

ENHANCING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION: EVALUATING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF CONTEMPORARY AND CLASSICAL METHODOLOGIES

Silvia Laura PAȘCU

Tania PETCOVICI

Abstract: *The present paper investigates the impact of modern teaching methods on English language acquisition outcomes, in comparison to those derived from traditional methodologies. Sixty first-year university students enrolled in a bi-weekly English as a Second Language course were divided into two groups. The first group received instruction for one academic year using modern approaches, including Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Learning, and technology-enhanced pedagogy. The second group was taught using traditional methods, specifically the Grammar-Translation Method and Audiolingualism. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study analyses quantitative data from standardized language proficiency tests and qualitative data from student interviews. Findings indicate that modern methods significantly enhance learners' communicative abilities and intrinsic motivation. However, traditional approaches remain valuable in reinforcing grammatical foundations. The study concludes that an integrated instructional model combining elements of both paradigms may offer the most effective strategy for addressing diverse learner needs.*

Keywords: *traditional/modern teaching methods, language acquisition*

1. INTRODUCTION

Education continues to evolve alongside advancements in technology and thus teaching methods are also changing. Nowadays modern learning often happens online using servers and web browsers, while traditional learning still takes place in physical classrooms where students and teachers interact face to face. One valuable challenge for teachers is how to combine these two approaches in ways that best support student learning and growth.

Effective teaching is grounded in learning theories from cognitive psychology which help teachers create learning experiences that match students' needs, taking into account things like assessment, development, subject content, problem-solving skills, and knowledge transfer. (Fourie, Schlebusch, 2024: 65)

According to Ehsanpur, Razavi (2020:8) using strong learning strategies helps students actively participate in lessons and connect new information with what they already know, leading to better and longer-lasting learning. Past studies

on traditional and modern teaching methods have shown mixed results, with many suggesting combining both which can lead to better outcomes.

2. METHODOLOGY

The paper analyzes the comparative efficiency of traditional and modern approaches in English language teaching. The participants include 60 pre-intermediate level English language learners, aged 19-35, selected from the 1st year of university studies. The participants have been divided into two groups, each being taught for an entire academic year (two semesters) either with classical or with contemporary methods.

As a first step of the research, an initial assessment of a larger group of students (136) was conducted out of which those with a similar language proficiency (pre-intermediate) were selected in order to establish a baseline for comparison. The initial test comprised of a written and oral part, assessing students' understanding and use of English, grammar rules, vocabulary, reading comprehension, listening and speaking skills. The oral part was an interview where students were supposed to introduce themselves and answer different questions. Based on their answers, students' fluency, pronunciation and accuracy were evaluated.

The final purpose of the research is to compare students' improvements for each skill at the end of an academic year based either on traditional approaches or modern methods.

2.1. Participants exposed to standard teaching practices

As previously mentioned, a group of 30 students enrolled in a bi-weekly English as a Second Language course received instruction through some classical methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method, Audiolingualism and Direct Method throughout an entire university year of study, namely 28 classes.

In a conventional classroom setup, the teacher delivered content through lectures, while the students practiced through drills and written assignments.

a) Grammar-Translation Method

Through direct translation exercises between the target language and native language, as well as vice-versa, the students learned multiple grammar rules and vocabulary. Numerous sets of exercises were used to develop reading and writing skills. The lessons were teacher-centered, monotonous, leaving students in a passive position, without spontaneous opportunities to use the language. The materials were printed textbooks or worksheets while feedback was given either through correcting exercises or tests.

b) Audiolingual Method

Dialogues presented either from a recording or verbally by the teacher were accompanied by drawings to illustrate their meaning. The lines of the dialogues were memorized through group repetition and then students were asked to use them adapting to their own interests by replacing words or phrases. Sentences with specific linguistic structures were removed from the dialogue to form different

pattern drills such as answering questions, replacing new words or grammatical structures, negating affirmative sentences or making morphological changes from singular to plural and the other way round, all based on the teacher's requests. The follow-up activities consisted of reading, writing and vocabulary activities, based on the dialogues which had been practiced in the class. Some recordings of the dialogues were also used in order to improve pronunciation. The lessons were still teacher-centered, with no opportunities of real-life language use, while feedback was given through immediate corrections.

c) Direct Method

The teacher shared stories or narratives on different topics in order to engage the students and illustrate concepts. They were asked to read them which led to fluency improvement and comprehension, to answer questions for their understanding assessment, to comment upon the texts for their speaking skill enhancement, to engage in simulated scenarios in order to practice communication and problem solving. Some dictation exercises and map drawing exercises based on listening comprehension were also used in the class. All in all, vocabulary and grammar were taught through speaking and listening, with direct exposure to the language but without any translation. The lessons were teacher-led and focused on clear instructions and immediate feedback.

