllabus is followed for the sequencing of grammar in an organized and systematic way.
7. The mother tongue is the medium of instruction. It is used to explain new items and comparisons are made between the foreign language and the students native language.

The Grammar Translation method was predominantly adopted in language teaching from 1840's to the 1940's. In modified form it continues to be widely used in some parts of the world today. "It was not necessarily the horror that its critics depicted it as" (Howatt : 1984).

### **The Reformative Method**

The teaching of grammar is generally considered a dull and monotonous activity simply because it is neither creative nor interesting. As a result it is felt that a reformative approach is needed in language teaching. The language teaching specialists like Marcel, Predergast and Gouin did much to promote

alternative approaches to language teaching. However, their ideas did not receive as much support and attention as it needed. From the 1880's the linguists like Henry Sweet in England, Wilhelm Victor in Germany and Paul Passy in France contributed a great intellectual leadership necessary for reformative ideas in order to gain credibility and acceptance. The discipline of linguistics was evolved with vitality and strength. A new branch of knowledge in the name of phonetics was established. It was intended for the scientific analysis and description of the sound systems of languages. It gave new insights into speech processes. Linguists stressed that speech rather than the written word was the primary form of language. The International Phonetic Association was founded in 1886. Its International Phonetic Alphabet was designed to enable the sounds of any language to be accurately transcribed. One of the main goals of the association is to improve the teaching of modern languages which leads:

- The study of the spoken language
- The training of phonetics for improving good pronunciation
- To introduce conversational phrases and idioms through the use of conversation texts and dialogues
- An inductive approach to the teaching of grammar
- Teaching new meanings through establishing associations within the target language rather than by establishing associations to the mother tongue.

Henry Sweet has advanced an approach that sound methodological principles should be based on a scientific analysis of language and study of psychology in his work the Practical Study of Languages published in 1899, he advanced four principles for the development of teaching methods:

- Careful selection of what is to be taught
- Imposing limitations on what is to be taught
- Arranging what is to be taught in terms of the four communication skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing
- Grading materials from simple to complex

Victor, Sweet and other reformers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century supported that the principles on which a new approach to teaching foreign languages should be based on some specific procedures. They believed that the following procedures will help in developing a practical method of teaching language:

- The spoken language is primary and it should be reflected in an oral based methodology.
- Phonetics should be applied to teaching and teacher training.
- Writing is to precede listening.
- The presentation of words in sentences and the practice of sentences in a meaningful context without being taught as isolated and disconnected elements.
- The rules of grammar should be taught only after the thorough practice of the grammar points by the students i.e., the inductive method of teaching grammar should be adopted.
- Translation to be avoided though the mother tongue can be used for the explanation of the new words or for the testing abilities of comprehension.

These principles paved a way for the theoretical foundations for a principled approach to language teaching. The first one is based on a scientific approach to the study of language and of language learning. They reflect the beginnings of the formation of a new branch of knowledge in the name of the applied linguistics. This branch of knowledge deals with the scientific study of second and foreign language teaching and learning.

### **The Direct Method**

The concept of the Direct Method of teaching came from the chain language learning. Gouin was one of the first reformers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to conceive a methodology based on the observation of chain language learning. Other reformers during the end of the century similarly paid their attention to the naturalistic principles of language learning. For this reason they are sometimes referred to as advocates of a natural method which is also called by the name The Direct Method. Throughout the history of language learning attempts have been made to make

Second language learning as important as the First language learning.

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century Montel stated how he was entrusted to a guardian who addressed him exclusively in Latin in the early years of his life as his father wanted him to speak Latin well. L.Sauveur used intensive oral interaction in the target language. He employed questions as a way of presenting and eliciting language. He opened a language school in Boston in the late 1860's. His method soon became known as the Natural Method or The Direct Method.

Sauveur, the exponent of the Direct Method, argued that a foreign language could be taught without translation or the use of the learners native language if meaning is conveyed directly through demonstration and action. The German scholar F. Franke contributed much on the psychological principles of direct method between forms and meaning in the target language. He gave a theoretical justification for a mono-lingual approach to teaching. According to Franke, a language could best be taught by using it actively in the classroom. Rather than using analytical procedures and focus on explanation of grammar rules in classroom teaching the teachers must encourage the direct and spontaneous use of the foreign language in the classroom. Learners would automatically be able to induce rules of grammar. The teacher replaced the text book in the early stages of learning. Speaking begins with systematic attention to pronunciation. Known words can be used to teach new vocabulary using mime, demonstration and pictures.

