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Exploring a Successful Language Methodology for Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced English Language Courses at CIEX

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Abstract

This article presents synthetically, the theoretical fundamentals of language teaching related to the main topic and subtopics of a thesis to obtain the degree of MA in Applied Linguistics and English Teaching. The aim of this paper is to frame some language teaching theories and some language teaching methodologies. Along with the discussion of these topics, this work will also provide information about the most relevant language teaching methods and approaches as well as the recent communicative approaches that have emerged in the history of language teaching. This article concludes that a deep analysis of the theory related to the area of language teaching is the basis for the theoretical support and for the practical implementation of any successful teaching methodology.

Key words

Language teaching theories; methodology, approach and method concepts in language teaching; elements of language teaching method; approaches and methods in language teaching; communicative approaches.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta sintéticamente, los fundamentos teóricos del área de enseñanza de lenguas relacionados con el tema principal y los subtemas de una tesis para obtener el grado de Maestría en Lingüística Aplicada y Enseñanza del Inglés. El objetivo de este trabajo es enmarcar algunas teorías sobre enseñanza de lenguas y algunas metodologías de enseñanza. Junto con la discusión de estos temas, este documento también proveerá información acerca de los métodos y enfoques de enseñanza más relevantes que han surgido en la historia del área de enseñanza de lenguas. Este artículo concluye que un análisis profundo de la teoría relacionada al área de enseñanza de lenguas es la base para el soporte teórico y para la implementación práctica de cualquier metodología exitosa de la enseñanza de lenguas.

Palabras clave

Teorías de enseñanza de lenguas; conceptos de metodología, enfoque y método en la enseñanza de lenguas; elementos del método en la enseñanza de lenguas; métodos y enfoques en la enseñanza de lenguas; enfoques comunicativos.

Language teaching theories

As the area of language teaching evolves, some theories that explain language teaching emerged. Zahorik (1986, cited in Richards J., 2000) classifies teaching into three important conceptions: science-research conceptions, theory-philosophy conceptions, and art-craft conceptions; these conceptions are derived from different conceptions of teaching:
The science-research conceptions are the results of research which are supported by experimentation and investigation. To exemplify these conceptions, Zahorik takes into account: Operationalizing learning principles, a tested model, and doing what effective teachers do. Operationalizing learning principles are the development of teaching skills based on researches on memory, transfer, motivation, and other important learning factors. A tested model of teaching conceives good teaching in terms of specific acts produced by logical reasoning and research. The last approach has proposed teaching principles derived from studies made from effective teachers’ practices, classifying effective teachers as those who reach better performance on standardized tests.

Blum proposed a science-research theory (1984, cited in Richards J., 2000), in which he identifies twelve characteristics of effective language teaching: a well-planned curriculum will lead to clear instructions to relevant activities teachers should guide students through their lesson and should monitor their progress. Another important characteristic is that teachers should re-teach the lesson that students did not understand, moreover, the time of the class should be used for learning. The routines implemented by teachers should be efficient, trying to promote teamwork, and should be practiced in a positive relationship between teachers and students. Finally, for effective language teaching, teachers should have an excellent performance.

A second classification of theories is the Theory- Philosophy Conception. The theories which belong to this category are based on human values, self-awareness, working with others as humans, focusing on what is morally correct and what can work in a class. Some examples of these conceptions are the theory based approaches. These approaches are based on the use of reason or rational thought, it means that the methods of this approach are based on systematic and principled thinking and not on scientific research; communicative language teaching and the silent way are examples of this approach.

Other approaches that belong to the Theory- Philosophy conceptions are the humanistic approaches. These approaches consider humanistic conceptions of teaching and learning, such as feelings and emotions. Students in this situation have an active participation in learning, some examples of these approaches are: Community Language Learning and Reflective Teaching. It can be said that in the theory- philosophy conceptions, the participation of both teachers and students is essential for language teaching in contrast with the following conceptions.

The last category is Art-Craft Conceptions which considers teaching as an art or a craft. In these conceptions, the personality and skills of teachers are very important because teaching depends on their skills and personality. These approaches consider that a good teacher is capable of assessing certain situations and designing appropriate techniques and practices for that situation, considering each situation as unique. In these approaches teachers have to develop their own approach according to their needs and what they feel is the best for each situation (Richards J., 2000).

