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THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING METHODOLOGY

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Abstract

The article examines the theoretical foundations of foreign language teaching methodology: its relationship with linguistics, psychology, pedagogy, and sociolinguistics, as well as the main theories of language acquisition (behaviorism, the cognitive approach, sociocultural theory, and the input, output, and interaction hypotheses) and the concept of communicative competence. It demonstrates how these theories have influenced the development of teaching approaches and methods and what conclusions teachers can draw from them.

Keywords

foreign language teaching methodology, theoretical foundations, language acquisition, communicative competence, approaches and methods.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются теоретические основы методики преподавания иностранных языков: связь методики с лингвистикой, психологией, педагогикой и социолингвистикой, а также основные теории усвоения языка (бихевиоризм, когнитивный подход, социокультурная теория, гипотезы входа, выхода и взаимодействия) и концепция коммуникативной компетенции. Показано, как эти теории повлияли на развитие подходов и методов обучения и какие выводы из них может сделать преподаватель.

Ключевые слова: *методика преподавания иностранных языков, теоретические основы, усвоение языка, коммуникативная компетенция, подходы и методы.*

Foreign language teaching methodology is the science that studies the aims, content, methods and means of teaching foreign languages. A teacher can follow a course book without knowing the theory behind it, but sooner or later every teacher must decide why one activity is better than another, why students make certain mistakes and why a method that works in one group fails in another. These questions cannot be answered by experience alone. They require a theoretical background that explains what language is and how people learn it. Anthony (1963, pp. 63–67)[1] described the relationship between theory and practice in three levels: an approach is a set of beliefs about the nature of language and language learning, a method is a plan for presenting language material that follows from an approach, and a technique is a particular activity in the classroom. This article reviews the main theoretical sources of the approach level: linguistic, psychological and sociocultural, and shows how they shaped the methods used today.

Every method contains a view of language. In the structural view, language is a system of related elements, such as sounds, words and sentence patterns, and learning a language means mastering these structures. This view led to methods in which grammar is presented in a fixed order and practised through drills. In the functional view, language is a means of doing things, for example asking, refusing, apologising and persuading, so the syllabus is organised around communicative functions and topics. In the interactional view, language is a tool for building and maintaining social relationships, and learning takes place through conversation. The shift from structure to communication was strongly influenced by the concept of communicative competence. Hymes (1972, pp. 269–293)[2] argued that a speaker needs to know not only whether a sentence is grammatically correct, but also whether it is appropriate, possible and actually used in a given situation. Canale and Swain (1980, pp. 1–47)[3] applied this idea to language teaching and described communicative competence as the combination of grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. Grammatical

[1] Anthony, E. M. (1963). Approach, method and technique. English Language Teaching, 17(2), 63–67
[2] Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), Sociolinguistics (pp. 269–293). Harmondsworth: Penguin
[3] Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. Applied Linguistics, 1(1), 1–47.

competence covers vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. Sociolinguistic competence is the ability to use language appropriately for the situation and the partner. Strategic competence is the ability to solve communication problems, for example by paraphrasing when a word is forgotten. As a result, the aim of teaching moved from correct sentences to effective communication.

Theories of learning influenced methodology as strongly as theories of language. Behaviourism explained learning as the formation of habits through stimulus, response and reinforcement. Applied to languages, it suggested that students should imitate correct models, repeat them many times and receive immediate correction. This is the theoretical basis of the audio-lingual method with its dialogues and pattern drills (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, pp. 53–69)[4]. The behaviourist explanation was seriously challenged by Chomsky (1959, pp. 26–58)[5], who showed that children create and understand sentences they have never heard before, so language cannot be only a collection of habits. After this criticism, attention turned to the mental processes of the learner, and learning began to be seen as an active process in which students form hypotheses about the language and test them. Three later hypotheses are particularly important for classroom teaching. Krashen (1982, pp. 20–30)[6] proposed that learners acquire language when they understand input that is slightly above their present level. This idea explains the importance of listening and reading and of teacher talk that is clear and adapted to the learners. Swain (1985, pp. 235–253) [7]argued that input is not enough: when learners have to produce language, they notice what they cannot yet say and they test new forms, so speaking and writing tasks are necessary. Long (1996, pp. 413–468)[8] emphasised interaction: when learners and partners negotiate meaning, by asking for repetition, checking understanding and rephrasing, input becomes comprehensible and

[4] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). Approaches and methods in language teaching (2nd ed.). Cambridge

[5] Chomsky, N. (1959). A review of B. F. Skinner's Verbal Behavior. Language, 35(1), 26–58.

