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THE PERFECT TEACHING METHOD: CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

Abstract: *Despite its many shortcomings and general obsolescence, the standard method of English language teaching used in Uzbekistan nowadays remains to be the Grammar-Translation method. Once effective in the past, this method has been challenged, and quite successfully, on numerous occasions, with the most famous and well-established instance being the Communicative Language Teaching method, also known as “CLT”. This article will explore the reasons behind the imperative incompatibility of the Grammar-Translation method with nowadays’ needs of English learners, as well as other methods that Uzbekistan’s educational institutions would benefit from adopting. Finally, I will try to devise our own method, based on the major developments made in this area, and taking into account certain aspects of our educational system that would not let us adopt any of the existing alternative methods of English learning in their “pure” form.*

Key words: *teaching method, approach, grammar-translation, communicative approach, Uzbekistan.*

Language: *English*

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Introduction

*A language cannot be taught. One can only create conditions for learning to take place.
Alexander Von Humboldt*

As was pointed out by Celce-Murcia, the field of language teaching is very different from other fields of knowledge in that it constantly evolves and changes over a very short period of time [2:2]. This inherent trait of the language teaching field to fluctuate and adapt is further exacerbated by the fact that many language teachers are not familiar with the existing teaching methods, created and developed by other language teaching professionals in the past.

Why is this important? First of all, proper awareness of the existing methods and their distinctive features can greatly aid the development of language teaching. Language teachers can employ the already existing and complete methods and tools, instead of creating their own. This equals to saved time and energy, as well as increased effectiveness (the extent of the latter, of course, depends on the effectiveness of

a certain method in relation to the one already in place). Second of all, in the case of countries with an English teaching system like that of Uzbekistan, where English teachers’ approach to language teaching is vastly affected and limited by outdated teaching materials and is mostly derived from the methods of teaching used by previous generations of English instructors that, in the case of Uzbekistan, date all the way back to the USSR era, knowing about the already existing methods, their pros and cons, can help make progress in this area, essential in order to respond to the nowadays needs’ of English learners, who tend to prioritize the ability to communicate freely over the ability to work with intricate texts and grammatical constructions.

Before we proceed with our explanations any further, it is important to establish one assumption

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regarding the terminology that will be used in the following sections. While most scholars distinguish between language “approach” and “method” [1; 2; 12; 5; 9], these terms are often used interchangeably, depending on how broadly or narrowly the content of a certain approach or method is to be scrutinized. For instance, while the Grammar-Translation Method is most commonly known as a “method” and not an approach, certain sources do refer to it as an approach [2; 13]. For this reason, these two terms in this article will be referred to interchangeably as well, unless specified otherwise.

OVERVIEW OF OTHER METHODS.

As posited by Celce-Murcia [2:4], there have been nine major approaches developed by language teaching scholars:

1. Grammar-Translation Approach (GT). This approach is often called “the classical approach”. It is probably the oldest approach to language teaching (more about it in the next section), usually viewed as outdated for its lack of flexibility, opportunities for language learners to use the target language and main focus being on grammar parsing, rather than communication skills. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: very low.

2. Direct Approach. It was developed as a response to the Grammar-Translation Approach, and as such uses the techniques of the latter in reverse: whereas GT used mainly the native language of students to teach the target language, the Direct Approach predominantly (in many cases – exclusively) uses the target language. If GT concentrates more on grammar, the Direct Approach does not deem grammar knowledge as necessary for language learning, giving preference to conversational skills. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: native-like.

3. Reading Approach. This one, just like the Direct Approach, was developed as a reaction to the impracticality of the preceding approach. As evident from its name, it shifts the focus in the opposite direction, favoring reading skills at the expense of all others, namely speaking and listening. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: low.

4. Audiolingualism (U.S.) This approach was developed in the first half of the 20th century in the US. In its attempt to balance out the drawbacks of the Reading Approach, it resembles the Direct Approach, with input from behavioral psychology, stating that language is habit formation [2:5] that starts with listening and speaking skills, followed by reading and writing. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: average.

5. Situational Approach (Brit.) Just like the previous approach, the Situational Approach was an answer to the Reading Approach. For this reason, it also tends to diminish the importance of reading and writing skills compared to speaking and listening.