Methodology, approach, and method in language teaching

For this study, it is necessary to define the concepts “method, approach, and methodology”. Ochoa A. (2005) expresses that in scientific and technical contexts, the concept of methodology has been used as synonym of method. As a result, these concepts seem to be integrated.

Researchers have provided a variety of definitions that in most cases are similar. Thus, methodology and methods can be concepts that evoke misunderstanding; however, it is essential to consider methodology as a more general concept than a method. A methodology can make use of several methods while a method can make use of a wide range of
techniques and activities.

In early attempts to define these concepts, Anthony (1963, cited in Richards J. and Rogers T., 2003) defines method as a procedure for teaching a language, which is based on an approach. According to this author, an approach is a set of general teaching-learning theories and principles, which explain the nature of the language to be subsequently taught. An approach is in the first place of the hierarchy, it is global and several methods can belong to it. In this same issue, Anthony provides a distinction between a method and an approach. He defines approach as the assumptions and beliefs about language and language learning. He argues that a method is the practice of the theories which belong to an approach, according to the skills that teachers plan to develop, the contents they need to teach, and to the order the content should be taught.

For Ochoa A. (2005) a method is more specific. It is the systematic procedure to accomplish an objective, and it was defined as the procedures and techniques to reach a goal of a specific field of study.

Richards J. and Rodgers T. (2003) analyzed the concepts of approach and method from Anthony’s model. For them, an approach includes the theories and principles that form a philosophy of language, while a method is the procedure to teach a language derived from an approach. They suggest that approaches and methods are important for teaching languages, since they provide teachers with good practice and teaching skills. They consider that if teachers use the best approaches and methods, it will help them to improve the quality of their language teaching. They visualize an approach and a method from a level of design, where the objectives, syllabus, and contents are planned, but they add to Anthony’s model new variables, such as the learners’ and the teachers’ roles (Richards J. and Rogers T., 2003).

Larsen and Freeman (2000, cited in Mendez M., 2007) consider that methods are necessary for teachers for five reasons: The first one is that a method helps teachers to reflect about their teaching practice. The second reason is that teachers can choose, according to the assigned group, the method to use. The third one is that methods provide teachers with a methodological background which is part of the essential theoretical knowledge that teachers need to manage. The fourth reason to know methods is that they can present new alternatives of teaching which can challenge the teachers’ current practice. Finally, the fifth reason is that methods provide teachers with more techniques which can enrich their classes. So, teachers can take the good techniques and characteristics of different methods to reach students’ learning, according to the features of the group, the students’ characteristics, and the context.

Several authors have concluded that there is not a perfect method. This is the reason why the study of the methods and approaches in language teachers’ programs is analyzed and taught, since it allows knowing the changes and the most recent discoveries in this field. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is not a method able to solve all the problems that exist in the teaching-learning process. Beyond this, there is not an identical language class with the same conditions, characteristics, and context; precluding the existence of a perfect method for language teaching (Mendez M. 2007).

Rodgers T. (2001) defined methodology as the relationship between the theory and practice. The theories explain what language is, how a language is learned, and how a language should be taught. According to him, these theories are related to some “design features of language instruction”; He considers that these features should include: stated objectives, syllabus specifications, activities to use in the class, teachers’ role, students’ role, and materials.

For Rodgers T. language teaching methodology is an interrelated process in which theories of learning and teaching are the support of the design features, which are practiced in
class. Language teaching is a cycled process because the information gathered from the observation of teaching practice gives feedback to the instructional design features, and this information modifies or enriches the theoretical framework of language teaching. It can be clarified that inside a methodology methods and approaches are found: methods propose techniques and teaching practices, while approaches represent the philosophies of language teaching (Rodgers, T., 2001).

Richards, J. and Rodgers, T. (2003) proposed a model which describes the elements that form a method, this model includes: the approach, design, and procedure. This model presents similarities to the model proposed previously by Rodgers (2001) who described language teaching methodology in three components: Theory of language and learning, instructional design features, and observed teaching practices.

