

Foreign Language Teaching Methods

—A Historical Sketch—

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The aim of this paper is to trace foreign language teaching methods from a historical point of view. We dealt with the grammar-translation method, the natural method, the phonetic method, Jespersen's method, the oral method, the reading method, the graded direct method, and the oral approach. We made much discussion on the features and defects of these methods and concluded that "from teacher-oriented to student-oriented" will be a main stream of foreign language teaching in the future.

0. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to sketch the history of foreign language teaching methods. In his book *The Language Teaching Controversy*, Karl C. Diller⁽¹⁾ looks back on the history of foreign language teaching and remarks that the language acquisition controversy has shown major streams, which are the "rationalists" and the "empiricists" in terms of Noam Chomsky.⁽²⁾ Diller also implies that the large theoretical division between the rationalists and the empiricists has produced the rational approach and the empirical approach, which have developed into two language teaching methodologies: the cognitive theory and the habit-formation theory.

These two types of linguists—the rationalists vs. the empiricists—have quite opposite features. The rationalist has an emphasis on the use of the mother tongue, the cognitive and deductive approach, and the use of the written language, while the empiricist usually excludes the use of the mother tongue and places a great stress on the habit-formation and inductive approach and the use of the spoken language. Diller himself supports the rationalist camp, and at the same time recommends Gouin's highly original series method and the direct method proposed by Berlitz and de Sauzé, and emphasizes the exclusive use of the foreign language. Taking Diller's opinion into consideration, we may say that the use of both methods is important in foreign language teaching. In other words, what is most important is not "either A or B" but "both A and B." We should avoid a tendency on the part of language teachers to swing from one extreme to another in their attitude toward various methodological features. The tendency to swing from one extreme of opinion to the other is called the "pendulum syndrome" by Clifford H. Prator. These two methods are complementary in foreign language teaching. Therefore,

a compromise plan of the two methods should be made on the basis of positive data prepared by language teachers themselves. This may be a difficult problem, which Japanese English teachers should attack in the future.

1. The Beginning of Foreign Language Teaching

When did people begin to learn a foreign language? By what process did they learn a foreign language? According to R. Titone,⁽³⁾ the first method of learning a foreign language is to master the foreign language through direct contact with the people who speak the foreign language. This method is similar to the process of learning the mother tongue. Titone makes a detail discussion on the way how the Sumerians, the Egyptians, and the Romans learned a foreign language.

The Sumerians had reigned, before the Semites did, the Sumer Empire, which became Babylonia later. It is generally agreed that the Sumerian civilization which was created between B. C. 5000 and B. C. 2000 is the oldest civilization that had been made in the world. Between A. D. 1902 and A. D. 1903 the textbooks which are considered to have been used about B. C. 2500 were discovered. In that addition, hundreds of clay tablets which contain many letters were excavated. What is more interesting the Sumerians who were conquered by the Akkadian Semites taught the conquerors Semites the Sumerian language.

It is quite rare in the history of foreign language teaching that the people who were conquered taught their conquerors their own language. In this way, the Sumerians created the oldest "dictionary" that has been known in the world. It is said that the Akkadians made use of the "bilingual dictionary"—the Sumerian-Akkadian dictionary—in order to master the Sumerian language.

2. The Romans and the Direct Method

The Romans taught their children Greek (Classical Greek). The Greek people disliked, however, to learn Latin because they despised foreign peoples as "barbarians." Roman children were taken care of by Greek nurses or slaves. Thus they learned Greek through the so-called Direct Method. School-aged children learned three R's in two languages—Latin and Greek. The conversation textbook written at the age of Emperor Hadrian (117-38 A. D.) contains interesting language materials to be taught at Roman schools. These teaching materials are translated into English as follows:

The *paterfamilias* moves forward his friend and says, "Good morning, Caius," and he embraces him.

The latter returns the greeting and says, "Nice to meet you. Would you like to come along?"

"Where?"

"To see our friend Lucius. We are going to pay him a visit."

"What's the matter with him?"

"He's sick."

"Since when?"

"Since a few days ago."

"Where does he live?"

"Not very far from here. If you like we can go there."

