

Speech Varieties When Teaching.

A Study of the Speech Varieties that the Language Teacher Chooses to Employ in the Classroom Context in Relation to the Teaching Method

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Abstract

The present study operates as a means of awareness-raising as regards the choice made by the teacher of English of “the appropriate speech variety” in the classroom context, taking into account the fact that teachers’ discourse could <and should> vary according to the content (“the language of...”), the channel (spoken, written or mixed), the participants, or even the role played by the teacher within different types of lesson as specific teaching methods (The Grammar-Translation Method, The Direct Method, The Audio-Lingual Method, The Silent Way, Suggestopedia, Total Physical Response, The Lexical Approach, etc.) require specific levels of formality, style or attitude.

Keywords: *method, teacher’s role, formality, teaching styles, attitude.*

Employing the “appropriate language variety” involves the fact that the homogeneity hypothesis, even rejected at the level of the whole language, ought to be accepted at the lower level of the language variety (Albu 2005:19). The Language Acquisition Device (LAD) innatist acquisition hypothesis, first proposed by Noam Chomsky in 1960s, claims that all human beings acquire language

because they possess a specific “language organ” or language acquisition device that needs only to be triggered by incomplete, imperfect samples of

the language. According to that view, we do not teach the LAD to speak any more than we teach the liver to perform its functions. Proponents of this hypothesis conclude that language cannot be taught; it can only be acquired. Since then we have been bombarded with the virtues of acquisition, the vices of learning, and the futility of teaching. Yet, teachers find it necessary to teach... (Lado 1988:2)

Against the LAD hypothesis comes the evidence of language use. Liver functions are basically the same for all human beings, whereas “linguistic attainment shows major differences in style, register, range of vocabulary, and creativity among speakers of the same language” (Lado 1988:3).

I based my paper on Diane Larsen-Freeman’s *Language Teaching Methods. Teachers’ Handbook for the Video Series*, (the video series featuring live demonstrations of current methods of teaching English as a second language), and also on her *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, a study of teaching methods which serves as a foil for reflection on teachers’ actions/discourse. Considering the English classroom an environment in which “communities of speakers” (teachers and students) use language as a vehicle for learning and communication, a pertinent analysis of teachers’ classroom speech in relation to the vast variety of teaching methods could be required.

1. The Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method has been called the ‘Classical Method’ since it was first used in the teaching of the classical languages such as Latin and Greek. Earlier in this century, this method was used for the purpose of helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature (Larsen-Freeman 2008:11). Little thought was given at that time to teaching someone how to speak the language; after all, languages were not being taught primarily to learn oral communication, but to learn the written forms. Instructions were provided in the native language, grammar analysis often focussed on the form and inflection of words, and reading of difficult classical texts began early. Translating sentences from the target language to the mother tongue, or vice-versa, represented a typical exercise of this approach (Celce-Murcia 1992:6). An important feature of the Grammar-Translation Method is that the teacher is the authority in the

classroom. It is essential that students get the correct answer, thus the teachers use mother tongue to provide long, elaborate explanations of the grammar intricacies in a deductive manner.

Some of the most common techniques I would employ in a Grammar-Translation teaching framework might be: reading comprehension questions, translation of literary passages, teaching antonyms / synonyms, teaching tenses (deductively), fill in the blanks, etc. Even though teaching by approaching such a method would rather require the use of the ‘frozen’ or ‘formal’ style of language¹, teachers may adapt different teaching styles and attitudes in order to create the proper atmosphere for learning which would suit the students’ needs, levels or tastes.

2. The Direct Method.

Since the Grammar-Translation Method was not very effective in preparing students to use the target language communicatively, the Direct Method became popular. One of the very basic rules is that “no use of mother tongue is permitted” (Celce-Murcia 1992:6). In fact, the Direct Method receives its name from the fact that meaning is conveyed directly in the target language through the use of demonstration and visual aids, with no recourse to the students' native language (Larsen-Freeman 2008:23). Although the teacher directs the class activities, the students’ role is less passive than in the Grammar-Translation Method. The teacher and the students are more like partners in the teaching/learning process. The initiation of the interaction goes both ways, from teacher to students and from student to teacher, although the latter is often teacher-centred. Students associate meaning and the target language directly by means of demonstrations, not explanations or translations. They are taught how to ask questions as well as answer them. Pronunciation is worked from the very beginning of language instruction, and lessons should contain some conversational activities perceived as opportunities for students to use language in real contexts. Grammar should be taught inductively; there may never be an explicit grammar rule given. Teachers focus on developing students’ speaking and listening skills mainly and encourage self-correction.

