



## Second Language Theories and Their influences on EFL in China

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### Abstract

This article begins by accounting the development of Second language theories .It describes major ESL theories ever since the 18th century to those currently adopted in ESL field. Then it proceeds to demonstrate their influences on EFL teaching in China, like nowadays an increasing awareness of non-cognitive factors in teaching foreign languages, reforms in some traditional teaching methodologies to satisfy the current demand for temporary EFL learners and ever-increasing case studies in new teaching modes. Lastly the author points out some problems existed in current EFL teaching and learning in the hope of drawing the attention of teachers and researches in this field.

**Keywords:** EFL theories, Cognitive, Influence, Integration, Flexibility, Diversification

### 1. Introduction

Second language theories have come a long way since the bad old days of rote learning. Here the author generally reviews the history of major ESL theories ever since 18th century to currently practiced in ESL field. An understanding of second language acquisition can improve the ability of mainstream teachers to serve the culturally and linguistically diverse students in their classrooms Significant professional development is necessary to gain a full understanding of second language acquisition theory, and some key concepts can be understood and applied in the classroom.

#### *1.1 Grammar -Translation Method*

The grammar translation method is a foreign language teaching methodology derived from classical (sometimes called traditional) methods in teaching Greek and Latin. The method requires that students translate whole texts word for word and memorize numerous grammatical rules and exceptions as well as enormous vocabulary lists. The goal of this method is to enable students to read and translate literary masterpieces and classics.

Classes were conducted in the native language. A chapter in a distinctive textbook of this method would begin with a massive bilingual vocabulary list. Grammar points would come directly from the texts and be presented contextually in the textbook, explained elaborately by instructors. Grammar thus provided rules for assembling words into sentences. Tedious translation and grammar drills would be used to exercise and strengthen the knowledge without much attention to contents. Sentences would be deconstructed and translated. Eventually, entire texts would be translated from the target language into native languages and tests would often ask students to replicate classical texts in the target language. Very little attention was placed on pronunciation or any communicative aspects of the language. The skills exercised were reading and translation, but only in contexts.

#### *1.2 Direct Method*

The Direct Method, sometimes also called Natural Method, is a method for teaching foreign languages which refrains from using learners' native languages and just uses target languages. This method was established in Germany and France around 1900. Characteristic features of the direct method are teaching vocabulary through pantomiming, realia and other visuals, teaching grammar through an inductive approach (i.e. having learners find out rules through the presentation of adequate linguistic forms in the target language). Centrality of spoken language (including a native-like pronunciation), focus on question-answer patterns and teacher-centeredness also characterize this method.

The Direct Method was an answer to the dissatisfaction with Grammar Translation Method, which teaches students in grammar and vocabulary through direct translations and focuses on the written language. There were attempts to set up similar conditions as would imitate the mother tongue acquisition. For this reason these attempts were marked the Natural Method. At the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, Sauveur and Franke proposed that teaching language should be undertaken within the target-language system. This was the first stimulus for the rise of the Direct Method. Later, Sweet recognized limits of the Direct Method and proposed a substantial change in the methodology and introduced the Audio-Lingual Method.

### *1.3 Audio-Lingual Method*

The Audio-Lingual Method is based on behaviorist theory, which professes that certain traits of living things, and in this case humans, could be trained through a system of reinforcement—correct use of a trait would receive positive feedback while incorrect use of that trait would receive negative feedback.

This approach to language learning was similar to the Direct Method. Like the Direct Method, the Audio-Lingual Method advised that students be taught a language directly, without using the students' native languages to explain new words or grammar rules. However, unlike the Direct Method, the Audiolingual Method didn't focus on teaching vocabulary. Rather, teachers drilled students in the use of grammar.

With the Audio-Lingual Method, instructors would present correct models of sentences and students would have to repeat them. Teachers would then continue the process by presenting new words for students to sample in structures. In audio-lingualism, there is no explicit grammar instruction—everything is simply memorized in its form. The aim is to train students to practice particular constructs until they can use them spontaneously. In this manner, lessons are built on static drills in which students have little or no control on their own output. Teachers are not providing responses that will result in negative feedback. This type of activity, for the foundation of language learning, is in direct opposition with communicative language teaching.

### *1.4 Audio-Visual Method*

The term Audio-Visual (AV) refers to works with both sound and visual components, the production and the use of such works, or the equipment involved in presenting such works. Movies and television shows are examples of Audio-Visual presentations.

In a typical presentation, presenters provide the audio by speaking, and supplement it with a series of images projected onto a screen, either from a slide projector, or from a computer connected to a projector. Early audio-visual courses consist of taped dialogues, accompanied by film -strips designed to act as visual cues to elicit responses in foreign languages.