In junior high school English textbooks (in particular, for the first year students) authorized by the Ministry of Education in Japan, many dialogue lessons written on the basis of teaching materials which are familiar with students' life are presented. From the Roman teaching materials mentioned above, it is obvious that dialogue lessons have been given as the primary teaching materials since the Roman period.

3. A Foreign Language as a Subject of Study

When peoples who have different languages and cultures need to have communication with one another, a kind of *lingua franca* is required. In medieval Europe Latin was a language used in school education, a language spoken in the church, and a language employed in higher education. In this sense the Latin teaching method had a great influence upon other foreign language teaching methods. This is just similar to the fact that the teaching method of *kanbun* (Chinese writing) in Japan was fitly applied to English teaching method. In Japan various kinds of foreign language methods have been introduced since the Meiji era. However, only the English-Japanese translation method is an original method designed by the Japanese. In spite of much criticism, the grammar-translation method has survived up to the present and will be regarded as important for English teaching in the future.

With the coming of the Renaissance, serious consideration was given to a language spoken in each nation. Even in this situation, the Latin language had been used until the eighteenth century, only because Latin-learning possessed a cultural and educational value.

Michel de Montaigne (1533—92) was provided with a "progressive" education by his father. He engaged a servant who could not speak French, in order to let the servant take care of his son Montaigne. He prohibited the servant from talking with Montaigne in other languages than the Latin language. In addition, the music sung in Latin awoke Montaigne every morning. Later in his life Montaigne remarked about Latin teaching that Latin should be taught not through grammatical rules but under the circumstances without tears and that other languages than Latin should not be employed. This fact shows that he recommended the foreign language teaching method similar to the direct method or the natural method which has been used at present.

Jan Amos Comenius (1592—1670), who is famous as an educational reformer in the seventeenth century, criticizes the Latin teaching method as unworkable in the following:

- (1) Children learn words and phrases without understanding fully the meaning.
- (2) Complicated grammatical rules are taught to children.
- (3) Difficult teaching materials which are beyond children's intellectual ability are presented, and the progress of classwork is too advanced.

Comenius published the Latin textbook titled *The Gate of Languages Unlocked* in 1631. This is the first textbook in which simple sentences are arranged according to the difficulty of the sentence and the grammar is described in order to be inductively taught. He was also the first person that made educational use of pictures or other objects. His book *Orbis Pictus* was written on the basis of a pioneer-like method which spread education through visual aids.

It is not until the seventeenth or eighteenth century that modern foreign languages were taught as a subject of study. The teaching method on which language teachers of those days modeled was based on the method of teachers of the Latin language who were fanatical in their belief that it is the best way to a mastery of the Latin language to memorize many grammatical rules. This is the beginning of the grammar-translation method in Europe.

4. The Grammar-Translation Method

The grammar-translation method assumes that a foreign language can be understood only through rendering the foreign language into the mother tongue on the basis of the grammatical rules. The grammar-translation method was substantially an adaptation for modern languages of the method used to teach Latin and Greek. The features of this method are as follows:

- (1) Pupils memorize basic grammatical rules and exceptional rules.
- (2) The teaching method is always deductive.
- (3) A composition is regarded as an important lesson given to pupils for the purpose of making use of many grammatical rules.
- (4) Idiomatic expressions of a foreign language are often neglected.
- (5) Translation is so important that excessive attention is paid to how to express in the mother tongue.
- (6) A teacher does not give phonetic training to his pupils, so that the intonation and rhythm of sentences are neglected except for the pronunciation of each word.

It is rather impossible to identify a scholar who created this teaching method. In the 1840s, however, the grammar textbook which Heinrich G. Ollendorf published in Germany was widely read. Each lesson in his book was composed of grammatical description, lists of the vocabulary and translation exercises. In Japan the grammar-translation method has an old history in English teaching.

5. The Natural Method

The natural method is a teaching method that was introduced as one directly contrary to the grammar-translation method. This new method is also called the conversation method because much attention is paid to a conversation through ears and eyes. This method states that it is the best way to a mastery of a foreign language to follow the process by which children learn their mother tongue naturally from their parents. That is why the word "natural" is given to this method. Generally speaking, children are good at imitating and memorizing, but adults possess their good reasoning, judging, or analyzing ability. The method in which the ability inherent to adults is neglected may be said to be "unnatural."