The first element of Richards and Roger’s model, “approach of a method” gathers a theory of the nature of language, which includes an explanation of the nature of language proficiency and a conception of the units of language structure. Besides that, it contains a theory of the nature of language learning which defines the psycholinguistic and cognitive processes in language learning and an explanation of the necessary conditions to have success in both these processes. Other important elements that are not mentioned in this model but are essential to model the teaching practice in the class are: language teaching theories and models; because the teachers’ beliefs about teaching and the sciences that compose their education model influence in their teaching decisions in the class.

The second element called design, includes the general and specific objectives of the method, a definition of the criteria taken into account to design the syllabus, the definition of the learning and teaching activities used in the classroom, the determination of the learners’ role, which considers the tasks students have to do, the participation of the students in choosing the content of the classes, and their role in the classroom as a processor, performer, initiator or problem solver. Another important sub-element in the design is the teachers’ role, this considers the function of the teachers, their participation in the syllabus design, the relationship between the teachers and students and the degree of responsibility in students’ learning. The last element is the role of the materials used in the classroom; here, it is very important to know the teachers’ assumptions about the materials, what kind of materials they use, and the relation between the materials and other inputs.

The third element of a method is the procedure. In this section, the classroom techniques are defined, and the practices and behaviors are presented when the method is put into practice; for example, the definition of the time, space, and equipment used for the class. Some other elements that are considered in the procedure are: The interactional patterns used by the teachers and the tactics and strategies that characterize the method (Richards, J. and Rodgers, T., 2003).

The concept of methodology in science in general, implies much more than a method. It refers to the theoretical analysis of the methods which belong to a certain field of study. The concept of methodology based on Ochoa, A. (2005) is “a body of practices, procedures and rules” that is used by researchers or by those who are involved in a discipline. Another definition is that a methodology is a group of methods and principles of a specific discipline.

Richards J. (1985, cited in Mendez M. 2007:33) defined methodology in the area of language teaching as a process of experimentation in which information is gathered, evaluated, and informed based on the target objectives; this information is used to research language learning and the communicative processes. It means that methodology works as a circled process, in which the experience and the data obtained help to provide feedback on the procedure of language learning, giving teachers
the opportunity to improve the language learning and teaching processes.

For this study, a language teaching methodology defines the principles of teaching English as a foreign language, which are derived from several language teaching approaches (language learning and teaching theories); meaning that methodology includes the conceptualization of the theory and the specification of the practice of a particular way of teaching a language. Furthermore, the use of the concept of teaching methodology in this study was selected, since it is more inclusive and flexible than the concept of teaching method. The concept of teaching methodology allows to consider the importance and the richness that teachers' knowledge, personality, teaching style, beliefs and experience provide to CIEX Methodology through their daily teaching practice.

Relevant language teaching methods and approaches

Every approach and method with their differences and characteristics have contributed to the development of language teaching and learning. In this section, some methods and approaches related to the studied principles of teaching methodology are presented.

The Direct Method is the most popular method of the natural methods. The natural methods stated that second language learning could be similar to first language acquisition, being the naturalistic principles of language learning. Sauveur (1826-1907, cited in Richards, J. and Rodgers, T., 2003) was a representative of this movement, he practiced oral interaction in the target language in the class and he made students speak through questions. This educator and some others thought that it was not necessary to translate the class in the mother language, and that learning occurred through demonstration and action, so teachers had to encourage the active and spontaneous use of the target language in the classroom and the new vocabulary was presented through mimic, demonstration, and pictures.

From the fundamentals mentioned above, the Direct Method emerged and its main principle is the use of the target language as a mean of instruction. Oral production was taught through questions and answers carefully graded between the teacher and students in small and rigorous classes. Teachers taught just everyday sentences and vocabulary. Concrete vocabulary was presented through demonstrations, pictures or realia, while abstract vocabulary was taught through associated ideas. Grammar rules were learned inductively. It means that rules were not explained and memorized; on the contrary, they were understood by students through practice. For this method, accuracy in speaking and listening was important (Richards J. and Rodgers T., 2003).