### *1.5 Communicative Language Teaching*

Communicative Language Teaching is an approach that emphasizes interaction as both the means and the ultimate goal of learning second/foreign languages. It is also referred to as "communicative approach to the teaching of foreign languages" or simply the "Communicative Approach ". Historically, CLT has been seen as a response to the Audio-Lingual Method (ALM), and an extension or development of the Notional-Functional Syllabus. Task-based language learning, a more recent refinement of CLT, has gained considerable popularity.

As an extension of the notional-functional syllabus, CLT places great emphasis on helping students use target languages in various contexts and learning language functions. Unlike the ALM, its primary focus is to help learners create meanings rather than help them develop perfectly grammatical structures or acquire native-like pronunciation. This means that successful learning of a foreign language is assessed in terms of how well learners have developed their communicative competence. Successful learners can loosely be defined as possessing abilities to apply knowledge of both formal and sociolinguistic aspects of a language with adequate proficiency to communicate. Any teaching practice that helps students develop their communicative competence in an authentic context is deemed an acceptable and beneficial form of instruction. Thus in the classroom, CLT often takes the form of pair and group work requiring negotiation and cooperation between learners, fluency-based activities that encourage learners to develop their confidence, role-plays as well as judicious use of grammar and pronunciation which are in the form of focused activities.

### *1.6 Cognitive Approach*

As the Audiolingual Method was on the decline in the 1960s and many shortcomings were found in it, the Cognitive Approach developed as an alternative, in response to criticisms leveled against audiolingualism. In the meantime the structural linguistics gave way to the generative linguistics and turned the attention from mechanistic conditioning to meaningful leaning. One of the major proponents of the generative-transformational school of linguistics is Noam Chomsky, a famous American linguist. The generative linguists are interested not only in describing languages but also in explaining languages. In other words, they attempt to find what as well as why in the study of languages.

The Cognitive Approach insists that learning is based on understanding. Language learning is a creative process. Students can only perform after they have understood the system of the language. We can't imitate without activating a cognitive process. In a Cognitive Approach classroom, meaningful learning and meaningful practice are emphasized during the entire learning process.

The Cognitive Approach utilizes all four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing from the beginning of language courses. This agrees more with the nature of real communication, in which people seldom use one skill. In real life, communication is carried through all possible channels: listening involves speaking, reading might involve writing

and etc. When a foreign language learner can resort to all the possible target language resources, learning will be more effective.

## **2. Development of EFL in China**

Ever since 1950s till before The Economic Reform, influenced much by ex-Soviet Union EFL teaching models, Chinese EFL teaching lays great emphasis on the system and the inter-structure of target languages, which just satisfies with static teaching like memorizing new words and grammar explanation. We used to propose rote-learning and mechanical training and considered EFL teaching as a process of imparting knowledge. Later we found out that our traditional concept no longer met the higher demand for current society. As Lenin puts it, language is an important communicative tool.....Communication is the essential characteristics of languages. Looking back on our ESL teaching, our traditional teaching methods overstated the accuracy of grammar and ignored students' language creativity and learning initial, which eventually led to students' lack of communicative competence. As our vice premier once said in a conference, "We have spent too much time learning a foreign language, but our English language proficiency is far worse than we expect". The ultimate aim of foreign language teaching is to train learners' communicative competence. Foreign language is actually a tool in communication. Ever since CLT was introduced into China, its basic theories and principles have become major influential methodologies that have a strong impact on the field of foreign language teaching in our country.

With the advent of modern society and the era of new economy, we gain an ever-increasing chance to cooperate with the outside world, and English become significantly important in Chinese people's life. They need to master the tool to communicate with foreigners. How to improve foreign language teaching quality so as to produce fine quality "products" has therefore become the number one task for EFL teachers in China.

## **3. Influences of ESL theories on Current EFL teaching in China**

With the introduction of EFL theories into China, like Direct Method, Audio-Lingual, Audio-Visual, Communicative Language Teaching and Cognitive Approach and etc, our thoughts in language teaching are greatly activated. These pose great challenges to our traditional teaching concepts. Chinese EFL teachers begin their researches in both theories and practices in this field. They all agree the development of students' foreign language competence does not stand alone, it depends on various factors.