However, this approach, originated in Great Britain, promotes language teaching through various daily situations (at the bank, grocery store, etc.) that a student is put in. All grammar and vocabulary come from a particular situation. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: native-like.

6. Cognitive Approach. The skills and aspects of language teaching highly valued under the Audiolingualism approach – pronunciation, supremacy of practice, precision, perfection, habit formation – are tuned down and reversed in accordance with the rules of the Cognitive Approach, e.g. reading and writing are viewed as just as important as listening and writing. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: good.

7. Affective-Humanistic Approach. Chronologically this approach follows the Audiolingualism and Cognitive approach. Respect and students’ feelings, comfort, and mutual support come into the foreground, above all other methods, techniques, and materials. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: very good.

8. Comprehension-Based Approach. Language learning is equated to language acquisition. This approach advocates the creation of the right conditions for the student to acquire necessary language skills in a natural way, just like s/he acquired them when s/he learned his/her first language. This means the priority of listening (at first), de-emphasizing of rule learning (just like people do not learn the rules of their native language before they start speaking), comprehension over precision, etc. Required teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language: good.

9. Communicative Approach. This approach was developed the latest, and as such, it is, possibly, the most mature out of all. It deems the goal of language learning as being able to communicate. As such, it focuses on social aspects of language learning and its real-life applicability, rather than its linguistic (grammatical) properties. This approach is often viewed as opposite to GT, however, unlike the Direct and other related approaches above, it is not based on the drawbacks of GT and, therefore, it does not necessarily contradict its every feature. For example, the Communicative Approach (CA) does not disproportionately favor speaking and listening skills. Reading and writing are integrated from the very beginning as well, inasmuch as their application aligns with developing communication skills. The roles of the student and the teacher are vastly different, therefore, unlike in GT, the teacher’s overall proficiency in the target language has to be very good.

As can be inferred from the above, the teacher’s oral proficiency in the target language closely correlates with two features of the approaches: whether it is speaking/listening based or reading/writing based and the level of control over the learning process. It appears obvious that the most optimal approach or method of language teaching is

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the one that develops all skills equally. However, when applying this notion of the optimal approach to the system of Uzbekistani English teaching, we should take into consideration the historically persistent drawbacks of our teaching system that weigh down its development.

Not only does the overview of the most common approaches to language teaching above lets us understand their historical development, correlation with each other, features necessary for an optimal approach, etc., but it also, probably most importantly, lets us reflect upon our place in this system. As we will see later on, Uzbekistan's approach to language teaching is mostly similar to GT, which makes it evident toward which extremity we should lean in order to balance out and mend our system.

THE GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD AND ITS FEATURES

The "classical" approach to foreign language teaching most commonly used in Uzbekistan nowadays (and, until recently, in the rest of the world) stems from the practices of teaching Latin and Greek more than 500 years ago. It was then further developed and given its modern name of "Grammar-Translation Method" during the 18th and 19th centuries in Germany [10:330].

This method characterized by the following features:

- The main focus is on grammar rules;
- Language is taught as an academic subject;
- The main tool of learning the language is memorization;
- Instructions provided to students in their native language;
- The teacher does not have to speak the language fluently;
- Oversimplification of the mechanism of learning;
- Pure, decontextualized knowledge is valued over skills.

As explained by Celce-Murcia, "There is little use of target language for communication. Focus is on grammatical parsing, that is, the forms and inflections of words. There is early reading of difficult texts. A typical exercise is to translate sentences from the target language into the mother tongue or vice versa" [2:4].

Unfortunately, the language method used most commonly in Uzbekistan nowadays fits this description too well, especially compared to the rest of the approaches discussed in the previous section.

This gives us an insight into why the English language has been taught at schools and higher education institutions in Uzbekistan the way it has. The default method applied ubiquitously by Uzbek teachers and professors is and has always been the

Grammar Translation, which should have become obsolete a while ago, and yet it is still prospering and potentially interfering with the studying process of thousands of talented students throughout the country.

As a result, upon completing a course sometimes comprised out of several years of continuous language studying even advanced students find themselves not being able to communicate using the language they have been learning.

As put by Widdowson, knowing and doing should be the two sides of language learning [15:157]. However, language learners subjected to the traditional grammar-translation method are usually distinguished by that they may know something about the language, but cannot do anything about that knowledge, cannot use it in real life [5:799].