The natural method was advocated by François Gouin (1831—95) and M. D. Berlitz (1852—1921). The features of this method are summarized in the following:

- (1) Pupils' mother tongue is never used.
- (2) Pupils imitate their teaching materials over and over again.
- (3) Question-answer drills are given between a teacher and his pupils in step-by-step progression.
- (4) Objects, pictures, and gestures are often used as auxiliary for presenting teaching materials.
- (5) A teacher explains new words in already-learned words.
- (6) Phonetic symbols are not employed.
- (7) Letters are never used until pupils are versed in conversation through a foreign language.

The features mentioned above contain some principles important for the recent teaching theories. What is most important is that the natural method lays stress on the spoken language. As has been stated above, however, the weakest point of this method is to neglect the differences in language learning process between children and adults.

Gouin's method is also called the psychological method. His teaching principle consists chiefly of association of ideas and mental visualization. To put it otherwise, daily-used phrases or sentences are arranged according to a natural order in harmony with psychological process of human beings. In this way Gouin's method is sometimes called the series method. K. C. Diller highly esteems the series method as follows:⁽⁴⁾

Gouin seized upon this idea as the basis for his methodology: concepts are naturally ordered in *series*. Students will learn a foreign language more quickly and remember it more easily if they are presented with descriptions of these natural series.

As an example the series below will be given here:⁽⁵⁾

— I walk towards the door.	I walk
I draw near to the door.	I draw near

I draw nearer to the door.	I draw nearer
I get to the door.	I get to
I stop at the door.	I stop
—I stretch out my arm.	I stretch out
I take hold of the handle.	I take hold
I turn the handle.	I turn
I open the door.	I open
I pull the door.	I pull
—The door moves,	moves
the door turns on its hinges,	turns
the door turns and turns,	turns
I open the door wide,	I open
I let go the handle.	I let go

6. The Direct Method

The definition of the direct method is summarized: a method of teaching foreign languages which stresses complete or nearly complete reliance on the use of the foreign tongue rather than the vernacular for purposes of instruction and in which every effort is made to approximate the ideal of having the students think entirely in the foreign language from the beginning of the course; usually involves much practice in understanding the spoken word and in speaking, reading, and writing the foreign language.

The publication in 1882 of the paper titled "Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren" written by the German phonetician W. Viëtor (1850—1918) became a trigger for paying much attention to the direct method. Viëtor's paper gave a great shock to the foreign language teaching circles. The main points of the paper are: (1) intensive teaching of pronunciation (2) reading aloud repeatedly (3) inductive teaching of the grammar on the basis of reading materials (4) direct reading without translation.

In 1899 Henry Sweet published *The Practical Study of Languages*, which gave a strong support to Viëtor's foreign language teaching method which placed special emphasis upon phonetics. In this point the direct method maintained a leading position in the foreign language teaching world in Europe and America until in the 1920s in spite of provoking frequently the language teaching controversy between two circles, conservative and progressive.

The weak point of the direct method is that main part of learning activity consists of questions given by a teacher and answers given by pupils. A diminution of the chance for pupils to speak results in a decline in their speaking ability. A teacher should attach as much importance to what his pupils say as how they say it. In addition, no use of

pupils' mother tongue causes superficial understanding. In order to understand a foreign language, H. E. Palmer presents four ways:⁽⁶⁾ (1) by immediate association (2) by translation (3) by definition (4) by context. Palmer⁽⁷⁾ also points out that "the exclusion of the mother tongue is generally, if not always, a vicious procedure productive of the most harmful results."

7. The Phonetic Method

The natural method or the psychological method directed no attention to a systematic teaching of pronunciation. As a reaction against this method, H. Sweet proposed language teaching on the basis of phonetics. Therefore, his teaching method is called the phonetic method. The features of this method are:

- (1) Pupils confirm what they learned in oral drills through reading the works written in phonetic symbols.
- (2) Word-spellings are not given to pupils until they can master all the phonetic symbols.
- (3) A teacher teaches his pupils in a foreign language as possible as they can.
- (4) Systematic grammar teaching is not presented until the final stage of learning.
- (5) A teacher must have a knowledge and skill of phonetics.

