

A SHORT CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF THE EVOLUTION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES TEACHING/ LEARNING METHODS

Christina Andreea MIȚARIU

***Abstract:** The process of teaching/ learning foreign languages is not a new phenomenon. However, it had a considerable impact in the 20th century, when mobility of people and the technological progress have led to the increasing need of intercultural communication.*

Foreign language teaching/ learning methods have evolved in time as focus moved from the teacher to the student in an attempt to make the whole process more efficient. As human needs have always changed, we must adapt this aspect to the reality of present days. An essential factor is motivation of both parts involved in the process and the desire to continually make progress while becoming familiarized with a new language and culture.

***Keywords:** traditional methods, direct method, listening, repeating, communication strategies, continuous learning.*

Structural teaching of foreign languages and their inclusion in school and university curricula has existed since the 17th century, when Latin and Greek were compulsory, not for communication purposes (as they were already considered dead languages) but to increase the intellectual baggage of future scholars. Because the possibility to communicate directly in the two mentioned languages was excluded, teaching Latin and Greek was done exclusively by reading classic texts, translating them and by a detailed study of grammatical structures.

The Industrial Revolution that was to conquer the whole civilized world brought the need to study international foreign languages (English, French, German, and Spanish) to a new dimension, and the basis of the teaching/ learning process was exclusively the classical method (translations), the only method new up to that moment. At the beginning of the 20th century, other methods of teaching foreign languages appeared and were used instead of the traditional method.

Nicolae Iorga, in *History of Romanian Education*, mentions an official document from 1850, and he underlines the modality of learning foreign languages: „French and German should not make the learning difficult by using

luxurious things and adornments *which would have no serious result for most of the students: they can choose one of them in their last years of study. Greek, Russian and Turkish are optional subjects in the last three years of study*"¹.

Twentieth century has brought many changes, including the field of **foreign language teaching**. Step by step, modern teaching methods appear and they are based on other coordinates than **traditional methods**, which has already been proved inefficient and old-fashioned.

The traditional or classical method, beyond its limitations as far as creativity is concerned, has also some indisputable advantages. It has a certain plan for the teacher; the information is presented in a certain order established by the trainer/ teacher with few changes of setting. The teacher may guide students' attention to topics he or she is interested in teaching, according to a logical structure presented in an ascending order of difficulty. Finally, the study of grammar is used by the teacher/ trainer to offer students/ trainees rules and structures they should use and apply as they wish, offering them versatility.

If, from the teacher's point of view, there are apparent advantages, problems appear for the trainees, as they have a lot of theoretical knowledge which are not necessarily used in a hands-on approach. This method is based mainly on understanding the message and hardly on **producing** messages in the target language. Moreover, the result is predictable, as trainees are not encouraged to speak or communicate at all.

Another disadvantage is that, on a lexical level, the process is somehow forced. Normally, in his mother tongue, a child learns new words by experimenting, associating them with real life objects, making a natural Saussurian association between signified and signifier. The traditional method does not encourage experimental learning. Images or associations are not used to accumulate new lexical notions, which may transform the learning process into a more difficult task.

In addition, this method is less adapted to modern society, which is strongly connected to technology. The greatest disadvantage of this method is a lack of a real rapport with reality. It is mainly based on translating literary texts and not on simulating life situations.

As its inefficiency was underlined at the beginning of the 20th century, another method of foreign language teaching/ learning was introduced: the **direct method**.

This method aims to use completely different lessons taught exclusively in the target language. Mimicry and gestures are increasingly used to communicate the meaning of words and expressions, understanding being checked by an exchange of questions and answers between teachers and trainees.

¹ Iorga, Nicolae, *Istoria învățământului din România*, Ed. Didactică și Pedagogică, 1972, p. 210.

Another important step was that of introducing the **listen-repeat method** that appeared later (1950-1960), following the conception that the study of a foreign language may resemble the acquisition of new habits. This method aimed to progressively create some automatisms, starting from sounds- words- phrases- sentences. Grammar rules were learnt as a result of answers to different stimuli which determined the automatic emission of structures and sentences. The process of teaching and learning was based on speaking and listening. The teacher used the same type of exercise, based on patterns that the student repeated until he/ she could finally emit a similar structure. Due to repetition, both teacher and student were very limited as far as personal contribution and creativity were concerned. Thus, it was time for an improvement, a fact that determined the appearance of another stimulating method for both parts.

The technique of guided discovery learning is an approach where the teacher or author of materials interferes in the training process, and the students have the possibility of getting involved creatively in the learning process. The method is used to introduce new knowledge to prepare students for different aspects of the curriculum. A typical teaching lesson in this method is structured on six stages: introduction, drafting ideas, exploring, discussing conclusions, preparing future lessons and extension. This last stage asks students to work individually or in groups, to explore the material and, moreover, to put into practice what they have learnt.

This method basically opens the way for the **communicative method** which is considered by many specialists the most efficient and stimulating for both parts.

However, for a communicative approach of foreign languages, we must acquire knowledge and communication skills. In oral communication, the speaker forms a thinking system and communication system, obtained following a prior selection. Speaking appears as a creation process of numerous statements, as a result of multiple communication necessities, every time different ones. When we aim to use a foreign language as a means of communication, the trainee must reach generalization, using concrete facts of language, detaining rules for verbal actions in order to create new statements. To attain this objective, efforts on both parts (trainer and trainee) must concur.

