

THE CHALLENGES OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO COLLEGE STUDENTS IN THE UNITED STATES

Foreign language teaching in American institutions of higher learning is based on communicative approach, which, although with a few modifications, draws from several traditional methods of language teaching, such as Audio-lingualism, Total Physical Response method, and the Silent Way. I will briefly describe each of the methods listed. The Audio-lingualism 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. Total Physical Response (or TPR) method draws on the basic principles of how young children learn their first language. It involves a wide range of physical activities and a lot of listening and comprehension, as well as an emphasis on learning as fun and stimulating. It is based on a problem-solving approach to learning, whereby the students' learning becomes autonomous and co-operative. The scope is to help students select the appropriate phrases and know how to control them, with good intonation and rhythm. The teacher does not repeat the material nor supplies the phrases that the student has to imitate, and there is no use of the learner's native language. Patterns contain vocabulary, and coloured guides for pronunciation are used to assist the teacher in guiding the students' understanding while saying the least amount possible. Since it was neither practical nor effective to use only one method in the traditional classroom setting, many attempts have been made to facilitate teachers' work, i.e. to give them the freedom and at the same time effective guidance to teaching a foreign language to students with a wide range of linguistic abilities.

The Communicative Approach is a set of principles about teaching including recommendations about method and syllabus where the focus is on meaningful communication not structure, use not usage. In this approach, students are given tasks to accomplish using language instead of studying the language. The syllabus is based primarily on functional development, not structural development. In essence, a functional syllabus replaces a structural syllabus. There is also less emphasis on error correction as fluency and communication become more important than accuracy. Authentic and meaningful language input becomes more important as well. The class becomes more student-centered as students accomplish their tasks with other students, while the teacher plays more of an observer role. The main features of the Communicative Approach can be summarized as follows:

- 1) Focus on meaning;
- 2) Communicative competence is the desired goal;
- 3) Learner-centered;
- 4) Fluency is the primary goal;
- 5) Students are expected to interact with other people, either in oral practice, through pair and group work, or in their writings;
- 6) Dialogues, if used, center around communicative functions;
- 7) Intrinsic motivation will spring from an interest in what is being communicated by the language;
- 8) Task-based.

From the outline above it can be seen that the structure of the lesson has been modified to raise students' interest in the language, but the communicative competence remains the main goal of the Communicative Approach method, the main difference in achieving this goal being words and word combinations memorized, not phrases or entire dialogues. Having a set of learned words and expressions, students at every lesson are expected to produce their own phrases and sentences which, on the one hand, would be grammatically correct, on the other – created by students themselves.

The difficulty of teaching a foreign language by means of the Communicative Approach method is lack of structures that would aid students at the initial phase of language acquisition, for the structures they produce are modeled after the syntactic structures of English. Another difficulty is that it is very difficult to explain to students why a foreign language “works” differently. Unless the students had taken a linguistics class at the high-school level, it is usually meaningless to explain to them the grammar of the target language, because most students do not have sufficient background in English grammar.

Another daunting task of teaching a foreign language to an American student is offering an incentive for learning an unfamiliar culture and language in a college environment, where most students are required to take a foreign language course. Only very few students decide to add a foreign language minor to their business administration, nursing or history major, most of the time the reason being their previous experience with the culture or the language. Perhaps at the heart of the problem is the fact that most American adults do not expect to use a foreign language, or, if they do, the time commitments required to achieve and retain a high level of skill, weighed against expected use, do not favor language learning. Given the widespread perception in the United States that foreign language skills are not of great utility, the motivation for foreign language learning will remain weak. Until this situation changes, it will be very difficult to radically alter the existing foreign language system. Were adult demand for language skills to increase, student and faculty commitment to lengthening the training process would surely follow.

Bibliography

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