The criticism against the phonetic method is that phonetic symbols take precedence over word-spellings because phonetic symbols should be considered as auxiliary for mastering correct pronunciation. However, Sweet's phonetics-oriented method has had a great influence upon the foreign language teaching methods of today.

8. Otto Jespersen (1860—1943)

It is often said that a great linguist is also a great language teacher. This is quite true of Jespersen. He published *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (1909—31), *The Philosophy of Grammar* (1924) and other books. In particular, the book titled *How to Teach a Foreign Language* published in 1904 is highly esteemed as a classical research work for the foreign language teaching method. At the present time this book is regarded as the so-called "motive power" for the scientific foreign language teaching method. The original version of this book was published in 1901. Later this book was translated into English, Japanese, and other languages. This book contains some noticeable opinions with regard to the foreign language teaching method:

These [=modern language] want to be treated as living, and the method of teaching them must be as elastic and adaptable as life is restless and variable.⁽⁸⁾

One can never get any real appreciation of the idiosyncrasies of a foreign language as long as the translation is the main object.⁽⁹⁾

9. The Oral Method

The oral method was proposed by H. E. Palmer. He was chief of the Institute for Research in English Teaching (at present the Institute for Research in Language Teaching) for the period from 1922 to 1936. During this period (about 15 years) he made efforts to spread his oral method. One of his cherished opinions was that mastery of oral approach is most useful for understanding both spoken and written languages.

Before he came to Japan, he had already published *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (1917) and *The Principles of Language Study* (1921). In these books he described the oral method definitely.

Palmer classified language in two large divisions, language as code and language as speech, according to the linguistic theory proposed by Ferdinand de Saussure. He insisted that language as speech should be regarded as a subject of foreign language learning. He also states that language as speech has four skills of hearing, speaking (primary speech), reading, and writing (secondary speech). Furthermore, he says that primary speech should be prior to secondary speech in learning a language. His opinion is common with those of European and American linguists such as Bloomfield, Jespersen, Fries, Lado, Carroll. According to Palmer's theory, repetition drills are important for habit-formation.

10. The Reading Method

The reading method attaches much importance to silent reading, extensive reading, and rapid reading. The study of texts from the very beginning of the course, abundant practice in translation at sight, leading ultimately to the ability to read the foreign language with ease and without the interposition of English, are the principal features of this method. In America this method was proposed as a teaching theory for learning French, Spanish, or German in the period from the beginning of this century to the Second World War. The person who created this method was A. Coleman, chief of the Report of the Committee of Twelve. In this method, reading is regarded as most important from the elementary course and much emphasis is placed on familiarizing pupils with understanding the meaning of sentences through the expansion of eye-span. Because of neglecting the phonetics-oriented method which had held an important position in the foreign language teaching circles since the 19th century, however, the reading method had to face incisive criticism from American structural linguists. Moreover, the appearance in the 1940s of *The Intensive Course in English for Latin Americans* planned by the structurism group in Michigan University came to pay no attention to the reading method.

In Japan the progress in reading ability has been an essential problem for the language teaching method for many years. The new method proposed by Michael West had a great influence upon English teaching in Japan. West's books *Learning to Read a Foreign Language* (1926) and *Teaching English in Difficult Circumstances* (1961) were

written on the basis of the experience which he gained while he taught English to foreign people for a long time. The skills proposed by West—prompt speech, read and look-up, and skimming for rapid reading—are very useful for language-learners.

11. The Graded Direct Method and Basic English

In 1929 C. K. Ogden (1889—1957) devised *Basic English*, which consists of 850 words. On the basis of this Basic English I. A. Richards designed a new teaching method in order to teach English to the beginners. This method is called the graded direct method. Basic English is discussed in the book titled *English Through Pictures*, which is a textbook for the graded direct method. The features of this method are: (1) strict grading of teaching materials (2) no use of the mother tongue (3) sentence-situation (to teach sentences in the situation) (4) to attach importance to pupils' spontaneously-learning activity. Sentence-situation theory is applicable to the class over 40 pupils. The graded direct method is worthy of notice as a scientific and systematic teaching method.