This is also the most probable cause of the booming growth of various courses and private language institutions offering "innovative" methods of the English language teaching in our country today: for the old ways, contrary to the conventional wisdom, are not the best this time.

There are three major drawbacks to this approach. First of all, language teachers that (consciously or not) follow this approach, tend to value knowing over doing and accuracy over fluency. This results in students not being able to apply their knowledge and giving too much effort to being accurate, even if it means sacrificing fluency and effectiveness of their speech. Accuracy also means that rules are viewed as more important than speed and efficiency. Another characteristic feature of this approach is that rules are given in a strictly systemized fashion, while active learning and self-exploration are not given enough attention and opportunity, which leads to students perceiving language learning process as a rather mechanical exercise. This further hinders students' ability to develop their language skills, especially oral/aural. As put by Tinkel, "if the teacher talks about language to the students, he/she is far less likely to capture their interest than if he/she lets them explore it for themselves under conditions carefully prepared and controlled by him/her" [14:38]. Finally, the last major imperfection of GT is that it focuses too much on reading and writing, at the expense of listening and speaking.

Being one of the oldest language teaching approaches, GT has been explored in great depth by various scholars in the past. For this reason, the list of its disadvantages given as a demonstration of its ineffectiveness can be practically limitless. For example, it is very common for classes taught through GT to use 'lockstep' learning [6:338] or 'whole-class grouping' [4:78], when "the class grouping where all the students are working with the teacher, where all the students are 'locked into' the same rhythm and pace, the same activity." [6:338], so that their freedom of expressing themselves through talking and communicating with each other is severely limited. It

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comes as no surprise that very often this method produces students whose English is ‘dumb’ [5:799], which means that they cannot speak it, despite being skillful about the language’s certain aspects (usually reading). This explains why in our country the majority of students have trouble articulating when speaking in English, despite it being taught from elementary school and all the way to university.

Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to make an inference that this approach is all about hindering progress and language development. There is a reason why this is one of the most basic and long-lasting methods of language teaching. The importance of grammar cannot be overlooked as it is vital for the correct explanation of the mechanics and logical structure of a language. Grammar is the foundation of any language, no less important than any other aspect of language teaching. However, it is the excessive focus on grammar at the expense of other skills that damages the learning process, turning it for students into a mechanical, lifeless and often boring endeavor.

Another reason why GT is so popular in Uzbekistan is that it, unlike other methods, requires a minimum level of oral skills from the teacher. This also explains why typically GT instructions tend to concentrate on grammar rules ‘lockstep’ class reading – it is a relatively effortless and most predictable way to teach and control the class.

The many downsides of GT and attempts to mend those have eventually led to the occurrence of a so-called Communication Language Teaching method, or CLT.

CLT APPROACH

Being one of the major language teaching methods, along with the Grammar-Translation method, it has a variety of advantages over the latter. Nevertheless, despite its clear beneficial effect on the teaching and learning of the English language, it took almost half a century to make its way into the realm of English teaching in Uzbekistan and even today the majority of teaching institutions, especially those of higher education, still seem to fail to fully recognize its potential.

CLT’s distinctive feature is that it, as Daisy noted, “emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning a language” [3:250]. In other words, while grammar might be important for general language understanding, structuring and systematization, interaction (or communication) plays the central role in the development of language skills, especially oral and aural. Communication is required for communication, and it depends on language just as much as language depends on it [12:155].

As is noted above, grammar carries the structural meaning of language. On the other hand, communication’s function is wider than that of grammar: in addition to the structural, it also encompasses the social aspect of language [11:2],

which corresponds to the main reason why people learn foreign languages in the first place [8:1].

These findings point to the fact that linguistics and grammar alone will not enable the learner’s competency to use language in a given cultural social context [7:115].

As we inferred from the review of previously developed methods of language teaching, focusing on one aspect of language teaching will inevitably lead to the deterioration of some other set of skills. In this case, by emphasizing fluency and communicative competence, teachers who employ this approach often do so at the expense of accuracy. Under the CLT method, devaluation of accuracy is not just a byproduct of putting the principles of CLT into practice, it is a necessary element of it. The most typical example of its necessity is the difference in attitudes towards mistakes under GT and CLT. Under the former, “errors are usually seen as signs of failure” [5:800], while under the latter “errors are a sign of progress in internalizing the language system” [5:800]. The process of internalization means that a learner makes mistakes by applying the logic of his or her first language to the target language when trying to express him/herself in it. This should not be discouraged (like it usually is under GT), as it leads to better understanding and analysis of the target language. Punishing students for their mistakes when trying to communicate using the target language fluently could potentially have a very adverse effect, as the learner would stop actively adopting the language and instead perceive it over-cautiously, through the prism of rules and regulations.

