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MASTER 2: DAELE

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Methods and Approaches

The history of ELT in Algeria is a tale of ambition and accomplishment. Along this path, English language education has witnessed the implementation of the different methods and approaches that the literature of foreign language learning/teaching has developed and elaborated, moving from the most ancient classical method, the Grammar-Translation Method, to the most recent one, the Competency-Based approach, or CBA for short, en passant by Communicative Language Teaching. For the sake of a comprehensive study of English language teaching methodology in Algeria, let us have a look at the different methods and approaches that have significantly marked EFL classrooms, viz. the Grammar Translation Method, the Direct Method, the Structural Approach, the Communicative Approach and finally the Competency-Based Approach.

1. Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method originated in Prussia in the mid-19th century; it was the offspring of the German scholastic philosophy, and was therefore first known in America as the Prussian method. It dominated the field of foreign language learning for more than a century. Earlier in the twentieth century this method was used for the purpose of helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature, and grow intellectually. It is still acknowledged as the most popular method and is still widely used in many parts of the world. In this very specific context, Miliani notes,

*“Practice shows that traditional methods continue to prevail despite the progress achieved in methodology. It seems, therefore, that the methodological routine continues more than ever as it is subject to a superficial coating of new labels whose philosophies are only rarely internalized by teachers.”*¹ (Miliani, 1998, p. 14)

¹Researcher’s translation; the original quotation reads as follows: « *La pratique nous montre que les méthodes traditionnelles continuent de sévir en dépit des progrès méthodologiques réalisés. Il apparaît ainsi que la routine méthodologique continue de plus belle car soumise à l’habillage superficiel de labels nouveaux dont les philosophies ne sont que rarement intériorisés par les enseignants.* »

Brown (1994) attempts to explain why the Grammar Translation Method is still ‘alive and kicking’ in many countries worldwide by stating three main reasons:

1. This method requires few specialized skills on the part of the learner.
2. Grammar rules and translation tests are easy to construct and can be objectively scored.
3. Many standardized tests of foreign languages still do not attempt to test communicative abilities, so students have little motivation to go beyond grammar analogies, translations and other written exercises.

These reasons, among a few others, still perpetuate the use and consolidate, so to speak, the deep anchoring of the oldest classical teaching method in the field of foreign language learning despite the many criticisms that have been made explicitly to it. This confirms the adage that “old habits die hard”, so do the classical methods, not least the Grammar Translation Method.

1. 1. Focus on Grammar

As its name suggests, it leans heavily on the formal description of the target language and upon exercises of translation into and out of the native language. Needless to recall the term native language is used here to refer to the French language. It aims at inculcating the learner with a wide range of lexical items, mainly literary terms. The learner is supposed to memorise the grammatical rules and their exceptions, as well as paradigms and vocabulary list by heart, As Brown (1994) posits, focus on grammar, memorization of vocabulary and of various declensions and conjugations, translation of texts are at the core this method.

Thus learning a language is not just a matter of acquiring a set of rules and building a lexicon. It is how well the learner can use the language, and not how much he knows about it that matters most in the context of foreign language learning. In this respect, Alexander (1967) draws an analogy between a language learner and a pianist, he notes and concludes that,

Learning a language has much in common with learning a musical instrument. The drills and exercises a student does have one end in sight: to enable him to become a skilled performer. A student who has learnt a lot of grammar but who cannot use a language is in the position of a pianist who has learnt a lot about harmony but cannot

play the piano. The student's command of a language will therefore be judged not by how much he knows but how well he can perform in public.

(Alexander, 1967, p. vii)

This is another way of saying that we learn to do things by doing them, and this applies no less to language learning than to playing the piano. Overall, informed teachers should be aware of the fundamental and seminal distinction between language *use* and language *usage*. Widdowson (1978) defines *use* as being the manifestation of our knowledge of the language system to achieve some kind of communicative purposes; and *usage* as the manifestation of our knowledge of the language system.

