

# Language Teaching Methodology: Historical Development and Contemporary Issues

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## Abstract

This paper captures the historical development of language teaching methods over the years. It analyses the different language teaching methods and discusses their strengths and weaknesses. This paper also touches on the different approaches that gave rise to various methods of language teaching. This paper adopts a descriptive approach. The paper finds that in Nigeria, those involved in making language education policies are still struggling to keep abreast with latest developments in language teaching methods. The paper also finds that adopting just one particular method of language teaching may not suffice for modern language teaching given the dynamic nature of language itself and the teaching methods that are evolving in tune with advancements in the contemporary times. New trends in language teaching methods are discussed. There are many contemporary issues on language teaching methods that are yearning for the attention of education policy makers, those that ensure implementation of these policies and the language teachers as well. This paper advocates that Nigeria should keep abreast with contemporary developments in language teaching which emphasis communicative competence and carry out a gradual overhaul of the system which may entail improving upon or dropping some methods if necessary.

**Keywords:** Language Teaching, Theories, Methods, Applied Linguistics, Second Language Teaching (SLT)

## 1.0 Introduction

Anagbogu, Mbah and Eme (2010) define language as “a means which human beings have devised for communicating ideas, feelings, emotions, desires, etc. through complex vocal or unwritten symbols” (p.1). Agbedo (2000) sees language as a system of rules and principles of human communication and also as one of the most necessary and intricate of all social skills. Wardhaugh (1998) opines that “a language is what the members of a particular society speak and when two or more people communicate with each other in speech, we call the system of communication they employ a code” (p.1). We can also say that language is a set of common codes and symbols employed or used by those who share it to communicate and relate among themselves. Ezeude (2007) cites Richard and Rodgers (1995) who describe “language as a vehicle for communicating meanings and messages” (p.203).

It is imperative to note that all these definitions of language identify or recognizes both the structural and communicative aspects of language. The foregoing definitions of language by various scholars gives us the understanding that language has form, structure, rules as code and has the functional use for communication. Hence, we can infer that any approach or method employed in language teaching should adequately cater to both aspects and not emphasize one to the detriment of the other. In other words, any teaching method for language should not only focus on language as a vehicle for social interaction and communication but also focus on language as a form that is well organized in code. Therefore, the focus of any language teaching method should be to ensure that the learner grasp both the linguistic competence and the communicative competence. This is in line with the view of Corder (1975) as regards language teaching that we do not teach language for its own sake. Language is taught so that our pupils can communicate and be communicated with, so that they may convey meanings and understand meaning, so that they may enter into satisfactory mutual relations with native speakers or writers of the language. That is to say, language teaching should take notice of the communicative use of language.

There are several definitions and contributions from different authors as to what teaching stands for. Ezeude (2007) observes that “teaching is generally seen as system of activities designed to induce learning”. He further opines that “the act of teaching is therefore, a dynamic interaction of individuals – teacher and learners - to bring about a permanent change in behavior” (p.204). According to National Teachers Institute Book 3 (nd), teaching can be defined as a process of making it possible for pupils to learn.

Language teaching in this paper is not limited to the teaching of foreign languages like English and French which are taught as L<sub>2</sub>. The paper also has implications for the teaching of Nigerian Indigenous languages like Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik etc. which can be taught as either L1 or L2 or Alternate Language (AT). Anyanwu and Ikonne (2007) observe that in teaching indigenous languages, it is important that the teacher be conversant with different methods and strategies so that s/he can vary methods as situations warrant, thus, making his teaching better and equally exciting to the students. Anyanwu and Ikonne (2007) note the following language teaching

methods as suitable for some aspects of Nigerian languages:

These methods of teaching can be by lecturing, dramatization, story telling, activities, discussion, questioning and inquiring, discovery through project work, peer/group work, translation, natural conversation, demonstration, excursion and field trips, drilling, illustration, problem solving. The eclectic method can also be used.

