

The Grammar-translation Approach

The Grammar Translation method embraces a wide range of approaches but, broadly speaking, foreign language study is seen as a mental discipline, the goal of which may be to read literature in its original form or simply to be a form of intellectual development. The basic approach is to analyze and study the grammatical rules of the language, usually in an order roughly matching the traditional order of the grammar of Latin, and then to practice manipulating grammatical structures through the means of translation both into and from the mother tongue.

The method is very much based on the written word and texts are widely in evidence. A typical approach would be to present the rules of a particular item of grammar, illustrate its use by including the item several times in a text, and practice using the item through writing sentences and translating it into the mother tongue. The text is often accompanied by a vocabulary list consisting of new lexical items used in the text together with the mother tongue translation. Accurate use of language items is central to this approach.

Generally speaking, the medium of instruction is the mother tongue, which is used to explain conceptual problems and to discuss the use of a particular grammatical structure. It all sounds rather dull but it can be argued that the Grammar Translation method has over the years had a remarkable success. Millions of people have successfully learnt foreign languages to a high degree of proficiency and, in numerous cases, without any contact whatsoever with native speakers of the language (as was the case in the former Soviet Union, for example).

The Audio-lingual Approach

With the outbreak of World War II armies needed to become orally proficient in the languages of their allies and enemies as quickly as possible. This teaching technique was initially called the Army Method, and was the first to be based on linguistic theory and behavioral psychology.

Based on Skinner's Behaviorism theory, it assumed that a human being can be trained using a system of reinforcement. Correct behavior receives positive feedback, while errors receive negative feedback. This approach to learning is similar to the Direct Method, in that the lesson takes place entirely in the target language.

The Audio-lingual Method was widely used in the 1950s and 1960s, and the emphasis was not on the understanding of words, but rather on the acquisition of structures and patterns in common everyday dialogue. These patterns are elicited, repeated and tested until the responses given by the student in the foreign language are automatic.

Some characteristics of this method are:

- Drills are used to teach structural patterns
- Set phrases are memorized with a focus on intonation
- Grammatical explanations are kept to a minimum
- Vocabulary is taught in context
- Audio-visual aids are used
- Focus is on pronunciation
- Correct responses are positively reinforced immediately

This extensive memorization, repetition and over-learning of patterns was the key to the method's success, as students could often see immediate results, but it was also its weakness.

The method's insistence on repetition and memorization of standard phrases ignored the role of context and knowledge in language learning. As the study of linguistics developed, it was discovered that language was not acquired through a process of habit formation, and that errors were not necessarily bad.

The Communicative Approach

Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication. The teacher sets up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life. Unlike the audiolingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can leave students in suspense as to the outcome of a class exercise, which will vary according to their reactions and responses. The real-life simulations change from day to day. Students' motivation to learn comes from their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

The communicative approach assumes:

- that all communication has a social purpose - learner has something to say or find out.
- communication embraces a whole spectrum of functions (e.g. seeking information/ apologizing/ expressing likes and dislikes, etc) and notions (e.g. apologizing for being late / asking where the nearest post office is).
- classroom activities maximize opportunities for learners to use target language in a communicative way for meaningful activities. Emphasis on meaning (messages they are creating or task they are completing) rather than form (correctness of language and language structure) - as in first language acquisition.
- use of target language as normal medium for classroom management and instruction - reflects naturalistic language acquisition.
- more emphasis on active modes of learning, including pair work and group-work - often not exploited enough by teachers fearful of noisy class.
- primacy of oral work. Emphasis on oral and listening skills in the classroom. Contact time with language is all-important - paves way for more fluid command of the language / facility and ease of expression. Not just hearing teacher, but having personal contact themselves with language, practicing sounds themselves, permutating sentence patterns and getting chance to make mistakes and learn from doing so.
- grammar can still be taught, but less systematically, in traditional ways alongside more innovative approaches. Recognized that communication depends on grammar. Disregard of grammatical form will virtually guarantee breakdown in communication.
- seeks to personalise and localize language and adapt it to interests of pupils. Meaningful language is always more easily retained by learners.