The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching is another important method. This approach proposes principles of selection of lexical and grammatical contents, principles of grading and organization of the contents and principles of presentation which includes the techniques to present and practice in the class. This approach is characterized by the following principles: Language is firstly presented orally followed by the written form. The mean of language instruction is the target language, the content is presented and practiced by situations. The approach has a specific procedure to choose the vocabulary; the grammar is taught from the simple to the complex forms, and finally reading and writing skills are practiced.

The theory of language of the Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching is based on the perspective of a type of structuralism in which the structure of the speech is the central part of language, and the oral practice of structures was the main activity in the class, organized in situations to make students practice the language. The theory of learning was a “behaviorist habit-learning theory”. According to Palmer (1957, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2003: 36-44) there are three processes to learn a language: the first one
is receiving the knowledge, the second one is learning by repetition, and the last one is learning knowledge by using the language in practice.

The learning objective of the Situational Language Teaching Approach was to develop the four main skills of the target language; accuracy in pronunciation and grammar was important and error was not seen as part of the process of learning; furthermore, error was avoided whenever possible. The syllabus was designed by a list of the basic structures and sentence patterns of English and by lists of as many words as possible that could be included in the syllabus. The new vocabulary could be presented with materials or body language; new patterns were demonstrated through examples, repetitions and substitution activities such as: chorus repetition, dictation, drills, pair practice, group work, and controlled reading and writing activities. In this approach learners did not participate in the decisions of contents. They only respond to the instructions given by teachers; so, the main teachers’ roles are: as a model in the first stages, as a conductor of the class encouraging students to produce language, and finally teachers become skillful manipulators who look for perfection in students’ production. The role of the textbook is important, but teachers should use it just as a guide in the learning process and visual aids are used to present new structural patterns and new vocabulary.

The procedure followed in the Situational Language Teaching Approach goes from controlled practice to free practice and from oral presentation of the knowledge to speaking, reading and writing. The stages of the procedure are: pronunciation, revision, presentation of the new structures and vocabulary, oral practice, and reading of materials or written exercises (Richards J. and Rodgers T., 2003).

The Audio-Lingual Method was introduced in the United States during the Second World War. This approach considers language as a system of structured elements with the purpose of conveying meaning; these elements of language are phonemes, morphemes, words, structures and sentences. In this approach speaking was the first skill to develop followed by writing. William Moulton (1961, Richards J. and Rodgers T., 2003) stated some principles in which language teaching methodologies are based on: Language is speech and not writing. Language is formed by a set of habits; teachers should teach the language and not teach about the language, teachers should be native. Finally the last principle is that languages are different. The learning theory of this method is behaviorism, which considers that individuals possess a great range of behaviors which could be learnt by stimuli.

During the development of the different methods from the 1970s to the 1980s, other different approaches and methods were proposed; in this period, a movement was experienced, and it was from the belief that grammar was the central component of the language to the belief that language should be taught to get communication. Some of these methods are: Total Physical Response, The Silent Way, Community Language Learning, Suggestopedia, Whole Language, Multiple Intelligences, Neurolinguistic Programming, The Lexical Approach and Competency-Based Language Teaching; all of them trying to reach students’ language learning and to improve language teaching.

Recent communicative approaches

An important proposal for the studied methodology is the Communicative Language Approach which is based on the principle that the main function of a language is to reach communication. In this approach, courses should be focused on the development of communicative proficiency rather than the learning of language structures. Wilkins (1972, cited in Richards and Rodgers, 2003) tried to discover the system of meaning that exists behind the communicative use of a language. He proposed two kinds of meanings: The notional category, which refers to concepts
such as time, sequence, quantity, location, and frequency. And the second category is about communicative functions such as requests, denials, offer, and so on.

The objective of the Communicative Language Teaching Approach is to develop communicative competence and to develop the procedures to teach the four language skills in order to reach the interdependence of language and communication. In other words, this approach considers language functions and language structure as the core of language teaching. Halliday (1970, cited in Richards J. and Rodgers T., 2003) proposed a theory of the functions of language in which he assumes that only through language use and functions could a language be learned. He describes seven main functions that children required to learn their first language. These functions are the following: the instrumental functions that children use to get things, the regulatory functions that children use to control others, the interactional functions used to interact with others, the personal functions used to express personal feelings and meanings, the heuristic function used to learn and discover, the imaginative function used to create a world of imagination, and the representational function that uses language to communicate information.