## 2.0 Major Theories in Language Teaching

Ezeude (2007) describes approach in the context of language teaching from the perspective of Richards and Rodgers (1995), “an approach is a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning. An approach is axiomatic. It describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught” (p.204). Ezeude also opines that approach is the level which assumptions and beliefs about language and language learning are specified. Wilkins (1978) looks at the ways linguistics and language teaching are related by examining some of the linguist’s attitudes towards language. These attitudes according to him include those that represent the break with tradition. Wilkins further observes that issues arising from these attitudes are close to many assumptions made in language teaching noting “in some cases the influence of linguistics has been felt directly, in some, it is still potential, while else where direct results in language teaching are not expected” (1978, p.4). Stubbs (1986) notes that all language teaching takes place on the basis of some theory. Anasiudu (2001) comments that the different theories about the nature of language give rise to different views of what language is which in turn determines the approach one may emphasize in language teaching. He asserts that this emphasis may be on language as a system of forms (formalist approach – formalism) or as a means of communication (functionalist approach – functionalism). Hence, formalism and functionalism have been identified as two main linguistic theories that influence language teaching.

In understanding or gaining more insights into what an approach is in the context of this paper, let us turn to Bell (1981):

An approach is an orientation to the problem of language learning which derives from an amalgam of linguistic and psychological insights into the nature of language and the nature of the learning process. Well articulated, an approach is a Theory of Applied Linguistics which seeks to explain the phenomenon of language-learning in terms of which will assist the learner to achieve his goal (p.75).

Anasiudu (2001) identifies three grammars (Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar, and Transformational Generative Grammar) as those that support or make input to the Formalist approach to language teaching methods. On the functionalist approach to language teaching, Anasiudu (2001) notes that language is a means of exchanging information, dynamic in nature with an open system. This is a tradition away from the formalists that see language as a form that is static with a closed system. He further identifies different disciplines that made input into the functionalist approach to language teaching as including linguistics, philosophy, sociolinguistics, semantics, pragmatics and psychology. Agbedo (2007) opines that language teaching stands to gain a lot from the functionalist approach to language teaching when viewed from the theoretical standpoint of ethnographic or sociolinguistic approach to language teaching which lays much emphasis on communicative language teaching. Agbedo (2007) emphasizes the input and relevance of sociolinguistics in the functionalist approach to language teaching. Asserting this view Agbedo (2007) cites Littlewood’s (1981) position that the learner “must develop strategies for relating these (linguistic) structures to their communicative functions in real situations and real time ...” Littlewood concludes that language teachers “must provide learners ample opportunities to use the language themselves for communicative purposes,” (p.343).

Mmadike and Mbagwu (2008) discuss different theoretical views about the nature of language and note that these views inform the approaches and methods adopted in language teaching (cf. Richards and Rodgers,). The formalists insist on forms and structures of language while the functionalists insist on the appropriate use of language in context. This dichotomy in the approach to language teaching according to Nkamigbo and Eme (2009) leads to the distinction between linguistic competence from Chomsky (1957) and communicative competence from Hymes (1971). On this, Agbedo (2007) notes:

Communicative competence, a term established by Dell Hymes (1971), is the knowledge needed by a speaker or hearer, but is much more broadly based than the linguistic competence, of Chomkian linguistics. Instead of referring only to the knowledge of linguistic forms, Hudson (1980) observes that it includes our knowledge of how to use linguistic forms appropriately.... had also drawn a similar distinction. The goal of a student of language, notes Hymes, should be to account for the fact that a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate (p. 343).

Iloene (2007) discusses the two prominent approaches to language teaching, the formalist and functional approaches. According to Iloene, the formalist approach is a product of the interplay of structuralist linguistic principles and behaviourist psychological tradition whereby language is considered a system of structures that could be learned through a mechanical process of habit formation. This orientation, she observes, tends towards the orientation of decontextualizing language. Iloene (2007) notes that the criticisms that trailed the formalist

orientation from Chomsky (1957) led to the dimension of functional and communicative potential of language. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) observe that Transformational Generative Grammarians while revolutionizing linguistics in the late 1950's and 1960's alienated social scientists (Sociolinguists inclusive) by dismissing language use (performance) as a source of data for doing linguistic research. Chomsky, further note that Chomsky (1965) defined the goal of their work as describing knowledge (competence) underlying performance. The functional communicative approach to language teaching is also known as notional approach. On the functionalist approach, Anasiudu (2001) observes that it has input from different disciplines including not only linguistics, philosophy and sociolinguistics but also such others as Psychology. Stubbs (1986) asserts that the functional view of language in use will be of more direct relevance to teaching practice than a purely abstract view of a language as system and structure noting that a view of language in use also starts from everyone's every day experience of language.