An essential type of communication between teacher and trainee is direct communication which reestablishes the balance of the importance of the two parts involved in the process of teaching and learning. The teacher is not limited to sharing the trainee his/ knowledge, but also uses his/ her entire linguistic, cultural, pedagogical competence, being the resource-person, the expert that trainee ask, the animator of the study group, the person who helps trainee discover and systematize knowledge, the one who creates problem-situations, and last but not least, the one who has the capacity to empathize with the beginner.

Due to the human need for communication, especially in the globalized world, there are numerous such methods of teaching foreign languages that place communication at the centre of teaching activities. The greatest advantage of this method is that it focuses on *all linguistic* competences (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) not only on **grammar**. It is also entertaining, as it offers trainees a functional language that the trainee may use in everyday life, the context requiring practice. Interactivity is very important in this method, both horizontally (between trainees), and vertically (between trainees and trainer). Thus, the entire teaching process is based on the trainee, who is the receiver of the message, and also a sender.

Thus, arid and technical memorizing of grammar rules and an isolated vocabulary structure is replaced by a contextualized language, focused on development of linguistic abilities by creating different activities such as debates, role-plays, written communication activities and even theatre.

This time, the teacher's role changes, as they are supervisors of the trainees' activities. The advantages are apparently only for the trainees. However, at a more pragmatic look, the teacher also has advantages in such an approach, because he/ she can use their creativity, in a less constrictive setting. The teacher is no longer the prisoner of long hours of lectures, so they are less tired during classes. Preparing for the classes takes longer, because the selection of materials and exploitation modalities become the most important. Although, apparently, things are chaotic, the teacher must bear in mind a lesson plan that has to be followed, at least in broad lines, regardless of inherent deviations in such an approach.

The main disadvantage of this method is that more timid students might not feel at ease and may refuse to participate in some activities. Another disadvantage is the fact that the communicative method encourages the use of fixed expressions or „usual phrases”, so-called language automatisms. On the other hand, a great advantage is that it is easier to remember a phrase than to learn more grammar rules and more individual words to build a statement.

This type of approach is based on the rules mentioned above, and it has been used on the Internet on sites such as: <http://www.francaisauthentique.com/>, a method that promises quick, effortless learning of the foreign language targeted. Eliminating linguistic barriers and complicated grammar notions, this type of methods focus on taking the trainee in a more authentic linguistic environment, with real life situations, offering him/ her all the instruments needed for communicating in a foreign language. The proof of this method's success is the great number of trainees and trainers (for example, on the site mentioned above: 76 053 trainees and 199 407 members of the Francais authentique community on Facebook), in only two years after the launch.

The above mentioned method is based on the daily contact of the trainee with linguistic realities in the target language, using the learning platform, the blog, the newsletter, the TV shows or the auxiliary materials recommended. Without a continuous autodidact effort, a strong motivation, no method is efficient.

The European Commission has conducted an evaluation² where some essential messages are mentioned: the advantage of learning a foreign language at an early age, permanent development of linguistic communication, the importance of intrinsic motivation. In the Final Report of the Group for Intercultural Dialogue³ the issue of motivation was discussed, focusing on *the role of schools as fundamental factor in stimulating motivation for learning*. Some brief basic principles were described necessary in sustaining motivation for foreign language learning:

1. Learning foreign languages must be integrated in leisure activities;
2. School partnerships, e-mail must be exploited in detail;
3. Subtitled T.V. shows may become efficient instruments in learning foreign languages, as they can promote functional literacy and multilingual individuals;
4. Including adults who belong to different social environments in the study program.

There are two aspects of motivation: distinction between initiating motivation and its grounds, the latest being extremely important for understanding the paradigm of continuous learning based on developing a linguistic profile. A series of studies on motivation and work efficiency have proven the superiority of intrinsic motivation on success. The idea according to which motivation is a fluctuant process, influenced by different circumstances is sustained by numerous authors, such as Levy Leboyer⁴. Depending on the time span of students' attention, on the degree of voluntary participation to the learning activity, on the number of trials to solve an activity, motivation may be measured, although the term is not entirely appropriate. Thus, in an European context, the motivation for learning is the topic of numerous studies, opening new territories for debate and research.

2 Peter Edelenbos, Richard Johnstone, Angelika Kubanek, „Les grands principes pédagogiques sur lesquels se fonde l'enseignement des langues aux très jeunes apprenants: les langues pour les enfants en Europe: Résultats de la recherche, bonnes pratiques et principes essentiels”, octobre 2006, p. 22.

3 „O provocare salutară. Despre modul în care multitudinea limbilor ar putea consolida Europa. Propuneri ale Grupului de Intelectuali pentru dialogul intercultural, constituit la inițiativa Comisiei Europene”, Bruxelles, 2008, http://ec.europa.eu/languages/documents/report_ro.pdf, p.28

4 Levy Leboyer, “La motivation dans l'entreprise”, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1998, p. 54.

Conclusions

We consider that labelling teaching methods as efficient or inefficient is inappropriate as each method has its advantages and disadvantages. In real practice, most trainers/ teachers use a combination of multiple methods, taking the best form all of them.

Even the traditional method, which has been rejected for many years, has started to be reconsidered due to its main advantage: setting aside ambiguities, putting on the first place the clarity of information and logical structures. However, it cannot be applied for an entire course and it should not be prevalent.

In conclusion, no method is perfect. There are arguments pro and against each of them. In order to have an efficient learning style, we need to adapt the mentioned methods in a well-proportioned mix, where the teacher and the student play an active role, sustained by continuous motivation.

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NOTES ON THE AUTHOR

CHRISTINA ANDREEA MIȚARIU is a lecturer at the Faculty of Management in Tourism and Commerce Timisoara Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University. She holds a PhD. in Philology. She has published numerous books and articles.