The natural language learning principles gave the foundation for the Direct method. Enthusiastic supporters of this method introduced it in France and Germany where it was officially approved at the turn of the century. It became widely known in the United States through its use by Sauveur and Maxmilian Berlitz in all the successful commercial language schools. The main characteristics of the Direct Method are listed here under:

- Classroom instruction is to be conducted exclusively in the target language.
- Only everyday vocabulary and sentences are to be taught.

- Oral communication skills are to be built up in a carefully graded progression organized around question and answer exchanges between teachers and student in small intensive classes.
- Grammar is to be taught inductively.
- New teaching points are to be introduced orally.
- Concrete vocabulary is to be taught through demonstration, objects and pictures and abstract vocabulary for the association of ideas.
- Both speaking and listening comprehension are to be taught.
- Correct pronunciation and grammar are to be emphasized.

The characteristics listed above can be seen in the guidelines mentioned hereunder for teaching oral language:

- Never translate : demonstrate
- Never explain : act
- Never make a speech : ask questions
- Never imitate mistakes : correct
- Never speak with single words : use sentences
- Never speak too much : make students speak much
- Never use the book : use your lesson plan
- Never jump around : follow your plan
- Never go too fast : keep the pace of the student
- Never speak too slowly : speak normally
- Never speak too quickly : speak naturally
- Never speak too loudly : speak audibly
- Never be impatient : take it easy

(cited in Titone : 1968 : 100 – 101)

The Direct method has proved to be successful in private language schools such as Public and International schools where paying clients are highly motivated and the use of native speaking teachers is the secret of success. In spite of pressure from the proponents of this method it is difficult to implement it in Public Secondary School Education. It over emphasizes and dis starts the similarities between naturalistic first language learning and class room

foreign language learning. It also fails to consider the practical difficulties and realities of the class room. Besides, it lacks in a rigorous basis in applied linguistic theory. That is why it is often criticized by the proponents of the Reformative Method.

The Direct method represents the product of enlightened amateurisms. It has several drawbacks listed below:

- It requires teachers who are native speakers with fluency in the foreign language.
- It is largely dependent on the teachers skill rather than the text book.
- All teachers are not proficient enough in the foreign language to adhere to the principles of the Direct method.
- Strict adherence to the Direct method principles is often counter productive.
- The teachers are required to go at length to avoid using mother tongue.
- A simple brief explanation in the students mother tongue will be a more proper way to comprehension.

By the 1920's there was a study decline in the use of the Direct method of teaching language in non-commercial schools in Europe. In France and Germany, it was gradually modified into versions that combined some direct method techniques with more controlled grammar based activities. The European popularity of the Direct method of teaching language in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century made foreign language specialists in the United States attempt to get it implemented in American schools and colleges although they decided to move with caution. A study begin in 1923 and the status of foreign language teaching came to a conclusion that no single method could guarantee successful results. The goal of trying to teach conversation skills was considered impractical owing to the restricted time available for foreign language teaching in schools, the limited skills of teachers, and the perceived irrelevance of the conversation skills in a foreign language for an average student.

Although the direct method of teaching language enjoyed immense popularity in Europe, everybody did not adopt it blindly and enthusiastically. The British applied linguist, Henry Sweet, identified its

limitations. It offered elevations at the level of teaching procedures but lacked in a thorough methodological basis. It mainly focused on exclusive use of the target language in a classroom but it failed to address many issues that Henry Sweet thought more basic.

In spite of the changing status of approaches and methods in language teaching, the study of past and present teaching methods continues to form a significant component of teacher preparation programmes. The reasons for this are mentioned hereunder:

- The study of approaches and methods provides teachers with a view of how the field of language has evolved.
- Approaches and methods can be studied not as prescriptions for how to teach but as a source of well established practices which teachers can adopt or implement based on their own needs.
- Experience in using different teaching approaches and methods can provide teachers with basic teaching skills that they can later add to or supplement as they develop teaching experience.

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