

Key Terms and Concepts in ELT Approach and Method

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About 'methods' in language teaching, Davies (2007) makes a point, which is worth reflecting upon: "The history of language teaching is, indeed, the history of method. Like fashion in dress/clothes, method in language teaching emerges and disappears, and . . . it recycles itself after a decent interval. As staleness is to fashion, so is failure to method" (p.66). There is always the desire, the urge, and even the temptation to look for new methods of teaching, believing naively that the 'new' methods would necessarily be 'better'. According to Kaplan (1993, p.130), "language teachers are always in search of the foolproof method."

In the context of language teaching, a '**method**' is a system that is based on a particular theory of language or on a particular theory of learning; it is usually based on both. Some of the well-known methods are the **grammar-translation method**, the **audio-lingual method**, and the **direct method**. The term '**approach**' is used to refer to the general theoretical perspective or orientation, as in the **structural approach**, the **communicative approach** or the **lexical approach**. These theoretical orientations will influence the choices that teachers and curriculum policy makers make in respect of the type of syllabus, teaching materials, classroom exercises/activities/tasks, and even assessment tools and techniques.

For example, the **audio-lingual method** was underpinned by a structuralist orientation of language (i.e., language as a system of structures, or forms) and behaviouristic theory of learning (i.e., learning viewed as a kind of habit formation). Accordingly, in this method, the syllabus was organized in terms of a graded list of grammatical structures (or forms) and the classroom practices focused on drilling these structures in the learners so that correct

language habits were formed in them.

The **communicative approach**, which gave rise to the **communicative language teaching (CLT) method**, marked a clear shift in emphasis in language teaching— a shift away from the mere mastery of the language system in isolation (i.e., grammar and vocabulary) to learning how to use the system in real communication. It marked a shift from *linguistic competence* to *communicative competence* as the goal of language teaching and learning (The readers may recall an earlier article in this series on **accuracy versus appropriacy (or appropriateness)**). The *functional-notional syllabus*, *English for Specific Purposes (ESP) syllabuses*, and a *task-based syllabus* are examples of syllabuses and courses derived from this approach.

In the late 20th century, there was a strong reaction against the concept of 'method' for two main reasons: methods are prescriptive and do not take into account local contextual factors. Consequently, there has been a shift towards customizing an approach to suit the particular needs of the learners in a given context, local or regional. This is sometimes called the **post-method pedagogy**. Teachers also seem to favour a sort of **eclecticism**, i.e. combining activities and techniques from different methods and approaches. In practice, though, teachers originally trained in using a particular method tend to use the same method and even today coursebooks are based on form rather than meaning as their organizing principle.

References

- Davies, A. (2007). *An Introduction to Applied Linguistics: From Practice to Theory (2nd Edn.)*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Kaplan, Alice. (1993). *French Lessons: A Memoir*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.