Module Three: Methods and Approaches

Introduction

This module will provide an overview of the current prevailing methods and approaches in EFL teaching. Some methods such as the traditional grammar translation method and, to a certain degree, audiolingual approaches, are considered outdated with the emphasis shifting towards more innovative and interactive teaching methods. Advances in electronic media and technology will also have an impact on teaching EFL in the near future with developments in virtual classrooms and online learning coming to the fore. The communicative approaches outlined below will not disappear, they will just evolve and be adapted to fit with developments in multimedia. However, depending upon which part of the world you are teaching in, it is not inconceivable that you may come across curriculums and schemes of work that are based around some of the more traditional models of EFL teaching. With this in mind, it is useful to have some grounding in the differences in teaching approaches and their respective pros and cons in relation to the classroom. A vital skill for any teacher is to be able to think on their feet and adapt to changing circumstances and different learning environments. There is no single, catch-all approach to EFL teaching and cherry-picking aspects of one approach and combining with another is all part of the process of understanding students’ needs and managing an effective learning environment.

The Traditional Grammar Translation Method

The essence of this approach is that the grammar of the language is presented explicitly by rule (generally in the native language of the student), with example sentences in the target language. The student:

- learns a grammar rule by studying the example sentences;
- translates sentences exemplifying the rule into his language;
- translates sentences from his language into the target language.

Students who have learned English well via this approach typically have the grammar of English down pat. In fact, they generally know much more English grammar than native speakers do. They can read English quite well and in many cases can write it well. Such students are often weak, however, in the oral aspects of language. Their pronunciation tends to be difficult to understand, they have great difficulty understanding native speakers, and their fluency is quite low. These last two problems tend to lessen if students are in an English-speaking environment for any length of time. The solid grounding in grammar and written English allows them to establish relationships between the oral and written language.

Critics of the Grammar Translation approach point out that hearing and speaking a language are what language learning is all about, and if an approach doesn’t allow the student active practice in hearing and speaking, there is something dreadfully wrong with the approach. They also contend that learning all that grammar is a waste of time. Just as young children learn to speak a language without the benefit
of grammatical instruction, the language learner can do the same.

These criticisms have been pretty much accepted throughout England and the United States, and have led to the abandonment of the Grammar Translation Method in EFL and ESL teaching. However, Grammar Translation is extremely widespread in other countries, largely because it is the only approach that does not require the teacher to speak the target language well. Given the emergence of English as a world language, and the consequent great demand for English instruction in Third World countries, it is inevitable that people who know only a little English will find themselves teaching it. These teachers will naturally opt for a language teaching approach that puts the least pressure on their English abilities. The Grammar Translation method meets their needs admirably and, in addition, is probably very familiar to them as the way in which they themselves learned the English they know.

**Audiolingual Method Versus Functional/Communicative Methods**

**Audiolingual Method:**

**Introduction**

During the Second World War, army programmes were set up to teach American military personnel languages such as German, French, Japanese and Tagalog. Strong emphasis was placed on aural-oral training, or put simply, practising listening and speaking. The Audiolingual Method developed from these programmes. This method was also influenced by behavioural psychologists who believed that foreign language learning is basically a process of mechanical habit formation.

In the Audiolingual Method, skills are taught in the natural order of acquisition: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Audio lingual classes begin with a dialogue which introduces the lesson’s sentence patterns. The students memorise this dialogue, then practise grammar patterns in drills such as listen and repeat, substitution, chain and transformation. Accuracy in pronunciation is emphasised and fostered through minimal pair drills where students learn to differentiate between sounds such as the vowels in ‘ship’ and ‘sheep’, ‘hit’ and ‘heat’, and ‘bit’ and ‘beat’. Lessons are sequenced according to grammatical complexity. Translation, considered to cause interference from the mother tongue, is not allowed. Learning is tightly controlled by the teacher, who follows the text closely.