Mekiliuwa (2008) identifies Contrastive Analysis and Error Analysis as approaches in language teaching. Umaru (2005) asserts that Contrastive and Error Analysis are approaches to language teaching and observes that they are approaches adopted in the study of learner errors. It is worthy to note that Needs Analysis is also considered an approach in language teaching. Needs Analysis lays emphasis on the needs of the language learner. What is the need of the language learner? This is what gave rise to the concept of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and lately Igbo for Specific Purposes (ISP). These lay emphasis on language in use.

The interplay among approach, method, technique and procedure is well captured in the following. According to Richards and Schmidt (2002)

Approach in language teaching, is the theory, philosophy and principles underlying a particular set of teaching practices. Language teaching is sometimes discussed in terms of three related aspects: approach, method, and technique. Different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learned (the approach) imply different ways of teaching language (the method), and different methods make use of different kinds of classroom activity (the technique). Examples of different approaches are the aural-oral approach (see Audio lingual method), the Cognitive Code Approach, the Communicative approach, etc. Examples of different methods which are based on a particular approach are the Audio lingual, the Direct Method, etc. Examples of techniques used in particular methods are Drills, Dialogue, Role-plays, sentence completion, etc. (pp. 29-30).

### 3.0 An Overview of Language Teaching Methods

In this segment of the paper, we shall attempt to capture the chronological development of language teaching methods over the years and discuss which method came as result of the weakness of the preceding ones. And also consider which one adopts or co-opts approaches from the other. Again we shall consider approaches that gave rise to the different methods. In other words, on which linguistic view or approach does a particular method rely on? NTI (nd) observes that the methodology adopted by the teacher may hinder or promote learning. It further notes that a teacher needs to have knowledge of a variety of teaching methods he can select from in the teaching-learning process.

Ezeude (2007) opines that "method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon the selected approach" (p.204). He notes that a method is procedural and within one approach, there can be many methods. Ezeude further notes that a method is the level at which choices are made about particular skills to be taught and the order in which the content will be presented. The National Teachers' Institute Book 3 (nd.) refers to methodology as the ways by which the teacher presents his materials to learners and engages them in the task at hand.

Bell (1981) opines that a method is the application of the insights which constitute an approach to the problem of language learning. He notes that a method will ordinarily; has a pedagogical grammar or grammars associated with it and principles which guide the creation of such grammars, the selection of elements to be taught and of the techniques for teaching them.

Mekiliuwa (2008) observes that language teaching methods refers to classroom techniques and practices that are used in teaching of a second language. Umaru (2005) discusses teaching method as collections of procedures or techniques systematically employed for the purpose of efficient learning.

In this segment of the paper, we shall attempt to capture the chronological development of language teaching methods over the years and discuss which method came as result of the weakness of the preceding ones. And also consider which one adopts or co-opts approaches from the other. Again we shall consider approaches that gave rise to the different methods. In other words, on which linguistic view or approach does a particular method rely on? The National Teachers' Institute Book 3, observes that the methodology adopted by the teacher may hinder or promote learning. It further notes that a teacher needs to have knowledge of a variety of teaching methods he can select from in the teaching-learning process.

In what follows, we shall look at these methods one after the other, and do a 'synthesis' as it were, of the contributions of various scholars.

### **3.1 The Grammar Translation Method (GT)**

The GT Method is traced to the traditional approach to the teaching of Latin and Greek between the 17<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries though later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century the method began to be used for other modern languages including French and German, English. It started in Germany and spread throughout Europe. And by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many schools have adopted the GT method. Arthur (2010) observes that goals of the GT Method are to learn a language in order to read its literature. Grammar is taught deductively, by presentation and study of grammar rules, which are then practiced through translation exercises.