¹ According to Joos’s division of the formality scale of language, one could distinguish among five styles: frozen, formal, consultative, casual and intimate. (Joos 1961:40)

Several of the techniques I would approach to a Direct Method lesson or sequence of lesson designed for teaching issues related to Geography, Biology, or culture are: dictation, reading aloud, map drawing, paragraph writing, etc.

3. The Audio-Lingual Method (the Army Method)

Professor Charles Fries of the University of Michigan “led the way in applying principles from structural linguistics in developing the method, and for this reason it has sometimes been referred to as the ‘Michigan Method’” (Larsen-Freeman 2008:35). When World War II broke out, the US was suddenly lunged into a worldwide conflict, heightened by the need for Americans to become orally proficient in the languages of both their allies and their enemies. It was time for a language teaching revolution. The US military provided the impetus with funding for special, intensive language courses that focused on aural/oral skills, known as ‘Army Specialized Training Program’ (ASTP) or, more colloquially, the ‘Army Method’. In all its variations and adaptations, the Army Method came to be known in the 1950s as the ‘Audio-lingual Method’ (Brown 2007:22).

Teachers want their students to be able to use the target language communicatively. It is considered that students need ‘to overlearn’ the target language, i.e. to learn to use it automatically, by forming new habits in the target language. The teacher is like an orchestra leader, directing and controlling the language behaviour of his / her students. The new vocabulary and the structural patterns are presented through dialogues which are learned through imitation and repetition. Students' successful responses are positively reinforced; grammar is induced from the examples given; explicit grammar rules are not provided (Larsen-Freeman 2008:45). For an Audio-lingual lesson or sequence of lesson, I would employ chain drill dialogues, transformation drills, substitution drills, teaching minimal pairs, question and answer drill, completing dialogues, etc.

4. The Silent Way

This approach was proposed by Caleb Gattegno in 1972, and it was based on the assumption that teaching should be subordinated to learning (Brown 2007:29). Gattegno argued that to teach means to serve the learning process rather than to dominate it. He looked at language learning from the perspective of the learner by studying the way babies and young children learn, i.e. by

means of employing our inner resources (our perception, awareness, cognition, imagination, intuition, creativity, etc.) to meet the challenge at hand. (Larsen-Freeman 2008:54).

In most common English conversational situations, silence is embarrassing. Hence, one should start a conversation and continue it at all costs. In Japanese culture, on the other hand, a long pause, after a question initiated in a group situation, is natural. In English, such a pause could mean reservations about answering, and the speaker would provide additional explanations to break the silence. (Lado 1988:164)

In a Silent Way classroom silence is a tool for teaching; the teacher, who acts as a technician or an engineer, “- a stimulator but not a hand-holder - is silent much of the time, thus the name of the method” (Brown 2007:29). “Only the learner can do the learning”, whereas the teacher, “relying on what his students already know, can provide help (if necessary), focus on the students' perceptions, force their awareness, and provide exercises to insure their facility with the language” (Larsen-Freeman 2008:64). The learners' autonomy should be encouraged in their attempts of relating and interacting with the new challenges. The teacher does not model the new sounds, but rather uses gestures to show the students how to modify the native sounds. In order to help the learners to produce the target language sounds as accurately as possible, some instructions may be provided in the students' native language. Silence is a tool - as it helps to foster autonomy - which removes the teacher from the centre of attention so he / she can listen to and work with students. The teacher speaks, but only when necessary; it is the students who receive the practice in using the language.

Regarding the materials to be used in such classroom contexts, a set of Cuisenaire rods – small coloured rods of varying lengths - and a series of colourful wall charts could be useful. The rods may be used to introduce vocabulary (colours, nouns, adjectives), verbs (give, take, pick up, drop), and morpho-syntax (tense, comparatives, pluralisation, word order, etc). Even though the Silent Way was perceived as too harsh a method, and the teachers too distant to encourage communicative atmosphere, I consider it quite appropriate to various teaching situations such as introducing vocabulary related to numbers or rooms and furniture by using sets of coloured rods.

The originator of this method is Georgi Lozanov, who argues that language learning can occur at a much faster rate than ordinarily transpires (Brown 2000:27). It is considered that sometimes we feel that our performance is inefficient due to the fact that we set up psychological barriers to learning, i.e. we feel limited in our ability to learn for the fear of failing, therefore, in order to make better use of our reserved capacity, our psychological limitations need to be 'desuggested'.