**Impact on Your Classroom and Your Teaching**

Many of your students will be familiar with the type of activities described above. For most British students variety and change are essential parts of their learning experience. Therefore, you may sometimes find yourself amazed by your students’ stamina and capacity to repeat drills in mantra-like fashion, seemingly for hours at a time. In this respect there is always a concern that mindless chanting may replace actual learning and it is important to provide language-based games and activities to break up the monotony and provide variety. Testing for learning and comprehension
is also needed if following an audiolingual-based syllabus, as although the students may learn the words and phrases by rote, how can you tell they actually understand what they are saying?

Stop Reading and Reflect

Reflect upon your own experience of learning a language. Learning a modern language, most notably French, has been on the UK National Curriculum for many decades. Some of you may even have been taught Latin at school. How was the target language presented to you? What type of activities and classroom-based tasks were you required to engage with?

Functionalism/Communicative Language Teaching

Introduction
The late 1960s saw a shift in focus from the audiolingual method and its prototypes to functional and communicative language teaching models. The creation of the European Common Market led to the need to address greater freedom of movement across Europe, expanded business markets and hence the need to evaluate how language itself is used on a day-to-day basis and how native speakers of a language express themselves in various situations. Various studies were commissioned by the Council of Europe which in turn had a major impact on the teaching of English as a foreign language. Teachers and curriculum designers began to look at content, at the kind of language needed when greeting or shopping and for the purposes of tourism. The emphasis on form, on explicitly learning grammar rules or practising grammatical patterns, was downplayed in favour of an approach designed to meet learners’ needs when using the language to satisfy particular functions. Your TEFL trainer on the 20-hour weekend course will have touched upon functions when presenting grammar in context (giving advice to a friend). In general, a ‘function’ of language can be taken as the words and structures required as a means to an end, such as asking for and understanding directions, or simple social interactions.

The functional approach was further developed during the 1970s and 1980s into communicative language teaching methodologies. There is no single text or authority on communicative language teaching. It is referred to as an approach that aims to make effective communication the goal of language teaching. Several models have evolved around this principle such as Total Physical Response, Natural Approach, and the silent method, which although communicative in outlook, can be grouped as ‘Cognitive Learning Approaches’. Communicative activities particularly are impossible to pin down to only one strict approach but in essence cover any tasks or classroom activities that foreground speaking.

Basic Communicative Approach

The emphasis is placed on using the target language to accomplish a function such as complaining, advising or asking for information. Attention is also paid to the social context in which this function would be used, informally or formally, for example. All
four language skills are taught from the beginning with lessons structured to provide practice in each of the skills. In speaking skills the aim is to be understood, not to speak like a native speaker. In the sequencing of lessons, priority is given to learner interests and needs, and this covers age and culturally appropriate materials. In contrast to a grammar-driven method such as audiolingual, which may start with verb tenses, and work through from the present simple to more specialised and complex structures such as conditionals, the communicative approach may jump between different structures, according to what the target function requires. For example, if the target function was giving advice – ‘If I were you, I would ....’ – then this conditional is taught. For lower levels the structure would be differentiated to the use of ‘would’ + the infinitive without ‘to’. Interaction between speakers and listeners or readers and writers is at the root of all activities and with this in mind, learners usually work in pairs or groups for role-play, information-sharing or problem-solving activities.

Impact on Your Classroom and Your Teaching

The Communicative Approach will challenge your creativity to set up situations in which your students can demonstrate their competency in the four language skills. Group work is basic to this demonstration. However, you may face difficulties in the logistics of organising your groups. Lack of space or complaints from other teachers about the noisy moving of desks might feature in your first few weeks of asking your class to divide into groups. You will have to consider all of your options. Can you work outside? Is it possible to use the library for your lessons”? Can you set up a reward system to encourage your students to move quickly and quietly into their groups?

You may also encounter resistance to group work from your students. Some of the better students may resent having to ‘share’ their skills and grades. Some of the less-motivated students may take the opportunity to do even less work. Your grading policy for group work will have to be made specific to the students before they split into groups and you will need to monitor that everyone is contributing to the group effort. You should also leave the time and the opportunity for individual work.