If GT’s main goal is to know the language, CLT concentrates more on using it. As important as it might seem to be, according to Widdowson, the grammar that students “must obviously acquire somehow as a necessary resource for use, proves elusive. So quite often the situation arises where learners acquire a fairly patchy and imperfect repertoire of performance which is not supported by an underlying competence” [15:165]. In other words, such students repeat their once memorized set of phrases over and over, which hinders their language development, because they manage to express their thoughts using primitive constructions and simply move on, without analyzing what they might have just said or written, as long as it delivers the desired result - to be understood.

As we can see, the CLT approach is not flawless, despite it being one of the most recent and widely recognized methods of language teaching. However, it does not need to be perfect for language teachers to adopt it in a way that would benefit their already existing practices and facilitate their transition to a more effective approach to English teaching.

CONCLUSION

From the analysis given above, it follows that our primary objective should be not a creation of the

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perfect method of language teaching, as this does not seem plausible in the long run, at the very least due to the fact the language learning field changes very quickly, as stated earlier. Rather, we should strive to shift the balance in the other direction and make an effort to develop our students' communication skills. Given the latest tendencies of Uzbekistan globalizing with exponential growth, it is vitally important to provide an adequate solution that would handle the needs of nowadays English learners.

From the overview, it can be inferred that in general all methods can be divided into those focused more on reading and writing, and those focused more on listening and speaking. As a country with the main method of teaching being GT, it is obvious that our primary goal should be to promote the development of the "opposite" set of skills, as it is evident that it is the department where the teachers and students alike lack proficiency the most.

Out of the methods of the second group (concentrated on speaking and listening), CLT is one of the most prominent and mature ones. However, not only is it not possible for Uzbekistan to adopt the CLT method in its pure form, first and foremost because it would require major retraining, but it is also not advisable, for reasons listed in the previous section (lower priority of accuracy and knowledge of rules).

Nevertheless, it is not a coincidence that many people in our country deem it necessary to attend language courses in order to become proficient in a language. This is a sign of insufficient language teaching. And even then, many such students, especially the older ones, emphasize their desire to be able to talk and communicate freely, with no regard to other aspects of the target language, especially grammar. It is obvious, that such students do not mean to avoid learning grammar. Rather, such an inclination toward speaking and away from grammar skills indicates learners' disagreement with the existing traditional teaching paradigm that follows the Grammar-Translation approach.

The value of the Grammar-Translation method is that it works best for situations when teachers' skills are limited. However, this does not mean that we should refuse to implement the CLT method. It only means that it is a process that will require change not only on the part of the curriculum but also the teachers, who will have to adapt to the new style and improve their skills alongside their students.

The biggest change that we should make that would serve as a starting point on our way to creating a better and more advanced and effective language teaching system, is to derive one of the key features of CLT and to start presenting teacher, not as an instructor, but facilitator, who assists students in their journey of applying their cognitive skills to the learning process. To make this application more active and dynamic, it is also necessary to re-evaluate our perception of mistakes as something negative and undesirable.

It might be a daunting task, given that CLT generally requires a relatively high mastery of oral skills from the teacher. However, thinking that teachers' adaptation is the bottleneck of the transition process is not right. The teachers can change their perspective and approach relatively easily, especially considering that they already realize the value of the communicative (interactive) approach. The bottleneck is changing the course and course's objectives so that to allow for a balanced and comprehensive learning process, when the teachers and students have enough time to improvise and be spontaneous, as opposed to being pushed to finalize a certain number of exercises per semester. This means restructuring teaching material, books, teaching guides, etc., thereby setting different objectives and pushing everyone to move in a slightly different direction. Only by "rocking the boat" can we push the boundaries and limitations of our existing teaching system and take it to another level by producing highly skilled English learners, more or less equally proficient in all aspects of language and able to communicate with a great degree of both fluency and accuracy.

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