This method lays emphasis on grammar and translation. It encourages reading and writing above communication. Reading and writing were done from classical texts. Reading aloud was also adopted. Then in teaching Latin and Greek the focus was on correct grammar (grammatical rules, forms, structure), slot-filling, memorization, recitation, presentation of bilingual vocabulary lists and translation of literary texts but allows little room for pronunciation drills. Translation exercises were done from L1 to L2. Hence, the focus was on written language then spoken language. Anasiudu (2002) observes that GT was highly prescriptive. It was considered too rule governed. GT method assumes that once the learner masters the rules he has attained competence in the target language. Under GT, teaching exercises and questions are done in the native language of the learner. The GT Method inculcated in the learners capability of mental description by logical analysis of language into phrases, clauses, sentences and memorization of the parts of speech. This is an emphasis on ability to analyze and not an ability to use language in real life situations. Thus, GT Method produces students that know the grammatical rules but lack communicative competence.

Ezeude (2007) remarks that the principal defect of the GT Method includes the neglect of communication skills with little or no stress attached to accurate pronunciation and intonation. The GT Method is obviously the oldest and most traditional method of language teaching but it is pertinent to note that with all its shortcomings, it is very much in use for language teaching in Nigeria. Translation in language teaching can be useful but not when aural-oral skills (listening and speaking) as well as communicative competence are neglected since language is largely speech used for communication. One could say that this kind of situation could be said to be akin to the kind of experience most of us had doing French elective courses in the university for four years. Having a grasp of the grammar, rules and structure of the language to fetch us As but never had the communicative competence in French. This is in contrast with the Alliance Francaise experience where much attention is paid to communication.

The label GT came about by ‘detractors’ who tried to point out that this method does not produce learners that are proficient in the use of the language. It was considered too rigid with rules that do not make for language change.

### **3.2 The Direct Method (DM)**

The DM came as a result of reaction to GT. This method tries to recreate the exposure which children have acquiring language as they grow up. It entails reenacting the Stimulus-Response approach of the L1 acquisition. In this method every thing is said in the L2. In other words, teachers adopt the L2 and never used the learners’ mother tongue; hence, there was no need of translations. It lays emphasis on spoken language and avoids vocabulary lists and explanation of grammatical rules. It is assumed that the correct rules will be picked by the learners with time. Though in some cases most students claim to have benefited from the direct method like the case of Berlitz language schools, some do not. It emphasizes hearing, speaking, reading and writing (at stage of learning). Here, teachers use instructional materials such as charts, pictures, to make teaching and learning more vivid. It requires teachers that are highly proficient in the target language. In this method the learners can only be as good as the teacher. ( Ezeude (2007)).

### **3.3 The Audio-Lingual Method (Aural-Oral method)**

This method came as a result of the attempt to improve on the Direct Method in the 1940s by coming up with more structural materials in teaching the students moving from the simple to the complex. The Audio-Lingual Method which was developed by Fries in the U.S.A was first employed by the U.S. in the 1940s under the Army Specialized Teaching Programme. The method was further improved upon in the 1950s. Students are expected to repeat after the teacher. It views language as behavior. It is influenced by the belief that since language is a habit, it could be developed by practice. The method is still in use today. This method has some influence from the Bloomfield Structuralist Linguistics that is greatly influenced by Behaviourism. The behaviourists approach is driven by the primacy of speech over writing, hence, oral drills are placed above writing and reading. This method was developed and extensively used during the Second World War, when it was employed in teaching soldiers foreign languages, this why it is sometimes called the army method. Ezeude (2007) observes that the increase attention given to foreign language teaching in the U.S.A. encouraged the development of this method noting that it draws from the army experience. He cites Brooks (1964) who suggested that the method be called the Audio-lingual instead of the less embracing aural-oral method.

### **3.4 The Army Specialised Training Programme (ASTP)**

As earlier noted the ASTP was hinged on the Audio-Lingual Method. It was used in organizing intensive

language teaching courses to military personnel. American participation in the Second World War brought with it a significant effect on language teaching. There was great need of service personnel who could speak German, French, Chinese, Japanese, Malay, and other foreign languages fluently. Hence, the government commissioned some renowned American Universities in 1942 to develop foreign language programmes that would be employed in the ASTP. Conversational or communicative proficiency was the aim of the programme. It was like immersion. The learners were made to 'eat the language, sleep the language, play the language, quarrel the language, express the language', in fact made to live the period of the programme in the target language.