2.2. Participants exposed to modern teaching practices

A second group of 30 students enrolled in a bi-weekly English as a Second Language course received instruction through some modern methods such as the Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, Content-Based Instruction and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning throughout an entire university year of study, namely 28 classes.

Modern language teaching methods emphasize communicative competence and students' engagement, enhancing practical language skills through authentic scenarios and tasks.

a) Communicative Language Teaching

Based on topics that interest students, the teacher came up with role-playing activities, where students acted out real-life scenarios and practiced vocabulary and spontaneous responses. Information gap activities and group discussions were also used in the classes, where students shared information to complete a task, promoting collaboration, communication on relevant topics, improving speaking, listening, and critical thinking. Moreover, they practiced language skills through fun activities like vocabulary puzzles, charades, and different games. Through these interactive activities the students developed their ability to think and respond spontaneously. The courses were based on the use of printed and digital tools such as different platforms. They were student-centered, while the teacher offered guiding questions or prompts and provided feedback to ensure a correct language use.

b) Task-Based Language Teaching

The class activities focused on students using the target language to complete purposeful tasks, i.e. situations they could encounter in the real world. These included planning a trip, visiting the doctor, making a phone call, conducting an interview in order to find answers to specific questions, gathering information to make a poster or advertisement, designing a presentation, or solving a problem, all of which encourage authentic language use aimed at achieving a concrete objective. These creative activities promoted real-life language use, critical thinking, and communication. The main purpose of the method was to help students carry out assigned tasks using the knowledge they had already had of the target language. Classes were student-centered and the assessment was based on task outcome.

c) Content-Based Instruction

During these lessons students were focused on learning about a topic of interest such as neuroscience, psychology, economics, law, cuisine, traditions, music, favourite actor or actrice. They learned about these subjects using the language they were trying to study, as a tool for developing knowledge, thus enhancing their linguistic ability in the target language. The selection of the relevant topic of interest was followed by the identification of appropriate sources related to the subjects, from websites, reference books and videos to audio lectures, or even real interviews. During the lessons, students were divided into small groups, each tasked with a specific research assignment and provided with a source in the target language to guide their work. After gathering information, the groups shared and compared their findings, fostering collaboration and critical thinking. The activities concluded with a final product, such as a presentation or report, demonstrating their understanding and synthesis of the material. Classes were student-centered and the assessment was based on the final product.

d) Technology-Enhanced Language Learning

During some of the English classes technology was significantly used introducing interactive, immersive, and collaborative learning experiences. Tools like online games, discussion forums, and video-based resources were ment to boost students' engagement and motivation. Kahoot! or flashcards with Anki were used for gamified vocabulary activities, Padlet or Zoom were used to promote authentic language through discussions and collaboration. Moreover, multimedia resources like TED Talks and YouTube videos offered exposure to real-life language and cultural contexts, while mobile apps like Duolingo and Memris and Tiktok videos supported speaking, pronunciation, vocabulary, even grammar practice anytime, anywhere, offering flexibility and instant feedback.

3. RESULTS

The analysis of data collected from the 60 participants of the two groups revealed valuable findings on the impact of various teaching approaches.

3.1.Students' feedback and interviews

At the end of the academic year, the participants were asked to attend an interview of evaluation and to provide a short written feedback related to their insights on six major aspects of the English courses they had attended. These aspects are students' engagement, language skills' development, teacher's role, use of teaching materials, classroom environment and teachers' feedback.

3.1.1. Control group with traditional teaching approach

The group of students receiving instruction through classical methods admitted being little (18 respondents) or mildly motivated (12 respondents) during the classes due to the repetitive drills and the focus on memorization. They also mentioned boredom, a passive role of the student and the lack of language use in authentic contexts.

Regarding language skills' development, the majority signalled an improvement in grammar and vocabulary (28), as well as in reading (27) and writing (26) but complained about the lack of oral fluency (29) and poor listening (20).

As for the role of the teacher in the class, all the students agreed that in traditional classes it was central, controlling the lesson and rarely giving autonomy to students.

The participants in traditional classes listed among the generally used materials printed textbooks, worksheets, cards, posters, and audio recordings, while the classroom environment was structured and predictable, mostly with teacher-students interactions.

