

Teaching under the influence

grammar-translation method direct method silent way communicative approach
task-based learning community language learning audio-lingual method suggestopedia
content language integrated learning and immersion total physical response

A look at the methods behind the madness

Every teacher was a learner once upon a time. What influence did your teachers' methods have on you as a learner? And how have different teaching methods influenced the way you teach today?

If you're reading this, you probably are, have been, or are about to be a language teacher. You almost certainly are or have been a language learner, too. The activity that follows is designed to make you reflect on both experiences. Each of the texts describes a different approach to teaching. Read the descriptions and then decide if 1) it reflects your experience as a learner and 2) it has some influence on your teaching. Tick all the boxes that apply to you.

Next, see if you can match the paragraphs with the teaching methods in the box at the top of this page. When you've done this, read the article, which sets these methods in their historical context. This will allow you to check your answers and might give you an insight into where you and your teachers learnt (or acquired!) the tricks of the trade.

A In groups, students carry out an oral communication task with a clearly defined outcome. They do this in L2 with no linguistic support from the teacher. Next, groups report to the class on the outcome of the task. As they prepare their report the teacher helps students to express what they want to say. Students may then listen to native speakers doing the same task and analyze the language used before repeating the task to improve their performance.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

B Language is presented orally, and practice consists of the imitation, drilling and memorization of sentences and dialogues. Recorded material is used and may contain gaps in which students have to respond to prompts. Mistakes are rigorously corrected, vocabulary is minimized until basic structures are mastered, and there is no language analysis until students are familiar with a target structure.

- I experienced this as a learner.
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Teaching method _____

C A group of learners converse about a topic they choose. In early lessons learners might do this in L1. The teacher, who stands outside the group, helps the group to express their messages in L2, and these messages are recorded. The conversation that emerges is reviewed and analyzed in a later class.

- I experienced this as a learner.
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Teaching method _____

D The teacher presents grammar rules in L1. Students then practise applying these rules by translating sentences and texts into and out of L2 with the aid of bilingual wordlists. Oral practice rarely goes beyond the reading aloud of their finished translations.

- I experienced this as a learner.
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Teaching method _____

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E At first students just listen and are not expected to speak until they feel ready. When they do, the teacher reacts to meaning, not form. There is a focus on vocabulary but there is no reference to grammar. Teachers may include structures they think students are ready to learn in their speech but won't draw attention to them.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

F The teacher, who rarely speaks, uses coloured Cuisenaire rods to represent structures and students apply their minds to working out structures and how to use them in situations that are also defined using rods. Pronunciation is dealt with using Fidel charts on which colours represent L2 phonemes.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

G Classroom practice will vary considerably depending on the teacher. There may be a textbook and an overt grammar syllabus or students may dictate class content with the teacher introducing and focusing on language as the need arises. But there will be regular opportunities for learners to practise real communication in L2.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

H Rather than studying L2 as a separate subject, L2 is the medium for studying another subject. Students may attend a history class conducted exclusively in the target language, or learn how to cook in L2, for example.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

I In the early stages of learning, students are only expected to react physically to the teacher's commands and are not required to speak until they have received about 120 hours of tuition. When they do start speaking, there is little correction at first, but correction increases as their speaking develops.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

J In a brightly decorated classroom, 12 students sit in a circle in reclining chairs. Students get a new name in L2 and a new identity. A dialogue and its translation are introduced and discussed; then the teacher recites the dialogue against a background of slow, Baroque music.

- I experienced this as a learner.
- This has an influence on my teaching.

Teaching method _____

Answers:

A Task based learning; **B** Audio-lingualism; **C** Community language learning; **D** Grammar translation method;
E Direct method; **F** The silent way; **G** The communicative approach; **H** Content language integrated learning and immersion; **I** Total physical response; **J** Suggestopedia

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A brief history of EFL

How are second languages learnt? And what's the best way to teach them?

Everything we do as teachers can be traced back to attempts to answer the two questions above. What follows is a brief account of the historical context in which theories became teaching methods. The story is complex and at times confusing. And as always with history, what parades as fact is often just interpretation. Or misinterpretation!

It all started back in the 18th century. People had been learning foreign languages ever since the advent of commerce and foreign conquests but this was when foreign languages started to appear on school curricula, requiring a systematic approach to teaching them. This was generally done in much the same way that Latin was taught and by the 19th century what we now call the *grammar-translation method* was the standard model. But an increase in travel in the second half of the 19th century created the need to speak foreign languages and the only oral practice students got in the grammar-translation classroom was the reading aloud of finished translations. It was noted (not for the first

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time) that children learn to speak with no reference to grammar at all and a method was launched which put oral proficiency at the top of the agenda. The *direct method* was the first of many so-called natural methods that claim to teach a second language the way first languages are learnt and it achieved worldwide publicity through the Berlitz schools. Classes were small, and there was plenty of drilling and correction, but no L1 and no rules.

Grammar-translation and one form or another of the direct method dominated EFL teaching right up to



the 1950s. But as applied linguistics matured into a scientific discipline, both were increasingly called into question. In Britain, work on word frequency, structural complexity and language use in real-life contexts provided objective criteria for deciding what to teach and when to teach it, and emphasized the importance of introducing new language in situations where students might need to use it. By the 1950s *situational language teaching* had emerged as the standard EFL approach. Its influence was later reflected by the success of the *Streamline* textbook series.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, US entry into World War II created the need to teach oral proficiency in foreign languages quickly to large numbers of troops. This sparked off major changes in the way languages were taught, changes that found a strong ally in the late 1950s in behavioural psychology. The *audio-lingual method* was born. Speech became just another habit to be acquired.