Teachers should not act in a directive way, although this method is teacher-controlled and not student-controlled. For example, they should act as real partners to the students, participating in entertaining activities such as games and songs. Although there are many techniques that the teachers use, factors such as "communication in the spirit of love, respect for man as a human being, the specific humanitarian way of applying their techniques are crucial" (Gill & Lozanov 2010:4). Teachers should be regarded as professionals, reliable and credible. They should have a hundred percent expectation of positive results; they should also care of their students' feelings and teach them with personal participation through games, songs, classical arts, and pleasure. Students' errors should be corrected gently, not in a direct, confrontational manner. I think the Romanian teachers of English employ Suggestopedia (or at least, certain features of this method) to their classes more often than they realise. We always want to enhance our students' peripheral learning, and in order to do that, at the beginning of every schoolyear, term or even class, we decorate our classrooms with pictures, posters, or make use of various other meaningful materials to create bright and cheerful environments for learning. Role play, choosing new identities and creative adaptations (e.g. singing, dancing, dramatizations and games) are useful techniques I would employ in a Suggestopedia lesson or sequence of lesson.

5. Total Physical Response (T.P.R.)

Total Physical Response (T.P.R.) was developed by James Asher and it is called the 'Comprehension Approach' due to the importance it gives to listening comprehension (Larsen-Freeman 1990:18). After the learner internalizes an extensive map of how the target language works, speaking will appear spontaneously. A baby spends many months listening to the people around it long before it ever says a word. No one tells the baby that it must speak. The child has

the time to try to make sense out of the sounds it hears. Any child chooses to speak when it is ready to do so. Imperatives - used in a gentle manner, the way a parent would (usually) do with a child - are perceived as useful linguistic devices because meaning in the target language can often be conveyed through actions. It is said that language acquisition is enhanced when learners respond physically. The order of the commands should be changed so students do not memorize fixed routines. Correction should be performed in a non-threatening manner. The teacher is the director of all student behaviour. His / her voice and facial expression should be kind and friendly.

I often use commands to direct learners' behaviour, but my students' favourite technique is role reversal, i.e. a student commands the teacher and classmates to perform different actions.

6. The Community Language Learning Method

The Community Language Learning Method takes its principles from the more general Counselling Learning Approach developed by Charles A. Curran. Within this method teachers consider their students as 'whole persons.' (Brown 2000:27). Whole-person learning means that teachers consider not only their students' intellect, but also have some understanding of the relationship among students' feelings, physical reactions, instinctive protective reactions, and desire to learn (Larsen-Freeman 1990:89). The teacher 'counsels' the students. He/she does not offer advice, but rather shows them that he is really listening to them and understands what they are saying. By understanding how students feel, the teacher can help them gain insights into their own learning process as well as transform their negative feelings, which might otherwise block their learning. Within such Method, the anxiety caused by the classroom context is lessened by the teacher's supportive attitude. The style of language employed by the teachers may vary from consultative to casual.

7. Communicative Language Teaching

In the late 1970s and early 1980s there was a shift from a linguistic structure-centred approach to a Communicative Approach, as some observed that students could produce sentences accurately in a lesson, but could not use them appropriately when genuinely communicating outside of the classroom, therefore, being able to communicate required more than mastering linguistic structures.

Within the modern approach to this method, students are expected to perform such communicative functions as promising, inviting, declining invitations, asking for permission, offering help and so on, within a social frame. Whenever possible, the teacher introduces authentic language as it is used in a real-life context. The target language is a vehicle for classroom communication, not just the object of study. The teacher facilitates communication in the classroom. One of his/her major responsibilities is to provide contexts which are likely to promote communication. Since the teacher's role - as a facilitator of the activities - is less dominant than in a teacher-centred method, students are seen as more responsible managers of their own learning. Sometimes he / she is a co-communicator; but more often he / she provides contexts that prompt communication between and among the students (Larsen-Freeman 1990:131). The techniques I often use when employing the Communicative Approach are: language games, role play, picture strip stories, problem solving, scrambled sentences. My students find them enjoyable and, if they are properly designed, they offer them valuable communicative practice.

Conclusions

The present-day language teachers are increasingly aware of the range of methods at their disposal. In order to break the monotony of the class, teachers could and should borrow and adapt different teaching methods to suit the students' requirements, needs, level and context of culture. Teachers of English themselves are not very efficient in many cases. Their main problem is to appropriate these methods and become capable of playing the specific roles and of producing the turns of phrase that are most efficient in the context of the English classroom so that their students may increase their proficiency in any context in which the English language is needed. Therefore, the Eclectic method may be appropriate in many teaching situations as it combines various approaches and methodologies, depending on the aims of the lesson and the abilities of the learners. Sensitizing learners and getting them acquainted to various means of learning which would foster their autonomy takes the process of teaching beyond the sphere of the technicalities of training and makes it actually educational.

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