### *3.1 Emphasis on non-cognitive factors*

Non-cognitive factors in learning foreign languages have been one of the researches in EFL field. We realize that in EFL teaching teachers should not ignore students' initiatives. Factors like stimulating students' enthusiasm, self-consciousness and creativity turn out to be of vital importance in foreign language teaching. Compared with traditional methods and concepts, this is a qualitative leap. Our traditional methods emphasize "filling", ie, paying much attention to the knowledge delivery in language teaching, which would to some degree attribute to students' incompetence. After 8 to 10 years of learning English, students still feel embarrassed when it comes to expressing themselves and completing simple writing tasks. Students know little about communicative strategies. As a consequence, they are easy to violate communicative rules without realizing them. Of course the weakness in basic language training also contributes to students' difficulties in their communication and writing tasks. However, another case does seem to be more dangerous: fluency in oral English and failure to understand communicative rules, since in this case students may be misunderstood in authentic communication. And hurt native speakers feelings. To some extent, we have to confess our traditional EFL teaching has produced too many "dumb and fluency idiots", which will not at all satisfy the modern demand for foreign language specialists. However it is gratifying to note that with the introduction of modern EFL theories into China, Chinese EFL teachers are realizing defects in their practices and are beginning researches in case studies on the influences of non-cognitive factors on foreign language learners, which will surely "fill into fresh blood" into Chinese EFL field.

### *3.2 Curriculum integration, flexibility, and diversification*

Reform in current curriculum also belongs to one of the experimental projects in China's EFL field. Based on language learning and teaching theories, we devise our curriculum and set up new goals for EFL learners in the new century. The new curriculum tends to be

Integrated, Flexible and Diversified.

As for integration, we mean to combine listening, speaking, reading and writing tasks into one integrated course. While traditionally we usually separated these skills. We have devised 5 modes in integrated language teaching: 1) integrating language learning strategies into major courses 2) organizing tasks on specific topics 3) learning a language by participating various kinds of activities 4) learning foreign languages via series of events 5) learning foreign languages through completion of "tasks".

As for flexibility, we mean that we have more flexibility when arranging our curriculum, totally different from

traditional rigid mechanical approaches before. Based on recent researches in second language acquisition and second language psychology, we are considering transferring some university courses into high school curriculums. Thus students may set sound foundation for their basic language skills while in high school. University curriculum may then consider setting up courses like English literature, western cultures, secretary English, business English and etc. This can not only reduce the quantity of compulsory courses in university, but also enable college students to have more free time to enrich language knowledge and widen their vision of target languages. In this case students can not only learn theoretical knowledge but also practical skills. All these may help lay a solid foundation for their learning and employment in the future.

### *3.3 The Reform in Teaching Methodologies*

Since 1980s, foreign languages teaching in China was gradually moving towards its maturity both in theories and practices. Teachers realize differences in learners, teaching styles and teaching environment. To achieve success in language teaching, EFL teachers are advised to apply dynamic, adjusted "open policy" to foreign language teaching. They realize that learning outcomes rely much on factors like ultimate goals, professional levels of teachers, teacher's personality and difficulties in learning materials. They all agree teaching methodologies should vary from person to person, from time to time. Never will there be an effective methodology. We didn't have it before, and we will never have it in the future. Gradually foreign language educators begin to reflect on EFL teaching in China and start reforms in this field. Their main concerns are to abolish traditional "fillings" and encourage heuristics in classroom teaching. Current EFL in China are now experiencing its reforms in the following aspects: 1) Cooperative trend. Break the domination of teachers in classrooms and start to attach importance to cooperation between teachers and learners. Such cooperation not only helps brainstorming, but also enhances communication between teachers and learners. When learning a language, it is strongly advised that students understand the successful experience of other language learners. Also teachers may help students to form their own learning pathways. 2) Place importance to emotional factors. Teachers should especially care about new "self-images" of foreign language learners and help them improve their self-confidence. Integrating language teaching with its culture will also help arouse learners' interest. The interaction between teachers and students helps to create a pleasant and relaxed learning environment and will accordingly increase the efficiency of teaching and learning.

### *3.4 Strengthen Researches and Experiments in Teaching Modes*

Researches in EFL teaching mode have been carried out in China only in recent years. There are divergent views on the nature of EFL teaching, its mode, its concept and its characteristics. EFL researches and teachers all agree on the significant role that teaching modes play in EFL teaching theories. Since teaching modes embody both theoretical and interoperability characteristics, they are supposed to be the best link between teaching theories and teaching practices. Under the guidance of teaching theories, teaching modes combine various aspects in the teaching process and supply information for teaching strategy system. They are also reflections on teaching principles and laws and thus can make general teaching theories concrete and workable. They provide teachers with a set of teaching methods and strategies. Conducting an extensive and in-depth researches and experiments in teaching modes can not only help to enrich and develop foreign language theories, but also offer solutions to long-time detachment between foreign language teaching theories and teaching practices in China.