[6] Krashen, S. D. (1982). Principles and practice in second language acquisition. Oxford: Pergamon Press. pp. 20–30.

[7] Swain, M. (1985). Communicative competence: Some roles of comprehensible input and comprehensible output in its development. In S. Gass & C. Madden (Eds.), Input in second language acquisition (pp. 235–253). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

[8] Long, M. H. (1996). The role of the linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. C. Ritchie & T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), Handbook of second language acquisition (pp. 413–468). San Diego: Academic Press.

learners receive feedback. Together these three ideas support classroom practice in which students listen, read, speak and write in meaningful activities.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory adds that learning is a social process. Development takes place in the zone of proximal development, which is the distance between what a learner can do alone and what the learner can do with help from a teacher or a more capable partner (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)[9]. In language teaching this means that the teacher should give support, call scaffolding, and then reduce it as learners become more independent. It also explains the value of pair and group work: students learn language by using it with other people before they can use it alone. Pedagogical principles complete the theoretical background. Modern methodology is learner-centred: teachers consider the needs, motivation, age, previous experience and learning styles of their students. It also stresses the unity of teaching, learning and assessment: aims are stated clearly, activities are chosen to reach them, and progress is checked by evidence. Finally, methodology draws on the principle of consciousness and activity, according to which students learn best when they understand what they are learning and take an active part in the lesson.

The development of methods can be seen as a response to changing theories. The grammar-translation method viewed language as a set of rules and vocabulary lists to be translated. The direct method reacted against it and taught spoken language through demonstration and without translation. The audio-lingual method combined structural linguistics and behaviourism. Communicative language teaching appeared after the concept of communicative competence and the interaction research: it uses information gaps, role plays and discussions so that learners practise real communication. Task-based learning developed this direction by organising lessons around tasks with a clear outcome, which gives learners a reason to negotiate meaning. None of these methods has been proved the best for all learners; each of them reflects a particular view of language and learning. Understanding theory helps the teacher in several ways. First, it allows the teacher to choose methods and activities on the basis of reasons and not

[9] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. p. 86.

fashion. Second, it helps in explaining learners' errors: some errors show the influence of the first language, others show that the learner is testing a hypothesis. Third, it encourages combining ideas from different approaches. Most experienced teachers today use an eclectic approach: they may use a short drill to practise a difficult pattern, a role play to develop fluency and a task to integrate skills. Such a choice is justified when the teacher knows what each technique can and cannot do. Finally, theory supports reflection. A teacher who asks why an activity worked or failed is already doing methodological research on a small scale. Theory also guides lesson planning. A teacher who accepts the idea of comprehensible input will prepare listening or reading material at a suitable level; one who accepts the output hypothesis will include a speaking or writing stage; and one who values interaction will organise pair work with a clear communicative purpose. In the same way, the sociocultural view suggests that new language should be modelled first, practised with support and used independently at the end of the lesson. Assessment should also follow the aims: if the aim is communicative competence, a test of grammar rules alone is not enough, and learners should be asked to perform communicative tasks, for example to take part in a dialogue or to write a short message. Thus, each stage of a lesson, from the warm-up to the feedback, can be connected to a theoretical reason, and this connection makes teaching more conscious and more effective.

The theoretical backgrounds of foreign language teaching methodology include linguistic, psychological and sociocultural sources. Linguistics defines what is taught, and the concept of communicative competence has made communication the main aim. Psychology explains how learners acquire language and why input, output and interaction are all necessary. Sociocultural theory and pedagogy show the role of the teacher, the group and the learner's own activity. A teacher who knows these foundations can understand why methods change, select techniques thoughtfully and adapt them to real learners. In this way theory and practice are connected: practice tests theory, and theory gives practice a direction. For this reason, the study of theoretical foundations is the first step for every future teacher who wants to teach thoughtfully and to keep developing professionally.

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