Something relevant at that time and for the present was the proposal made by Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Richards J. and Rodgers T., 2003) who used a current concept in education “communicative competence”. They analyzed communicative competence and identified four dimensions: grammatical competence which refers to the domain of grammatical and lexical capacity called by Chomsky linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence which refers to the context in which the interaction between individuals happens, the information they share and the purpose of the communication, and the third dimension which is discourse competence; this dimension refers to the comprehension that occurs between people when interacting; conveying to the fourth competence called strategic, since it refers to the capacity to start, maintain and finish a conversation.

In brief, this approach considers language as a system that helps convey meaning, subsequently, the main objective of language is not only to interact and communicate but to express meaning. It considers the structure of a language as a reflection of language uses; reinforcing the importance given to functional and communicative significance instead of the structural and grammatical dimensions.

The Natural Approach was an early attempt of the communicative approach. It is characterized mainly because it suggests teaching language in communicative situations without using the native language, grammatical rules or drills. The natural approach emerged from the same naturalistic language learning principles of the Direct Method; however, this approach gives importance to the necessity of exposure of the target language instead of practice. In addition, this method suggests that the activities used in the class should be comprehensible and meaningful for students, instead of being grammatical and structural (Richards J. and Rodgers T., 2003).

Brown H. D. (2001) states that Communicative Language Teaching has the goal of developing students’ communicative competence. CLT considers language as a system for conveying meaning, and that language could be learned through interaction, communication, and functions, using meaningful talks according to students’ needs. Thus, sharing information, interaction, and negotiation of meaning were some activities applied in this approach. The role of the learner is as an interactor and negotiator, while the teacher participates as a facilitator of the communication, participant in tasks, needs analyst, counselor, and process manager; for this approach materials should be used to promote communication.

In 1996 Littlewood W. suggested important issues about Communicative Language
Teaching too, he states that it is characterized by paying attention to the structure, the function, and the social context of the language; this approach relates both the structural and the functional aspects in a more communicative perspective. Although the structure is significant for learning a language, it needs from the function to deliver the appropriate meaning; thus, one structure can have different meanings and can be applied to different functions, and in the same way, a function can be expressed by several structures: i.e. If a person wants to express the function of inviting a person to take a walk, the structure could be: “Would you like to take a walk?” or “Would you mind if we take a walk?”, and a third option would be “Let’s take a walk”. Littlewood W. (1996) considers that the first two sentences can be used in a more formal situation, while the last one can be used in a more informal situation, and with well-known people by the person who makes the invitation.

In the second decade of the XXI century some language teaching methodologies are based on constructivism. The constructivist approach states that students have an active role in their learning, constructing knowledge instead of just receiving it as empty containers. To construct knowledge first of all, students have to understand and use it. They have to understand the language and create their own concepts (Marlowe and Page, 2005). Constructivism considers as relevant the interaction and collaborative learning in the classroom, besides a flexible curriculum, in which students’ interests should be considered (Brooks J. and Brooks M. 1993).

It can be summarized that a constructivist approach refers to an active learning where teachers guide students to the construction of knowledge in meaningful contexts. In language classes students have to experience the language in meaningful situations and contexts through using the language that they will need in real life. According to Piaget (1955), people construct knowledge through experience and from experience people create models in which knowledge is stored. The models are expanded or modified based on two important processes: assimilation and storage (Hernandez, S. 2008).

Conclusions

The area of language teaching methodology has been a very active field that has been always looking for the most appropriate teaching methods, approaches, design elements (the learning objectives, the syllabus model, the types of learning tasks and teaching activities, the role of the learners, the role of the teachers, and the role of the teaching materials) as well as the class stages and procedures. In Mexico, many language teachers and researchers working in public and private institutions have also been extremely active looking for the teaching methodology that best suit their students’ learning needs and interests. Other important objectives in the search of that teaching methodology have been to include elements that provide the language teachers with some opportunities to grow academically and professionally. The theoretical characterization of the teaching methodology of a language teaching institution contributes to the improvement and to the success of all the processes that take place in that institution such as: the teaching and learning processes and academic and administrative processes.
References


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