## **4. Several Problems Existed in Current Foreign Language Teaching**

History of modern foreign language teaching has proved that the emergence of any new theories and methodologies is closely related to demands for that time and promoted by progresses in related subjects. Due to the ever-increasing contacts and exchanges between nations, the demand for EFL talents has reached an unprecedented degree. Although in ESL theories, we have Cognitive Psychology, Chomsky's linguistics rationalism, Context Linguistics and etc, but there is still too much to improve in ESL theories. A lot of problems in teaching practices remain to be solved.

### *4.1 Modern pedagogy vs traditional pedagogy*

Researches in teaching pedagogies in EFL are to meet requirements for contemporary society, to cultivate new ways and thus train more learners to meet new demands. However when new methods are not perfect, we should still hold on to old ones that have proven to be effective all through the history of EFL teaching practices. Discarding old methods thoroughly is not a good choice, since any new theories and methodologies are make-ups for their past. Adopting new theories and methodologies does not mean to cancel traditions. Anyway, ever since many ESL theories coming into China, many EFL teacher home think all existing methods are backward and out of date. Thus, they pushed modern ESL theories to its extreme. A case in point is the Communicative Approach.

In fact, every methodology has its merit. Take Direct Method and Audio-Lingual Method for an example, they are still very useful to children learners and beginners since they know little about their target language and do not have any communicative competence. Generally excluding these two methodologies is not conducive to EFL teaching.

As for Grammar-Translation Method, though we appraise and deny the ups and downs of this methodology, it is still an

important supplement to current EFL teaching methods. Regardless of foreign language learning in classroom or self learning, learners often achieve understanding of meaning of words or contexts with the help of grammar analyses. Sometimes it is very difficult to explain abstract words in target languages. Foreign language learners believe grammar analyses will certainly help them to understand contexts, long and complicated sentences. For example, when professionals in other fields consult their difficulties with EFL teachers, more often their problems are not meaning of words, but sentence structures, grammar points, or relationships between sentences.

#### 4.2 Call for reforms in CET 4 & CET 6 national examination

Tests, mostly in writing, are the major means to test the ability of students who learn English in universities or high schools. And implications of EFL test modes, especially like CET 4 and CET 6 national examinations, are tremendous to English teaching and English language learning. To some extent, it is a baton. Usually test questions are objective ones and in the form of multiple choice. Testees are required to select one correct answer among four choices. Although this test method can facilitate assessments, the credibility of such scores is questionable. For example, there are three students who have made correct choices to the same question: We can assume three possibilities in this situation: one is that the testee gets the correct answer because he can tell the reason why he makes it; another is testee get the score by trying his luck because he is not quite sure about the correct answer; the third possibility is testee doesn't know anything about the correct answer at all and simply makes his blind guesses. The result is that they all got one score since they all made the correct choice. Although they get the same score in that question, their knowledge and abilities are different. Since we all know there is 25% of the guess rate, the objectivity of this score should be discounted in this case. These test modes can mislead students and encourage their guessing. Therefore various ways of guessing skills are quite popular among students. There are researches in topics like Know-how-to-guess, guessing principles and etc. Actually these phenomena have been in existence for quite a period of time in China. As a consequence, quite a number of students' foreign language ability and knowledge are still very weak although they have got high scores in examinations. The negative effects that current test modes bring can never be ignored. Nowadays we can see some changes in CET 4 and CET 6 examination. We see more subjective questions in exam papers. But we have to confess that the volume of objective questions has not been reduced. Defects have not been eliminated, only slightly been made up. We need further reforms in test modes and we hope reforms in CET4 and CET6 can change in the direction that will help students to improve their EFL practical abilities and knowledge.

#### 4.3 Differences between Learning First and Second Language

Language acquisition theories advocate that children learn discourses in natural environments. Current researches in how learners learn to talk and how they use languages for social communication will no doubt be a great inspiration to EFL field. Although there are some similarities between kids learning to talk and beginners learning a foreign language, differences do exist between them. College students are adults. They have learnt English language for six years before they come to universities. We also believe students who are learning foreign languages have different social roles from children. Examining these differences will help to achieve effectiveness in EFL teaching and learning.

First, there is a cognitive difference between them. As children acquire their first language, they learn concerning cognitive areas like time and space, cause and effect relationship and etc. at the same time; While foreign language learners do not have to re-experience above processes. Second, when kids learn first languages, they also learn how to use set ways to express love and hate. Consequently, they obtain their social identities and try to develop their own personality in this framework; And foreign language learners, no longer need to learn the stereotyped concept of what to say in certain situations .

To sum up, we can see differences between first language acquisition and foreign languages learning. Therefore, when teaching foreign languages, there is no need for EFL teachers to repeat the known areas of students' cognition. Instead they should provide a "language rich" environment and supply stimulation to guide students to attain their self-study.

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