

## A CONCEPTUAL MODEL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE THEORIES

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Sooner or later the methods or applied linguistic teacher wants to present the best-known methods or approaches to Learning a Foreign Language (direct, audio-lingual, etc.) and to make some sense of them in terms of their theoretical underpinnings. The following presentation from my methods class may help others to restructure presentations and activities of what is often a vague and confusing topic. Be it known that I have borrowed freely from Brooks, Rivers, Chastain, Grittner, and others as do we all.

The cardinal perspective on language study, that is, what a language is good for and why it is worth studying, may be shown from two opposing poles: the anthropological (A) and the classical-humanistic (B).



Figure 1

The anthropological view has been in vogue among linguists for nearly a century and among language teachers for one or two decades. This "linguistic" view of language gained great impetus when anthropologists, notably Margaret Meade and Claude Levi-Strauss, made it known that the languages of so-called primitive cultures were often incredibly complex and subtle even though these languages existed only in the spoken form. Interested readers may obtain black and white masters for the preparation of transparent overlays similar to graphics used here, by writing to James W. Brown, Department of Foreign Languages, Ball State University, Muncie, IN 47306.

The heart of the anthropological view is its idea that a language is (1) primarily oral in fact, the written version of it—if any—being only a pale and incomplete imitation of the former; it is also (2) inextricably woven into the fabric of popular culture, i.e., everyday social behavior or “little-c culture” as we call it; further, a language is (3) infinitely variable as to dialect, level or register, and idiolect so as to recognize no good or bad variants so long as they are acceptable to the hearer at hand.

At the opposing pole (B) there is the classical-humanistic view of language study, which perceives language as the vessel of civilized tradition, the recorder of man’s worthiest thoughts, and the sharer, across time and distance, of his experience and knowledge. The classical-humanist will tell you that language is therefore (1) most communicative, more apt to beauty and creativity in its written form; that in this form it (2) transcends the routine of daily life in order to inform and inspire in the service of civilized refinement, i.e., “Big-c culture”; and that (3) since models of the language are found in the great works of past—and a few present—authors, the daily vernacular is prone to corruption and unwarranted departure from the ideal.

Extremes and abuses abound in both camps. The English teacher who declines to tamper with his students’ ghetto cant may be shutting them off from social mobility, and the foreign language teacher who very strongly advocates oral dialect may forget that the native listener’s tolerance of non-literary usage by foreigners may be indeed quite low. On the other hand, we know that the classical-humanist may skimp on the speaking and listening skills in order to concentrate on the deciphering of literary models. Though as linguistically-influenced relativists, foreign language teachers currently pooh-pooh the classical-humanist, it is likely that many first-language teachers, most publishers, and a colossal majority of office managers are at least *de facto* aspirants to the classical-humanist credo.

In real life, most foreign language teachers are to be found somewhere between the extremes; they are identifiable by emphasis, rather than omission, in their approach to skill development as can be seen when the two more “popular” strategies are placed on the anthropological-classical continuum in Figure 2:

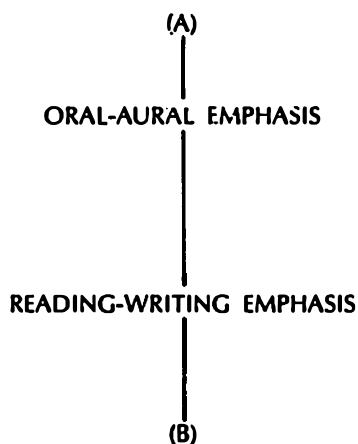


Figure 2

Next we extend our model horizontally and examine two schools of psychology relative to learning: the cognitive or mentalist (C) and the



behaviorist or Skinnerian (D). The former conceives learning as a rational, conscious act and includes concept formation, discrimination learning, and analysis through the ordering of symbolic data enabling man to know and learn. At the opposite end of this continuum are the behaviorists, who stress learning in terms of habit-formation and conditioning through accumulation of stimulus-response behaviors. Both areas of psychology claim their particular orthodoxies in the learning of languages. But what do these so disparate viewpoints lead to in the classroom? (Figure 3)

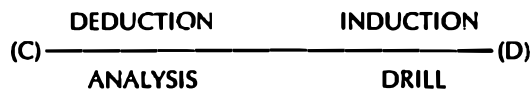


Figure 3

First, adherents of the mentalist view (C) will teach deductively, i.e., rules first and second the application of the rules to specific problems through

analysis. Those at pole (D) will teach inductively and so present rules only after the behaviors are learned by mimicry and drill.

