

Teaching techniques that I use in my ESL classes: pros and cons

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Table of content

1. Introduction.....	1
2. Literature review.....	2
2.1 Grammar Translation Method.....	2
2.2 The Direct Method.....	4
2.3 Communicative Language Teaching.....	5
2.4 Content Based Instruction.....	7
3. My experience as an ESL instructor.....	9
4. Findings based on my classroom observation and teaching	12
5. Conclusion.....	14
6. Bibliography.....	15

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1. Introduction

To complete my graduation program in linguistics, I did my teaching internship at an English medium school for three months. When I started my internship I was equipped mostly with the theoretical knowledge with some hands on teaching experience gained as a part of my courses. I taught English literature at the elementary level at "South Point School and College". I was mostly taught the methods and techniques of teaching language, but as I had to teach literature, I had to adopt the methods and techniques to suit my purpose. At first I had to observe the English classes taught by the teachers of the school for a few weeks. After that to get the hang of teaching I started teaching English classes for the rest of the duration of my internship. When I started teaching I could compare and contrast the methods and techniques of teaching I was taught with the methods and techniques I taught. It seemed that the teachers were not consciously using any particular method for teaching, but many techniques drawn on different teaching methods were in use. Thus, in this paper my focus will be on the techniques that I had used in my ESL class.

2. Literature review:

A teacher has to decide on a method to be used in a classroom which he/she thinks suitable for his or her class. Therefore, it is important to know different kinds of methods and techniques of teaching for a teacher to choose from. There are several kinds of methods and approaches to language teaching. Among them commonly used methods are:

- Grammar Translation Method
- The Direct Method
- Communicative Language Teaching Method
- Content Based Instruction

2.1. Grammar Translation Method:

Grammar Translation method believes that learners should be taught the grammar of the target language and taught how to translate literary texts from native language to target language or vice versa and this is how a learner learn the target language. "It is a method for which there is no theory"(Richards and Rodgers:7) as, this method emphasizes on memorization of items of vocabulary and grammar rules.

The principles of Grammar Translation method are:

- A fundamental purpose of learning a foreign language is to learn to read its literature.
- Its main goal is to enable the students to read or write in the target language. No emphasis is given on oral or aural skill, as it is assumed that students will never use the target language.
- Items of vocabulary are memorized from bilingual lists.

- The initial focus is on sentence translation; afterwards it goes beyond one sentence to a passage or any short text.
- Grammar is taught deductively. Native language is used as a medium of instruction to explain rules of grammar.

The techniques of Grammar Translation method are:

- **Translation of literary passage:** learners are required to translate reading passage from target to native language and vice versa. This reading excerpt may be taken from a piece of literature. Use of vocabulary items and grammatical structures are emphasized.
- **Reading comprehension question:** students have to answer in the target language based on their understanding of the text. Three types of questions can be asked and they are information based questions inference questions and questions which ask them to relate their lives to the passage.
- **Antonyms and synonyms:** students are provided with a set of words and required to find out the antonyms and synonyms.
- **Cognates:** sometimes there are similarities among the languages, like sound patterns, items of vocabulary etc. which are known as cognates. Student may be taught cognates by learning the spelling and sound pattern by comparing the languages. They have to memorize also the cognates, only if the languages have cognates.
- **Deductive applications of rules:** rules of grammar of the target language are explained first and then the examples of the rules are given. Students are required to find out more examples which are similar to the examples provided.
- **Fill in the blank:** students are provided with a series of sentences with missing words and asked to fill in the blanks with the new items of vocabulary that they have learned.
- **Memorization:** new items of vocabulary and their meanings in native language or vice versa are given. Students are asked to memorize the bilingual lists.

- **Use of words in sentence:** Afterwards students have to make sentences with the new items of vocabulary.
- **Composition:** students are required to write an essay or a composition in the target language. It also happens that students are asked to summarize the passage.

2.2. The Direct Method:

As a response to the failure of the Grammar Translation method, the Direct method emerged which believes that a foreign language is to be taught by conveying the meaning directly in that language through demonstration and visual aids with no use of students' native language. Thus, using Direct method or natural method second language can be learnt the way first language is acquired. This method deals with the regular use of everyday language of communication. It is said that "the Direct Method has one very basic rule: No translation is allowed"(Larsen-Freeman:23).

The principles of Direct Method are:

- Unlike grammar Translation method, Direct method emphasizes on oral communication and correct pronunciation of the learners.
- Oral communication is viewed as basic. Reading and writing exercises are based upon what the students practice orally first.
- Grammar rules are taught inductively, i.e. after giving the examples rules are explained.
- Items of vocabulary are taught through demonstration, pictures or through association of ideas.

The techniques of the Direct method are:

- **Reading aloud:** students are required to read aloud a text, passage or dialog one by one, the teacher explains the content of the text by using gestures, pictures, realia and other means.