As far as the teacher's assessment and feedback were concerned, students mentioned the focus on grammatical accuracy (27), correctness of exercises and tests (28), all providing a formal feedback.

3.1.2. Control group with modern teaching approach

On the other hand, the group receiving modern teaching approaches revealed being highly motivated during the classes due to interactive and dynamic activities, to the use of technology, familiar to the digital generation, and to the contact with real-life language use. 9 students associated the English course with a challenge, game or entertaining activity.

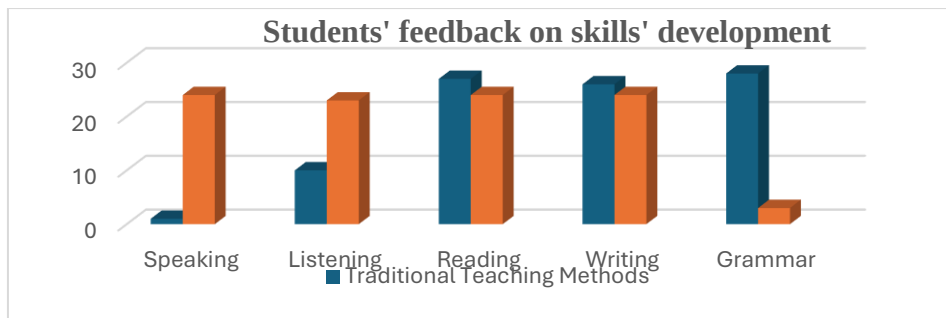
24 students identified improvements in speaking, listening, reading and writing, while 27 were not very aware of the grammar rules they were using.

For the majority of the students in this group, the teacher is a facilitator, a guide who gives students autonomy and encourages collaborative learning.

Among the materials used in a modern teaching approach, students listed multimedia, online platforms, interactive apps, computer games, artificial intelligence, as well as computers, tablets, and smartphones. For the 29 respondents the classroom environment was interactive and dynamic, based on collaborative pair or group work with students having an active role in learning.

Related to the teacher's feedback, 24 students identified a continuous, real time and constructive feedback during the activities, mainly focused on authentic

language use. 3 students also mentioned peer assessment as useful for collaborative learning.



3.2. Teachers' class observations

The teachers who taught the two groups made written observations throughout the whole academic year related to the same six relevant aspects: students' engagement, language skills' development, teacher's role, use of teaching materials, classroom environment and teachers' feedback.

3.2.1. Observations on the group with traditional teaching approach

The majority of the classes based on traditional methods needed continuous encouragements from the teacher for an active engagement of the students. The repetitive drills and strong focus on memorization caused learners to lose interest and led them to passive attitudes.

Improvements in students' grammar, vocabulary, reading, and writing skills were visible. However, it was challenging to enhance students' oral fluency and listening abilities due to limited opportunities for authentic language use in the classroom.

Assuming a central and authoritative role, the teacher directed the lesson and controlled the classroom activities, which limited students' autonomy and reduced opportunities for collaborative learning. Moreover, critical thinking and problem-solving skills reached a low level.

The resources typically used in traditional methods, such as printed textbooks, worksheets, posters, and audio recordings, provided structured content, but did not completely engage the students who were accustomed to digital media. Due to the multiple materials available in textbooks, the teacher needed less time to prepare the courses.

The assessment throughout the traditional classrooms, often emphasized grammatical accuracy and correctness of exercises and tests. The feedback was typically formal and couldn't provide immediate guidance, limiting thus the students' ability to make improvements in their language use.

3.2.2. Observations on the group with modern teaching approach

Interactive activities, the use of technology, and real-life language applications appealed to students, especially those familiar with digital tools, which

increased their engagement and fostered a more dynamic and enthusiastic learning environment.

Adopting modern techniques resulted into a balanced development of all language skills, including speaking and listening. The use of multimedia resources and interactive platforms provided students with multiple opportunities to practice and improve their communicative competencies in real-world contexts.