Criticisms of functional approaches include the difficulty in deciding the order in which different functions should be presented. Is it more important to be able to complain or to apologise, for example? Another problem lies in the wide range of grammatical structures needed to manipulate basic functions at different levels of formality (for example, ‘Can I ......?’ as opposed to ‘Would you mind if I ......?’). In addition, although it is possible to identify hundreds of functions and micro-functions, there are probably no more than 10 fundamental communicative functions that are expressed by a range of widely used exponents. There is also the apparently random nature of the language used, which may frustrate learners used to the more analytical and ‘building-block’ approach that a grammatical syllabus can offer. Another apparent weakness is the question of what to do at higher levels. Is it simply a case of learning more complex exponents for basic functions or is one required to seek out ever more obscure functions (complaining sarcastically, for example)?
Task 3A

Think of three general language functions (e.g. asking directions, ordering from a menu in a restaurant, complaining) and make a list of the stock phrases and words needed to satisfy the different functions. Choose one of the functions and devise a group work task and context (e.g. role play, writing dialogues, etc.).

Total Physical Response (TPR) and the Natural Approach

Background
Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method built around the coordination of speech and action. It attempts to teach language through physical activity. The Natural Approach shares with TPR an emphasis on exposing the learner to hearing and understanding the language before requiring the learner to speak.

Distinguishing Features
Language skills are taught in the natural order of acquisition: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Both the Natural Approach and TPR focus on the importance of listening comprehension as the basis for language acquisition. Both approaches believe that language is acquired, not learned. In other words, learners acquire a language through an unconscious process which involves using the language for meaningful communication. Learning, on the other hand, involves a conscious process which results in knowledge about the rules of a language, but not necessarily in an ability to use the language. The learner’s mother tongue is seldom used. Meaning is made clear by mime, drawing, etc. Great attention is paid to reducing learner anxiety. The Natural Approach stresses that self-confident learners with high motivation are successful learners and that teachers should create a learning environment which promotes self-confidence.

The Silent Way

Background
In the Silent Way learners are actively responsible for their own learning. Learning a language is seen not as a process of habit formation, as is advocated by the audiolingual method, but rather a process whereby the learner discovers the rules of the target language and then applies those rules to understand and use the language. In other words, learning is more effective if learners discover the rules for themselves, rather than just remembering and repeating what is to be learned. A basic premise of the Silent Way is that the teacher should talk as little as possible and should encourage the learner to speak as much as possible. Mistakes are considered part of the process of discovering the rules and the teacher should not interfere in this process by correcting the learner’s mistakes.
Distinguishing Features

All four language skills are taught from the beginning, though reading and writing are sequenced to follow what has been produced orally. Special charts are used to teach pronunciation. First, there is a sound-colour chart, containing blocks of colour, each one representing a sound in the target language. The teacher and students point to blocks of colour on the chart to form syllables, words and sentences. Second, there are the word charts, containing words whose letters are colour-coded in the same way as the sound-colour chart. The teacher and students make up sentences, point to words on the chart and read the sentences they have spoken. Third, there are colour-coded charts which help students associate the sounds of the language with their spelling. For example, ‘ay’, ‘ea’, ‘ei’ and ‘eigh’, which are all different spellings of the sound ‘ey’ in English, are listed and colour-coded together. Cuisenaire rods (bits of wood of varying lengths and differing colours) are used to introduce vocabulary and structures. At the beginning level they can be used to teach numbers and colours (‘Take two red rods’). At an intermediate level they can be used to teach comparatives (‘The blue rod is bigger than the red one’). And at a later stage they can be used to teach conditionals (‘If I had a blue one, I would give it to you’). An English-speaking student learning Thai describes the Silent Way activities with rods used to teach her Thai:

‘Our teacher put the rods on the table, picked up each rod and told us the colour of the rod. She used gestures to show when she wanted one of us to give the word for the colour “red” or “blue”. If the pronunciation was wrong she used gestures to get us to repeat the word again. Everyone in the group helped, offering his or her version until our teacher gestured that someone had the right version. When we had learned the colours, she used the same method with the rods to teach us the numbers. She put two rods on the table, said the Thai word for “two” and gestured that we should repeat the word. After that she asked, for instance, for three blue rods or four green rods. We listened and then gave her the rods she asked for. It sounds pretty simple, but she could keep us busy for hours with those rods.’