Here too there is danger at the extremes: those at far (C) tend to progress no further than intellectual data-shifting, while those at extreme (D) may be lost in the morass of snappy drills and parroted dialogs; in their contrast they typify the much-discussed dichotomy between "a paralysis of analysis" and "a smattering of chattering," excesses that are avoided quite simply by hovering closer to a central position and leaning to one or another as the situation demands.

Now, as we combine outlooks on language (A-B) and learning (C-D), Figure 4 we see that the basic methods or approaches are seen in relationship to the others in terms of their theoretical foundations.

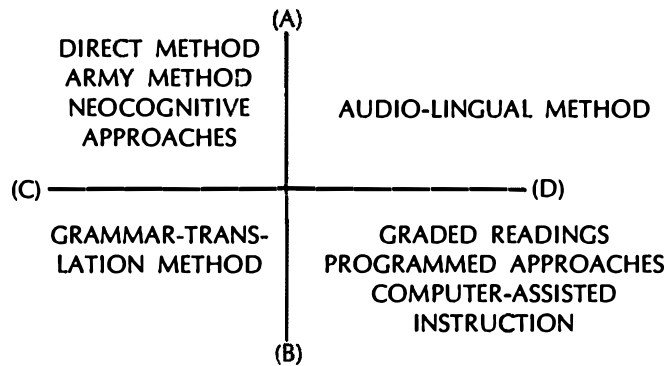


Figure 4

Here the methods teacher can describe and demonstrate (or better, help the students to describe and demonstrate) what these approaches are and how they operate in the classroom. A guided tour of the four quadrants might follow this outline:

Within the C-B quadrant is the grammar-translation or reading method, with its stress on literary models (B) and the intellectual mastery of rules, declensions, conjugations, word lists, and translations through deductive strategies. The approaches in B-D quadrant combine the old and new: graded readers are a decades-old device often used in conjunction with direct method or grammar-translation classes. The programmed materials developed in the sixties led to later CAI (Computer-Assisted Instruction) programs which combine Skinnerian learning with written exercises, not with a view to literary study, but rather because written exercises are best suited to the present capabilities of CAI with their visual readouts and students' typed responses.

At A-D is the audio-lingual method, the ballyhooed cure-all of NDEA days which, say some, shares with Christianity the onus of having not been tried and found wanting. Clearly the most powerful influence on foreign language teachers even today, the audio-lingual method stresses repetition of dialogs and pattern practice to the point of "internalization," i.e., fluent and nonreflective production. By doctrine, grammar generalizations come **ex post facto**, inductively (if at all), but later audiolinguists have loosened this dictum.

The A-C quadrant also points up essential similarities of older and newer approaches. The direct method predicated on mime and imitation, and the similar ASTP or Army method, as well as the commercial Berlitz Method, trace their roots as far as the days of Comenius in their study of grammar and rules (the cognitive attitude) in tandem with intensive oral practice. They differ primarily as to the kind and amount of grammar presented. Sharing a theoretical background but in quite different focus are neocognitive proponents of newer linguistic systems. Thus far, the neocognitivist attitude has served as a leavening influence in audiolingual dogma, but itself has yet to find a form accessible to the language teacher or students.

Some discussion-provoking implications arise from this presentation model. First is the degree to which our methodological substrata are borrowed. Do we rely too much on linguists and psychologists to give us direction and justification? Is the language teacher forced to make decisions not only in fields that are tangential to his own, but in matters that remain as hotly contested issues among specialists themselves? How then can theory really help the teacher who works in the complex dynamic of the classroom? Further discussion may focus on the implication that none of the current approaches offers a unified theory-to-practice path beyond the teaching of discreet elements within the language; that we are still in the fumbling stage in the matter of translating rudimentary classroom response (Chomsky's "language-like" behavior) into meaningful social communication. This area still provides much challenge to the thoughtful, creative teacher, regardless of his or her methodological starting-point.

Finally, this presentation may lead to the point that even though the theoretical foundations of various methodologies are at odds, there need be no "sheepmen-cattlemen" conflict in the practicing teacher's mind, since daily classroom realities will tug toward a central eclecticism, where all will be in good and ample company until the One True Path is discovered.

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