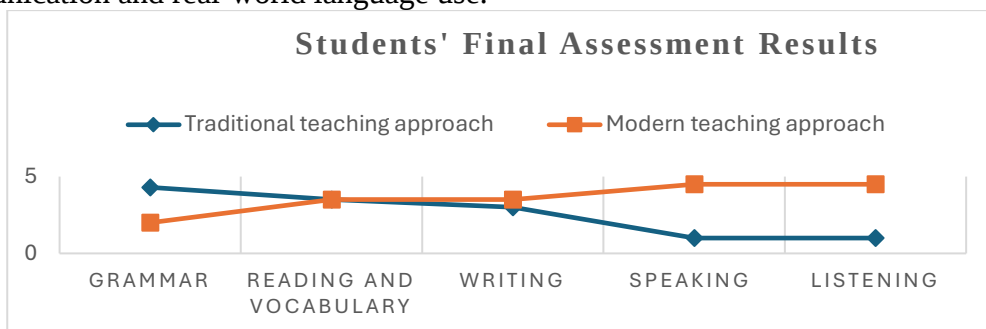
Through the classes with a modern teaching approach, the educator was a facilitator who promoted students' autonomy and encouraged collaborative learning. The students had an active role in their education through group activities and discussions.

The integration of multimedia, online platforms, interactive applications, and devices like computers, tablets, and smartphones, aligned with students' digital experiences, enriched the learning process by providing diverse and interactive content. Due to the great variety and multitude of teaching materials on different platforms and applications the teacher needed much more time to prepare the classes.

The modern teaching practices involved continuous, real-time, and constructive feedback, and focused on authentic language use. The teacher also encouraged peer assessment and fostered a collaborative learning environment where students could learn from each other's perspectives and experiences.

3.3. Final evaluation test

At the end of the second semester, in addition to providing feedback and participating in interviews, the students from both groups – those engaged in traditional approaches and those who were taught through modern methods - took a final evaluation test. While all students showed progress, the areas of improvement varied. As expected, the students who attended traditional classes enhanced their levels of grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing, while the students who attended modern teaching classes showed significant improvement in speaking, listening, reading and writing. The final evaluation test indicated that although traditional techniques remained effective for building core grammar skills, modern strategies offered substantial benefits in enhancing students' oral communication and real-world language use.



4. CONCLUSIONS

The present study comparing traditional and modern teaching approaches in English language learning revealed significant differences in students' engagement, language skills enhancement, and overall learning outcomes. Modern teaching methods, which included technology, interactive activities, and real-life language use, significantly increased students' engagement and motivation. On the other hand, traditional approaches, which relied on repetitive drills and memorization, led to boredom and passivity among students.

The study also found that modern teaching methods promoted a balanced development of all language skills, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Significant improvement was visible in students' ability to communicate effectively in authentic contexts. In contrast, traditional methods mainly focused on grammar and vocabulary, with limited opportunities for real-life language use, resulted in poor oral fluency and listening skills.

The role of the teacher also differed between the two approaches. In modern classes, the teacher acted as a facilitator, encouraging students' autonomy and collaborative learning, while in traditional classes, the teacher assumed a central, authoritative role, directing the lesson and controlling classroom activities. If the first approach allowed students to take an active role in their learning process and to develop their critical thinking and problem-solving skills, the later limited students' autonomy and opportunities for collaborative learning.

All things considered, in order to maximize the effectiveness of language instruction teachers should consider blended approach, combining the strengths of traditional and modern methods. By incorporating technology, interactive activities, and real-life language use into language instruction, teachers can create a dynamic and engaging learning environment that serves to different learning styles and promotes balanced language development.

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Notes of the author:

Silvia Laura PAȘCU, senior lecturer at Tibiscus University of Timisoara, teaches English and Italian general courses, as well as English/Italian for specific purposes (Business, Psychology). She holds a PhD in Romance linguistics with a thesis on *The Correspondences of Latin Infinitive and Supine in Romanian and Italian*. Interested in the contrastive study of Italian and English phraseology, paremiology and teaching she published the book: *The Idiomatic Expressions in Italian, Romanian and English* (2010), and various articles: *Teaching English to Students in Economics* (2022), *Challenges of Online Language Teaching - Useful Applications And Platforms* (2021), etc.

E-mail: silvia_madincea76@yahoo.com

Tania PETCOVICI, PhD, is a senior lecturer affiliated with Tibiscus University in Timișoara, Romania, teaching and specializing in translation studies, ESP (English for Law, Economics and Psychology). Her scholarly contributions encompass books, journal articles, and conference papers. She is the author of two books: *The Rhetoric of Clothing – Exclamatory Words in the Syntax of Dress and Syntactic and Lexicological Frames*, as well as author and co-author of number of papers, published in various journals: *Language Localization, Internationalization, Transcreation* (2021), *Benefits of Online Teaching* (2020), *Effective Translation at the Core of Successful Business Communication* (2015).

E-mail: taniapetcovici@gmail.com