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No rules, no need to even comprehend (not at first, anyway). As a recent advert says: *You listen, you repeat, you understand!* Countless learn-in-a-month audio-based courses hit (and continue to hit) the marketplace.

The audio-lingual method was influential in the 1960s but the humanistic values that shaped the times led in the 1970s to a series of methods that focused more fully on learners' needs and abilities. The *silent way*, developed by Caleb Gattegno, saw foreign language learning as an intellectually engaging process of problem-solving and discovery. The teacher remains silent and guides the learning process, while responsibility for working out the rules falls on the learner. *Community language learning*, devised by American psychologist Charles Curran, was based on humanistic counselling techniques. Learning is seen not only as an intellectual process, but also as an emotionally engaging group experience. The group decides what happens with the teacher, or "knower", in the role of consultant. And from Eastern Europe came *suggestopedia*. By inducing a relaxed but aware mental state in the learner through the use of music, classroom décor and ritualized teacher behaviour, Bulgarian psychiatrist Georgi Lozanov claimed that the power of the memory could be optimized, resulting in greatly accelerated learning. The 1970s also brought *total physical response* (TPR), a natural method developed by psychologist James Asher and based on the observation that children learn in stress-free environments by responding to commands before they start speaking. And, last but far from least, there was the hugely influential *communicative approach*. But more about that later.

The 1980s saw the *natural approach*, and with it linguist Stephen Krashen's seminal views on how languages are learnt. Krashen claimed that language learning is a subconscious process of acquisition. The human brain is geared to acquire structures in a predetermined natural order, and only exposure to language we understand (comprehensible input)

can activate this process. Language emerges in its own time, errors and all. Consequently, teachers adhering to the natural approach expose their students to as much comprehensible input as they can and focus on meaning rather than reacting to form. Many now contest the idea that formal study cannot lead to acquisition, but the concept has taken such a firm foothold in EFL thinking that whether or not acquisition takes place is one of the main criteria used to judge methods past and present. It gives extra force to TPR and Asher's claim that what you understand you will later produce automatically. Acquisition theory also provides a rationale for *immersion teaching*, an approach that has developed to meet the linguistic needs of people who live in

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bilingual communities. Students study subjects in both languages from the day they start school, often with no formal language teaching at all. On a smaller scale, *content teaching*, the idea that language can be learnt through studying another subject (like cookery, for example) in the target language, also draws on acquisition theory.

So where are we now? It is impossible to make sense of current EFL teaching, especially in the West, without reference to the *communicative approach*. This grew out of sociolinguistics in the 1970s and the view that there is more to communication than just grammar and vocabulary. Communication involves *communicative competence* – the ability to make yourself understood in socially appropriate ways. The claim is that L2 is learnt best when the learner struggles to communicate real meanings. Nowadays most teachers and students take for granted the need for real communication in class but EFL history clearly shows that this has not always been the case! Within the communicative approach itself the precise role of communication is a moot

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point. The so-called weak form of the approach sees communicative activities as opportunities for students to practise new language and develop fluency. This weak communicative approach has had the most far-reaching impact on the EFL world, probably because it has meant adapting rather than rejecting existing methods. But *task-based learning*, one of the most talked about of recent methods, can be traced back to the so-called *strong communicative approach*, which holds that communicative competence can develop only if students are thrown in at the deep end and required to carry out tasks that demand real-life communication. Communication comes first, and new language is introduced only if students need it to communicate; it is never studied for its own sake. In task-based learning, students start by carrying out a communicative task with no help from the teacher, though focusing on language use once a task is completed is accepted as an aid to acquisition.

We also know much more about English vocabulary than we did before. Thanks to the arrival of corpuses (enormous databases of recorded examples of spoken and written language), we can understand more about how English works. This brings us beyond grammar and vocabulary, and into the area of what is sometimes called *lexicogrammar*. The *lexical approach*, developed by Michael Lewis in the 1980s, takes vocabulary as the main focus for syllabus design and classroom teaching. It looks at word frequency and collocation (how words go together). As more and more corpus data becomes available, the influence of the lexical approach has been seen more in contemporary teaching materials.

There is no shortage of material available to language teachers. Some argue that there is even too much material, that teachers are over-reliant on it. Dogme ELT is the name of a loose collective of teachers who argue for a pedagogy of “bare essentials, unburdened by the excesses of materials and technology”. Dogme ELT was co-founded in the late 1990s by Scott Thornbury, who argued that ELT needed a movement similar to the Danish film movement Dogme95, whose founders and followers produce films using minimal means for maximum effect.

And where does it all go from here? Lately, there is talk that ELT has grown out of methods. We live now in what the educationalist B. Kumaravadivelu calls a “post-method condition”. This means that teachers can choose the best practice from a variety of approaches, selecting them and shaping them in ways which are appropriate to their own classrooms. This has also sometimes been called an *eclectic approach*.

However, is there another wave of methods around the corner? Will the increased role of technology in classrooms and in the home lead to the development of a new way of learning? Or will the devices we use prompt us back towards an older method such as the direct method? As knowledge of the workings of the human brain develops, will methodology take a new path altogether? It would be interesting to know how our students will look back tomorrow on the way they were taught today.