- **Question and answer exercise:** students are asked questions and they are required to answer to those questions in the target language in full sentences.
- **Getting students to self-correct:** teacher helps the students to find out the error and correct it by themselves. For this, the teacher can repeat the student's error using a questioning voice. Another way of correcting is that the teacher can stop repeating the sentence just before the error so that the student can understand where the error occurred and that he can correct himself.
- **Dictation:** teachers read a passage several times and students are required to write them as they listen to it. At first the students listen to the speech; then they write it down and finally students check their writings.

(Larsen-Freeman 2000; 30-31)

2.3. Communicative Language Teaching:

When there were researches done to see after learning the second language whether the students could communicate or not, it came to light that students can produce sentences accurately in the classroom, but they can not proficient enough to communicate in the real world. Thus, Communicative Language Teaching became important in teaching as its main objective is to communicate in the target language.

The principles of Communicative Language Teaching method are:

- Communication in the target language and focusing on its authentic use is the main idea.
- Items of vocabulary and grammar students learn follow from the function and situational context.
- Ability to find out the meaning of the communicators' intentions is an important part of communicative competence.
- Students' ideas and opinions are given importance.

- Learners have the chance to work with language at the discourse or above the sentence level.
- Errors are seen as a natural outcome of learning stage, no chance is given that error can hamper the fluency of the learner.

(Larsen-Freeman: 125-128)

Techniques of the Communicative Language Teaching are:

- **Authentic materials:** teachers use the materials from real life, newspaper articles, television and radio broadcasts etc. which use the authentic language for communication so that the students can get the idea of the real use of language.
- **Role play:** Students have to deal with a given situation. There would be two sides in a role-play situation and the participants do not know how they will respond to each other's questions or query as there is a natural unpredictability about the other person's preference.
- **Scrambled sentence:** students are required to organize the sentences in right and meaningful order of the scrambled text or passage.
- **Language game:** game like Information gap is enjoyable to the student. First the students do not know what their classmates are going to do in the weekend. Students as speakers have choices to predict what their classmates will do in the weekend. Each of the speakers will receive feedback from the member of the group. If the prediction is not understood, then none of the members will respond to it and if it is meaningful and thereby understood only then the members will respond.
- **Picture strip story:** in this technique one student will take strip story. He or she will show the first picture of the story to the other students. And then they will predict what the second picture would look like. The picture strip activity work also as a problem solving task in communicative technique.

(Larsen-Freeman 2000: 132-34)

2.4. Content Based Instruction:

The basic philosophy of Content Based instruction is to use the target language to learn it rather than learning it to use it. In other words, it believes in teaching through communication rather than for it, for example, learning geography or religion in English. By using good content taken from various disciplines, Content Based teaching exposes its learners to the process of language, not pre-determined linguistic content.

The principles of Content Based Instruction are:

- Content of a subject is learned through the foreign language. Thus reading the content of the subject the language proficiency of the students will increase.
- Teachers facilitate the learners to explain a concept in the target language by developing the complete utterance together.
- If the language is taught in contextualize and in an informative form then learning will be more effective.
- Different subjects have specialized language. The teacher helps the students to cope with the language by giving them language support.
- It is easy to teach the language if the language is used as a medium of communication and the meaning is contextualized.

(Larsen-Freeman: 2000, 140-141)

The techniques of Content Based Instruction are:

According to Richards and Rodgers, there are no specific techniques or activities associated with content based teaching, as it is an approach rather than a method. An approach “describes the nature of the subject matter to be taught”(Richards-Rodgers:19). The materials and exercises of the courses are usually chosen according to the subject matter, but students have to have minimum idea about the target language from before. Steps that are usually followed in this method:

- Discussion of grammar and vocabulary and activities related to the lesson already taught.
- Activities previewing vocabulary of that lesson.
- Reading or listening to the materials based on the lesson.
- Discussion on the lesson.
- Students read or listen to other articles or related tape.
- Students may present their ideas using the target language.
- Discussing or reviewing the subject matters of the lesson.

(Richards and Rodgers 2001; 219)

3. My experience as an ESL instructor

No single teaching method was used in the classes I observed taught by the senior teachers. Few of the teachers used eclectic method, which meant a mixture of a number of methods. I taught in class I and class II and there were in total 2 sections for each classes. In total there were more than 60 students.

One day I taught a revision class on spelling, in class I. in that class there were around 25 students. I introduce simple board game and divided the students in rows. I called one student to the board, when he or she was unable to write the right spelling, I called another student to come to the front and help the former student. It was mostly a student centered class which made the student talk more than teacher talk. Whenever a student made any mistake, other Students were eager to give the right answer. In another revision class on poem, I introduced another board game; students were divided into two groups. I had to revise a poem which had six lines and I had assigned one group first three lines and the second group the last three lines. But the lines were written not in right sequence and with wrong spellings. I wrote down the “wrong” poem on the board and one student from each group had to come to the board and correct the mistakes. After the correction by the first group the second group had to correct it. In the same way the second group did the board work and the first group did the corrections. These revision classes actually go under the Grammar Translation method as the students were required to memorize the spellings and poems.