Impact on Your Classroom and Your Teaching

The Silent Way is designed to be used with small groups. Its charts and related materials are specially prepared by an organisation in New York. Teachers using the method usually undergo intensive training in its techniques and philosophy. Although The Silent Way would be a little unwieldy as an approach with large classes of 30 or more students there are some sound pedagogical principles to consider in this method. First is the idea that what students discover for themselves is retained and owned in a more permanent and meaningful way than are materials which have been packaged and only require students to memorise them. Second is the idea of peer coaching in a non-competitive environment. Having presented the materials, the teacher withdraws and lets the students experiment with the rules and generate conversation in English. The teacher’s principal role is to monitor during group work and to make sure that the group atmosphere is open to the contributions of all its members.

One possible drawback of the Silent Way is that the use of colour charts and cuisenaire rods may not be appropriate for teaching advanced levels who may
require a more sophisticated approach to presenting more complex grammatical structures. Nonetheless, the principle of limiting teacher talking time and structuring lessons around problem-solving activities are sound principles and coincide with contemporary educational theories concerning ‘task-based learning’ (i.e. the students learn through experimentation and self-discovery and the teacher’s role is to facilitate this learning process).

**Radical and Innovative Teaching Approaches**

The 21st century has seen the rise of ‘student-centred learning’ and in particular, what has come to be known as the Dogme approach to language learning. The Dogme method was first proposed by New Zealand-born teacher and academic Scott Thornbury and has proved somewhat controversial, not least because of its anti-textbook stance.

The principle underpinning Dogme is to create a learning environment where the students determine the content of the lessons and decide, according to their own specific needs, the target language to be explored. Central to this philosophy is the notion that students learn best when they are engaged in the subject material and it has direct relevance to their life experiences and common interests. To this end, the Dogme approach dispenses with coursebooks and prescriptive schemes of work, realia, flash cards, Cuisenaire rods and any other classroom paraphernalia (some exponents of Dogme also ban pens and notebooks). In place of textbook-based materials, an emphasis is placed on conversation as the key to language learning as this is the most authentic form of language production (or ‘language at work’). The students themselves should be encouraged to bring their own materials and stimuli into the classroom, not have materials thrust upon them. Finally, Dogme follows the view that language ‘emerges’ in the learner through a dialogic process of exchanging ideas and problem solving and is not acquired through directed practice and memorisation.

Typically, a Dogme-approach lesson would consist of the students negotiating the content with the teacher according to pre-agreed objectives (each student is required to have a list of targets relevant to the reasons why they are learning a language and how it may benefit and enrich their lives). The students then work mostly in small groups with the teacher working mostly in a monitoring and facilitating role (although they need to think on their feet, have a bank of ideas and suggestions for tasks and activities and cajole and motivate the students to stop lessons from stalling). At the end of the lesson the students are invited to reflect on their learning and share their experiences with other members of the group and evaluate their own progress.

**Impact on Your Classroom and Your Teaching**

The Dogme approach has certainly set the cat amongst the pigeons as far as the EFL establishment is concerned. This can partly be understood in terms of the fact that the EFL industry has been, for better or worse, closely linked with the publishing industry and the production and sale of resource materials. To suddenly suggest that textbooks and resources can be a hindrance to learning was tantamount to sacrilege in some quarters and bound to provoke hostile and conflicting reactions.
Leaving aside the arguments relating to EFL publishing and its influence upon classroom teaching (ironically, prior to developing his radical teaching approach, Scott Thornbury had a distinguished career as an author of EFL textbooks), the Dogme method has some sound pedagogical principles. It should be the defining objective of any teacher to try as far as possible to place the student at the centre of the learning process. It also makes perfect sense that students learn more when the material is relevant to them and their life experiences as this will help them to better engage with tasks and activities. Finally, the Dogme method encourages teachers to be creative and imaginative in the classroom and not rest on their laurels by hiding behind the comfort blanket of a prescribed coursebook or syllabus.