1.2. Importance of Grammar

Although it is generally agreed that grammar has its due value in the process of language learning, the place of grammar in the language teaching process has always been controversial. Some language teachers take this idea further so to posit that it is a truism to assert that grammar represents the skeleton of a language, to use Crystal's (1990) metaphor. In clearer words, this means that grammar is part and parcel of the teaching process. A sound knowledge of grammar represents an asset of paramount importance to the learner, and it therefore deserves its fair share of attention in the language classroom. In lines with such view, Cunningsworth contends that ***"Few, if any, writers on language learning would disagree that the internalisation of grammar rules is central to language learning and that any teaching programme which omits grammar is not really teaching language in the full sense of the word."*** (Cunningsworth, 1987, p. 18). As for Rivers, another authority on foreign language teaching, she argues that grammar represents ***"the framework within which language operates"*** (Rivers 1991: 3). Drawing an analogy between the grammar of a language and a "boneless chicken", ironically she responds to an interviewer's question on the importance of grammar in the language learning process, as well as to those who de-emphasize it by ***'...saying that we don't need to teach grammar ...is like saying that you can have a chicken walking around without bones'***. (Rivers quoted in Benmoussat 2003, p. 16).

Yet, it is widely recognized that an over-emphasis on grammar rules renders language learning routinized and boring, and this can have a detrimental effect on the process of learning. Put differently, the use of isolated, out-of-context sentences can negatively impact the learning process as it reflects a de-contextualized use of language. However, it suffices to

say that teachers are well-informed to account for the specificities of the teaching situation, and well-aware to know what their learners needs are, what their interests and worries are, what should be done to get around the failures, and ultimately to contribute to a better change and to fruitful innovation in language teaching. This is the rationale of one's acting as agents of change.

1.3. Focus on Translation

It is commonly agreed that translation is a well-established discipline in its own right, and as such it should be taught separately as it presupposes a through linguistic knowledge of both the source and target languages. As Halliday et al. Report

Translation is, in fact, an extremely complicated and difficult task. It is far from being the simple, obvious exercise it is sometimes described to be. In its usual form it is more appropriate to the advanced stages of a university special course, when the literary and historical styles are being studied, than to the early stages of acquiring practical skills in a foreign language.

(Halliday et al., 1964, p. 268)

Experience has shown that, when translation becomes a means of teaching, it may cause confusion and may lead to a word-for-word exchange which can do great harm to the language learning process. This has led proponents of the communicative language teaching/testing to convincingly assert that the use of the mother tongue is counter-productive and the use of translation in the language classroom can do more harm than good to the learning process (Carreres, 2005).

However, some leading applied linguists, such as Stern and Cunningham, do not totally play down the role of translation in a language course in teaching and testing. Stern (1992) note that a contrastive analysis between L1 and the target language is indeed very important for the language learner. Therefore translation in one form or another can play a certain part in language learning. Likewise, Cunnigham (2000) recognizes that while there may indeed be some negative effects from using translation, there is a place in the learning environment for translation. Therefore translation can contribute to the student's acquisition of the target language at all levels.

1.4. Translation: A Curse or a Blessing

To launch into a debate about using or not using the mother tongue in an EFL teaching/testing environment is far beyond the scope of the present research work. Admittedly, the issue is problematic and has always had a divisive effect among teachers. It seems there is a never-ending debate about its use. For a decade or so, since the advent of the direct method in the late 1960s till the emergence of Communicative Language Teaching in the late 1970s, translation, as an aid to teaching and learning, was banned from language classrooms. Ironically, it became an outlaw in the field of language teaching, not least EFL. Nonetheless, since then, positive attitudes towards translation and the use of the mother tongue have started to develop and discussions and arguments have emerged arguing that translation is a legitimate pedagogical tool and it deserves to be rehabilitated (Widdowson 1978, Harmer 1991, Ellis 1992, Ur 1996). At its best, most authors agree that translation is most useful as a quick and easy way to present the meaning of words and contextualized items, and when it is necessary to draw attention to certain differences that would otherwise go unnoticed.