### **3.5 The Audio-Visual Method**

The Audio-Visual Method also known as Global Method was developed in France in the 1950's (Ezeude, 2007). The method uses techniques such as integrated texts, recorded dialogues, and illustrations. Its approach is psycho-pedagogy rather than linguistics. Highlights of this method include teaching speaking, reading and writing. It uses drills to teach basic grammar and vocabulary. The method was later further developed in Britain and adopted in teaching children in the school system of developing countries.

Okoro (2004) cites Richards, J., Platt, J. and Weber, H (1985) who observe that the Audio-Visual Method assumes that language is learned through communication, translation can be avoided if new languages are taught in situations.

### **3.6 The Cognitive Code Method**

This method arose as a result of a reaction to the audio-lingual method and based on the idea that language is rule-governed. Hence, language learning is rule formation and not habit formation. The method is hinged on the belief that writing is as important as speech, thus, there is no need to overstress pronunciation since foreign language learners cannot sound exactly like the native speakers of the language. The method believes that language has to do with the mind; hence, the method focuses on the intellectual capability of the learner. It presents the contrastive features of both the target and source language.

Umaru (2005) notes that though some people view the cognitive code learning method as a modified version of the grammar-translation method, it seems to have had its roots in the Gestalt psychology and transformational linguistics. This method was criticized because it looks as if it was setting the hands of the clock back to the Grammar-Translation Method that insisted on knowledge of rules.

### **3.7 The Eclectic Method**

This method depends on the personal qualities of the teacher and his ability to get on well with the students. It does not follow any single method but uses a selection of techniques and adopts any technique or procedure. It believes that methods are complimentary. It holds that each method is in itself incomplete. Its weakness is ubiquity and lack of confidence. Larsen-Freeman and DeCarrico (2002) observe that pedagogical grammars are typically more eclectic, drawing on insights from formal and functional grammars as well as work on corpus linguistics, discourse analysis and pragmatics.

### **3.8 The Communicative Language Teaching Method (CLT)**

Probably the most recent method in language teaching, the CLT came as a result of dissatisfaction with pattern-practice most popular with the Audio-Lingual Method. Arthur (2010) observes that CLT takes pedagogical ideas from a wide range of methodological approaches and it is therefore adaptable to a range of different learner needs and styles. It emphasizes functions rather than forms of language with lessons and organized concepts such as 'asking for things' how to converse with others', 'how to deliver a speech in a meeting', 'how to address elders', e.t.c. (Agbede, 2011). That is focusing on the skills needed to express and understand different kinds of functions such as request, describing, expressing, expressing likes and dislikes etc. It tilts towards attempts to produce more appropriate materials for L2 language teaching which has a purpose (e.g English for Engineers; English for Non-Igbo Youth Corps Members serving in Igbo Land etc.). It uses notional syllabus and some other communicatively organized syllabi. This method emphasizes language use and the process of communication. Notional syllabi are designed to care of communicative information from the onset but also incorporating grammatical and structural factors. CLT adopts role play, simulation, drama, storytelling, group activities, dialogue, and conversation. It is essentially learner centred focusing on the learner and his communicative needs. Ezeude (2007) observes that the scope of the CLT had been expanded by mid 70s by both British and American proponents who now see it as an approach not just a method.

## **4.0 Contemporary Issues in Methods of Language Teaching**

Davies (2007) observes that the history of language teaching is, indeed, the history of methods and notes that different methods emerge and disappear and at the end of the day if one looks carefully it would be observed that a method had recycled itself after a decent interval. He further notes that since reliance on a particular method would likely lead to failure, it is inevitable that all methods will be challenged by new or revived alternatives.

Methods of language teaching are not static but dynamic. Ezeude captures this in the following:

Teaching and learning therefore, have their definite approaches and methods. These are dynamic and keep changing/improving with time, so that one does not deliver today's goods with vehicles of past

centuries...These constant changes in approaches and methods are functions of improvement on language teaching gadgets as result of daily advancement in science and technology. Language teaching has therefore gone beyond the simple use of chalk and board, through the audio-visual to the present day sophistication of computer aided programmes (p. 203).