There were “pre-reading” techniques that I used similar to the Content Based teaching’s principles, as the students were using the target language to learn about the story. At the same time few principles and techniques of Communicative and Direct method were coming in to some extent. In class I, I started a short story, “Uncle Tom-I”. For that I had to tell the students the gist of the story, the setting and introduce the characters and the setting. I had started the “Uncle Tom-I”. I started the second class by getting the feedback of the first part from the students and then I asked the students to guess what the second part’s story could be. Different stories came out of the students. And, they were really interested and had fun in making stories. One of the students knew the story so she told the real story. I told her to try to make her own story. She tried but ultimately she came up with the real one again! I guess she knew the story so she could not think of anything else. After this, I told them the story of the second part. I started the third part of the story too. I followed another process of introducing a new story. First I asked the students few questions orally to get the feedback. Then I instructed a few students to draw a few pictures that are related to the story of third part. Students were very excited when they were drawing on the board. Then I told the story in my own words by showing the pictures that they had drawn. I did not mention that the story was the story of the third part. I asked the students to tell the story that I told them in the same way by showing the pictures. After that I told them the full story of the third part and wrote the name of the story on top of the board, “Uncle Tom-III”.

An experiment that I tried was on error correction of the students’ previous class work on spelling and fill in the blanks; I introduced another game for the class. I divided the class

into two groups and named them “Tom” and “Jerry”. Tom’s copies were given to Jerry’s group members and Jerry’s to Tom’s. All the students were required to find out the errors and had to do the corrections in the other group members’ copies. Then I told them the errors and explained the corrections of the language as well as the content. The group won who found the mistakes and had done the corrections properly more than the other group. Unlike the cartoon, in that class Tom won the game. This technique helps in increasing peer-correction as well as self-correcting ability.

4. Findings based on my classroom observation and teaching:

The change of techniques brought by the English medium schools is expected to make positive contribution to the field of foreign language teaching. I have gained practical experience of teaching and the issues it entails during my internship in the school where I worked as an intern teacher. I tried to implement the techniques I was taught in my ESL classes. I realized certain things after I had had a first-hand experience of working as an ESL instructor. Though there is no fail-safe method as such, it is important to adopt a method or technique judiciously to ensure the best of outcome of teaching. I would like to make a list of few findings based on my experience:

- Rote learning was a very common practice among the students and teachers were not likely to change the system. The learning outcome would have been much better if the students were given a chance to find out of the answers themselves instead of the teacher giving them the answers. For example, in the revision and practice class on poem, I as a teacher could have encouraged them to come up with the answers instead of simply providing the answers. Without saying them to write down the unfinished line of the poem I could have asked them to think something else which may fit into that line, keeping the same meaning of the poem.
- In class on error corrections, teachers used to write down the correct answers and students had to copy the corrections. Sometimes few students could not understand their mistakes; they just corrected it by seeing the teachers'

corrections. So afterwards there is a possibility of doing the same mistakes again and again. It would have been better if the students were asked to try to correct their mistakes by themselves. Afterwards then the correct answers were explained and written on the board. Peer teaching can be emphasized so that the students can understand the errors and correct themselves while correcting peers' copies.

- I found that students did very well when I asked them to draw anything after any class work. The students seemed in a hurry to finish their writing just to draw the picture, but the bad thing that I felt that the students were more interested in drawing rather than writing which hampered their language learning.
- While teaching I wanted to experiment with different methods and their techniques to see whether they were effective or not with the students. Now schools are trying to change the teaching techniques. Still then sometimes I ended up by using the traditional techniques of Grammar Translation method rather than Direct or Communicative methods.

5. Conclusion

It is beyond argument that different kind of methods and techniques should be tried out to make teaching better. And, as we have already had used to with the traditional style of teaching, it might be a bit difficult to change the tradition. It is up to the teachers how they make good use of the techniques belonging to different methods. Thus the necessity of using different techniques may vary from teacher to teacher, but techniques have to be applied in all the process of learning and teaching.

Sometime, without knowing the methods or even their techniques or any teachers' training, the teachers were following Grammar Translation method and its techniques. Few teachers were trying to invent new ways of teaching, which fall under Communicative Language Teaching approach.

I would recommend for in-service teacher training to enhance the proficiency of the teachers and use their potentials by familiarizing them with modern trends of teaching.

In this paper I tried to compare various methods, approaches and their techniques I studied as a student and I applied as an ESL instructor. It was difficult and not advisable to follow certain techniques exactly as prescribed in different methods while teaching. Good teachers always adopt the techniques to suit the learning atmosphere.

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