In so far, then, we have seen that translation can be viewed as a ‘curse’ doing much harm than good to the learning process or a ‘blessing in disguise’ if exploited rationally, judiciously and optimally. Yet, a discussion of translation pedagogy would lead us to mention Klaudy’s (2003) seminal distinction between pedagogical translation and real translation. According to her, the types of translation differ at the levels of the function, the object and the addressee of the translation. As regards function, pedagogical translation, through translation activities, can serve as a device to improve the learner’s language proficiency. It has a three-fold aim: it gives the learner and the teacher the opportunity to practise, consolidate and test the language knowledge respectively. While in real translation, the translation activities do not serve as a tool but are the goal *proper* of the translation process. The object of real translation is to convey a message of some sort, i.e. information about reality, contained in the source language, whereas in pedagogical translation it is the message, i.e. information about the learner’s level of language proficiency. As for the addressee, in real translation it is a target language audience, i.e. a reader in search of information about reality, while in pedagogical translation, the addressee is the teacher or the examiner. In sum then, we can speak about real translation **“only if the aim of translation is to develop translation skills”** (Klaudy, 2003, p. 133), conversely, we can speak about pedagogical translation only if the goals of translation activities are devised to develop learner’s language proficiency.

In the same line of thought, Gile (1995) introduced the dichotomy of school translation and professional translation. He defines school translation as the writing of texts *“following lexical and syntactic choices induced by the source-language text”* (Gile, 1995, p. 22), as opposed to professional translation, in which the content of the text is the reader’s goal. Put simply, in school translation, the focus is language-oriented, while in professional translation, the focus is content-oriented. Schäffer (1998, pp. 131-2) suggests that a distinction be made between translation for foreign language purposes, that is, *“reproducing the message of the ST [source text] while paying attention to different linguistic structures”*, and translation for professional purposes which denotes *“text reproduction for specific purposes”*. Closely related to the difference between the two types of translation, it is worth noting Dollerup’s distinction. In *“foreign-language acquisition, [sic] many texts tend to be isolated fragments, because they are used to check student mastery of specific features (vocabulary, syntax, etc.), whereas texts in translation classes are coherent, run-on texts”* (Dollerup, 2005, p. 81).

1.5. Grammar Translation Method in Practice

To link theory to in-class practice, it is worth mentioning Richard and Hall’s series of ELT textbooks, the French mandated textbooks that were actually used in Algeria’s schools during the very post-independence period. They are, *par excellence*, illustrative examples of ELT textbooks that draw on the principles of the Grammar-Translation Method. The series in question consists of the following textbooks: *Anglais Seconde Langue, Classe de Quatrième*, (1960), *Anglais Seconde Langue, Classe de Troisième* (1961), *L’Anglais par la Littérature, Classe de Seconde* (1962), *L’Anglais par la Littérature, Classe de Première* (1963) and *La Vie en Amérique : 1ère ou Classes Terminales* (1963). The following texts, taken randomly from *L’Anglais par la Littérature, Classe de Seconde*, reflect faithfully what is to teach and test after the Grammar Translation Method.

2. Direct Method

It is commonly agreed that the Direct Method came as direct reaction against the inherent shortcomings of the Grammar Translation Method. As its name suggests, this new method emphasised language learning by direct contact with the foreign language in meaningful situations. The following is a list of the main principles underlying a direct method-oriented language teaching: The use of everyday vocabulary and structure.

- Grammar is taught through meaningful situations.
- Introduction of many new items in the same lesson so that the language sounds natural and normal conversation is encouraged.
- Oral teaching of grammar and vocabulary.
- Concrete meanings through object lessons and abstract ones through the association of ideas.
- Grammar illustrated through visual presentation.
- Extensive listening and imitation until forms become established.
- Most of the work done in class.

(Adapted from Mackey, 1965, pp. 149-50)

In summary, then, the direct method was introduced to actually remedy the teaching situation at two fundamental levels: substitution of explicit formal grammar teaching by language contact, and translation activities by language use. The rationale underpinning the direct method is, however, the establishment of a direct association between words and phrases and their meaning through demonstration, dramatisation, pointing, as it is the case with the process of L1 acquisition. As Lado posits *“The direct method assumed that learning a foreign language is the same as learning the mother tongue, that is, that exposing the student directly to the foreign language impresses it perfectly upon his mind”* (Lado, 1964, p. 5).