Odo (2007) observes that within the last three decades, newer methods of teaching languages have emerged which he collectively refers to as “Humanistic Approach”. These include Suggestopedia, The Silent Method, Community Language Learning Method, Natural Method, Delayed Oral Practice Method, Total Physical Response Method, Teaching aids and Materials Method. Snow (2010) summarizes eight language teaching methods the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method, the Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, the Total Physical Response Method, and the Communicative Approach, but we shall present here his summary of the Silent Way, Suggestopedia Total Physical Response, the Community Language Teaching and Communicative Approach because they touch on the current trends.

According to Snow (2010) the theoretical basis of Gattegno's Silent Way is the idea that teaching must be subordinated to learning and thus students must develop their own inner criteria for correctness. All four skills – reading, writing, speaking, and listening – are taught from the beginning. Students' errors are expected as a normal part of learning; the teacher's silence helps foster self-reliance and student initiative. The teacher is active in setting up situations, while the students do most of the talking and interacting. (cf. Snow (2010)).

Suggestopedia, according to Lozanov's method seeks to help learners eliminate psychological barriers to learning. The learning environment is relaxed and subdued, with low lighting and soft music in the background. Students choose a name and character in the target language and culture, and imagine that person. Dialogues are presented to the accompaniment of music. Students just relax and listen to them being read and later playfully practice the language during an “activation” phase. (cf. Snow (2010)). Community language learning according to Curren's method, teachers consider students as “whole persons,” with intellect, feelings, instincts, physical responses, and desire to learn. Teachers also recognize that learning can be threatening. By understanding and accepting students' fears, teachers help students feel secure and overcome their fears, and thus help them harness positive energy for learning. The syllabus used is learner-generated, in that students choose what they want to learn in the target language. (cf. Snow (2010)).

Total physical response method according to Asher's approach begins by placing primary importance on listening comprehension, emulating the early stages of mother tongue acquisition, and then moving to speaking, reading, and writing. Students demonstrate their comprehension by acting out commands issued by the teacher; teachers provide novel and often humorous variations of the commands. Activities are designed to be fun and to allow students to assume active learning roles. Activities eventually include games and skits. (cf. Snow (2010)).

Coming to the communicative approach, it stresses the need to teach communicative competence as opposed to linguistic competence; thus, functions are emphasized over forms. Students usually work with authentic materials in small groups on communicative activities, during which they receive practice in negotiating meaning. (cf. Snow (2010)).

Ezeude (2007) bemoaning the backwardness in language teaching methodology in Nigeria, observes that the communicative approach to language teaching is yet to be put to practice because of lack of facilities. He laments that Nigeria still makes use of text books modeled after Grammar-Translation Method, when language teaching has gone through the phases of grammar-translation, (traditional method), direct method, audio-lingual methods ( making use of audio-visual aids, like film projectors, language laboratories, video and monitors etc.)

## 5.0 Conclusion

Many would agree that Nigeria is yet to come to terms with the current reality of new global trends and development in language teaching methods. Modern trends in language teachings tend to favour the Communicative Language Teaching Method because it seeks to address the communicative reality of language. Attention is now being paid to not only the forms and structures of language but also to the functional or communicative use of language which is underscored by the appropriate and practical use of language in context. It will be of no use to anybody, except for academic purposes, to study a language and not be able to communicate effectively with that language. Given the attention that the constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria and the National policy on Education (2004) places on English and French as well as the indigenous languages, there is the urgent need to put the country on the track of modernity as far as language teaching is concerned. What we have in the country now could well be described as ‘delivering today’s goods with yesterday’s tools’ (Ezeude, 2007, P. 212). Government at the three tiers should make a concerted effort at keeping the language teachers abreast with the current global trends in language teaching methodology by sponsoring the teachers and those that monitor or ensure implementation of educational policies for trainings. Furthermore, there should be effort made to replace obsolete teaching aids, books and equipment and also ensure that such obsolete tools do not find their way into our country again.

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