12. The Oral Approach

The oral approach is based on American structural linguistics proposed by Leonard Bloomfield (1887—1949). Behaviorist psychology or behaviorism established by B. F. Skinner also has a direct influence upon the oral approach. A basic idea of the oral approach took root in English teaching circles in Japan during the period from 1950s to the 1960s. In reviewing the oral approach, William Moulton made the following formulation of the logans:

- (1) Language is speech, not writing.
- (2) A language is a set of habits.
- (3) Teach the language, not about the language.
- (4) A language is what its native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say.
- (5) Languages are different.

Charles C. Fries explains the meaning of "oral" as follows:

The word "oral" in the name "oral approach" expresses what we want the pupil to be able to do. It does not state a imitation upon what the teacher should do. The 'oral' here is not a restriction of the teacher's procedures, but stresses the particular goal for the pupil's mastery of the language materials of the first stage.⁽¹⁰⁾

He also remarks that "approach" means "a path to a goal—a path or a road that includes everything necessary to reach that goal."⁽¹¹⁾

In his book *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (1945), he discusses what he means by learning a language:

A person has "learned" a foreign language when he has thus first, within a limited vocabulary, mastered the sound system (that is, when he can understand the stream of speech and achieve an understandable production of it) and has, second, made the structural devices (that is, the basic arrangements of utterances) matters of automatic habit.⁽¹²⁾

His opinion that language learning is habit-formation is quite the same as that of other American structural linguists like Palmer, Carroll, Hockett.

The oral approach attaches much importance to what to teach. In this approach teaching materials should be selected on the basis of a scientific analysis and description and a contrastive study of both a target language and the mother tongue of pupils. Fries also insists that teaching materials should be arranged according to successive small steps of contrast. These ideas were embodied in *New Approach to English*, a junior high school textbook authorized by the Ministry of Education which was published by the English Language Exploratory Committee.

The teaching order for embodying the ideas suggested in the oral approach is presented in the five steps of learning a language propounded by Freeman Twaddell: (1) recognition (2) imitation (3) repetition (4) variation (5) selection.

13. Conclusion

Chomsky's generative transformational grammar gave a great impact to the English teaching world in Japan. The principal idea of this linguistic theory is that while a human being lives in his own linguistic environment, he has innate ability to master the language naturally, and that through this innate ability the human being has linguistic competence necessary for acquiring the language in the environment. Acquisition of a language can not be explained by behaviorist psychology or empirical habit-formation theory based on the audio-lingual approach.

Since the 1960s an increasingly large number of linguists have supported Chomsky's rationalist-based linguistic theory which is based on the idea propounded by René Descartes (1596—1650). Generative grammarians themselves have not yet established themselves in the language teaching profession, but rationalist-based direct methods similar to those of Berlitz and de Saúzé are undergoing a spirited revival in this new linguistic climate. The rationalist-approach is summarized in four propositions:⁽¹³⁾

- (1) A living language is characterized by rule-governed creativity.
- (2) The rules of grammar are psychologically real.
- (3) Man is specially equipped to learn languages.
- (4) A living language is a language in which we can think.

In his book titled *Memory, Meaning and Method*, E. W. Stevick states that language learning is human beings' total experiences, not aural-oral and cognitive experiences. He

also remarks that a language teacher should be language learning facilitator for children.

“From teacher-oriented to student-oriented” — this will be a principal stream of foreign language teaching.

Notes

- (1) Diller 1978 : p. 2.
- (2) Chomsky 1965 : pp. 47-48.
- (3) Titone 1968.
- (4) Diller 1978 : p. 59.
- (5) Diller 1978 : p. 59.
- (6) Palmer 1922.
- (7) Palmer 1917.
- (8) Jespersen 1904 : p. 4.
- (9) Jespersen 1904 : p. 44.
- (10) Fries 1970 : pp. 204-205.
- (11) Fries 1970 : p. 204.
- (12) Fries 1945 : p. 3.
- (13) Diller 1978 : p. 23.

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