The possible problems with the Dogme approach relate primarily to the extent to which the students ‘buy in’ to the process. Cultural attitudes to teaching and learning vary quite radically from country to country. A culture with a conservative perspective on education may reject the Dogme principles on the grounds that it is the role of the teacher to ‘instruct’ the class and not the role of the students to, in a sense, instruct themselves. The approach also places considerable strain on teacher-student relationships in terms of mutual trust and cooperation, creating a dynamic that may be alien to certain cultures and consequently uncomfortable for some students to fully comprehend and work within.

Suggestions for Using Various Teaching Methodologies for Specific Purposes

As stated in the introduction, there is no ‘catch-all’ EFL teaching method and the best approach is to adapt and combine a variety of methods for different purposes and to practice different skills. Below are some suggestions on how each method could be adapted in a classroom situation.

Audiolingual Method

If your students feel that they must know the rule for a certain feature of grammar, try this adaptation of the audiolingual method. Tell your students that they are going to discover the rules themselves. Then have them work through a set of audiolingual pattern drills which illustrate the feature. After they have done the drills, ask for volunteers to try to state the rule. If they have trouble expressing the rule, ask leading questions to guide them.

Conversations, dialogues or short narratives can also be used to exercise the students’ ability to guess meaning from context. Ask your students to listen for one or two specific words, play a tape recording of a short passage (two to three minutes at most), and ask for guesses about the meaning of the words. Have your students justify their guesses by stating what clues they used. Conversations and dialogues are also an excellent way to practise conversational formulas such as greetings and goodbyes, simple requests, invitations, apologies, compliments and the like. Such materials are particularly useful in one-on-one tutoring situations.

Communicative Approaches

One of the distinguishing features of the various types of communicative language teaching is that they emphasise the use of language in realistic ways. As you go about your daily routines, be on the alert for ways in which you use English to carry
out simple tasks: for example, taking a phone message for a friend, or interpreting for someone who speaks English but doesn’t know the local language. Adapt these tasks for classroom activities which will motivate your students and allow them to demonstrate their use of English in real-life tasks.

**Total Physical Response**
You can introduce new vocabulary to students using this method. It is especially effective with young learners but also useful in action sequences with adults. For example, any time you teach directions, have your students act them out, both with and without repetition of the directions. This will improve both comprehension and retention. TPR activities are also a good way to break up a session in which students have been sitting for a long time.

**Natural Approach**
Borrow some techniques from the Natural Approach for the teaching of vocabulary. Decide on key vocabulary terms to be taught during the presentation phase of the lesson and plan how you will put across the meaning of each of the words. Is it a verb whose meaning you can act out? Can you show a picture to illustrate the meaning? (Many teachers accumulate files of pictures specifically for this purpose). Can you use stick figures drawn on the blackboard? Can you contrast or compare the meaning of the new word to that of words which the students already know?

**Silent Way**
Adapt techniques from the Silent Way for teaching pronunciation and basic literacy skills. If there is no sound-colour chart available, make your own. Ask students to pronounce key words or to repeat sentences from the words that you or one of your students points to.

**The Dogme Method**
One useful Dogme method technique is the use of student-negotiated objectives and targets. As part of the information-gathering process when starting a new class (see Module Two: Getting Started), targets and objectives could be negotiated before the course of lessons begins in earnest. Depending on how regularly the class meets, a timetable could be created whereby every third or fourth lesson is a Dogme-approach lesson where the students determine the lesson content and work towards their targets and objectives. This would have the initial advantage of providing variety and difference in the lessons and gradually introduce the students to the concept of ‘student-centred learning’ if it was an approach they were unfamiliar with.