In a practical fashion, the direct method provides an exciting and interesting framework of learning a language through activity. Unfortunately, as Rivers noted *“Since students are required at all times to make a direct association between phrases and situations, it is the highly intelligent student with well-developed powers of induction who profits most from this method, which can be discouraging and bewildering for the less talented”* (Rivers, 1981, p. 34). To get around with the problems mentioned above, some educators strongly recommended the reintroduction of some grammatical explanations of a strictly functional kind given in the mother tongue. Along similar lines, where it is difficult to establish the meaning of words and phrases by demonstration and dramatisation, teachers could give very brief explanations in the mother-tongue.

In Algeria the direct method was first implemented in ELT Middle School classrooms in the early 1970s with the introduction of Broughton’s ELT textbook *Success with English Coursebook1*. The course book is divided into thirty-six teaching units. These are larger than

teaching lessons, and not necessarily are one week's work. How long a teacher takes over a Unit depends on local conditions: length and frequency of lessons, age and abilities of students, etc. Ideal conditions might give six teaching hours in a week. As stated in the Teachers' Handbook1 (1972, p. 25) "***Success with English is a flexible course and the classroom teacher must know best at what pace he can use it***". Culture-wise, though many EFL teachers and inspectors still report that Broughton's Textbook was appropriate for the proficiency level of our former 3rd and 4th year Middle-School pupils, its content was culturally inappropriate. The use of statements like: *Jillian is Martin's girlfriend* and *Martin is Jillian's boyfriend* have no place in our social context. Sentences of this type are still regarded as taboo topics. Allusion to dating and alcohol are seen as incompatible with Islamic values.

3. Structural Approach

The structural approach to language teaching, also known as the grammar approach, represents, so to speak, a compromise language teaching model which attempts to strike the balance between the formal teaching of grammar with a heavy use of a metalanguage and translation activities and the non-allowed use of the learners' mother tongue. The structural approach is actually a by-product of structuralism. In a structural syllabus the grammatical structures form the core of the whole teaching/learning process. A structural-based language course is based on units that are defined in grammatical terms. The different parts of the language are taught separately and step by step so that learning establishes itself as a gradual accumulation of the parts until the whole structure of the language is fully mastered. The following list provides the underlying assumptions underlying a structural syllabus:

- Language is a system consisting of a set of grammatical rules.
- Learning a language is learning the grammatical rules.
- Application of grammatical rules to practical language use.
- The linguistic input is selected and graded according to grammatical simplicity or complexity.
- Introduction of grammar structure at a time.
- Mastery of the structure before moving to the next.

In summary, then, the grammar of the target language occupies a central place and holds the lion's share in the teaching/testing process. The structural syllabus generally evolves around

two main components: a list of language structures, i.e. the grammar to be taught, and a list of words, i.e. the lexicon to be taught. This overemphasis on linguistic competence has a detrimental effect on the development of communicative skills. It does not address the immediate communication needs of the learner. However, testing is relatively simple as teachers have to deal with discrete point knowledge and skills.

In Algeria the structural approach was first implemented in ELT Secondary School classrooms in the early 1970s with the introduction of L.G. Alexander's popular ELT textbooks *Practice and Progress* and *Developing Skills*. Actually, *Practice and Progress* is the second textbook of Alexander's Series New Concept English²; it was first published in 1967 with a later (1993) revised edition. The textbook was intended for the pre-intermediate level which corresponded then to 1st AS and 2nd AS students. It is divided into four Units each of which is preceded by an entry test. Each Unit consists of twenty-four passages which become longer and more complex as the course progresses (Alexander, 1967, p. xiv). Though the passages are multi-purposes, they are made-up texts which evolve around specific grammar points, called, Key Structures.

As for *Developing Skills*, it is the third textbook of Alexander's New Concept English; it was first published in 1967. The textbook was intended for the intermediate level which corresponded then to 3rd AS students. It is divided into three Units the first two of which are preceded by an entry test. Each Unit consists of twenty passages which become longer and more complex as the course progresses (Alexander, 1967, pp. ix-x). Though the passages are multi-purposes, they are made-up texts which evolve around specific grammar points, called, Key Structures.

²Alexander's Series New Concept English consists of four textbooks: *First Thing First* intended for beginners, *Practice and Progress* for pre-intermediate students, *Developing Skills* for intermediate students and *Fluency in English* for advanced students.