

ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) APPROACHES

In language classrooms, to meet language learners' needs and to understand why learners can benefit from certain methods, it is essential for language teachers to understand theory-based approaches. Approaches are the roots of teaching methods. As defined by Edward Anthony, language approaches are theoretically well-informed positions and beliefs about the nature of language and language learning. In other words, approaches serve as the principles of language teaching.

With English acquisition as the primary goal, English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction is also an essential element of any bilingual program. Likewise, ESL approaches can also shed light on bilingual classroom practice. This entry focuses on introducing and discussing some major approaches that have guided ESL teaching, including the grammar-based approach, communicative language teaching, the content-based approach, sheltered English instruction, the whole-language approach, the natural approach, cooperative language learning, and task-based language teaching. The work of Jack C. Richards and Theodore S. Rodgers provides a comprehensive overview of the historical development of ESL methods and approaches. Much of the discussion below draws on their frameworks and descriptions of the theories and practices associated with each of these approaches.

Grammar-Based Approach

The *grammar-based approach* addresses the structure or grammatical elements of language in order to improve language skills. In an ESL class taught through the grammar-based approach, typically, the

teacher spends most of the available class time explaining grammar elements; the students are mere listeners.

The *grammar-translation method* is a practice of the grammar-based approach. Grammar is taught with extensive explanations in students' native language, and later practice is through translating sentences from the target language to the native language, or vice versa. Little attention is paid to the content of texts; rather, emphasis is on language form itself. Similarly, little attention is paid to pronunciation and active use of English.

Although to some extent, focus on form is essential for English learners, especially English beginners, the grammar-based approach has many obvious drawbacks. No class time is allocated to allow students to produce their own English sentences, and even less time is spent on English output production (spontaneous or reproductive). Students may have difficulties "relating" to the language because the classroom experience is disconnected from real life. There is often little contextualization of the grammar; thus, students memorize abstract rules in isolation. Therefore, grammar-based approaches have largely been rejected by the field, though grammar instruction is still considered by many as an essential component of ESL instruction and can be included within other approaches.

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative language teaching (CLT) is a current recognized approach and is influenced by theories of language as communication and the functions of language (e.g., how to make a request). The emphasis of CLT is on functional communication, social interaction, and real-life language use. Addressing fluency and accuracy, this approach considers integrated components of communicative competence, including the grammatical, functional, and sociolinguistic. The major tenet of CLT is that language acquisition is achieved through using language communicatively, rather than from repetitious drills that are common in the grammar-based approach.

In an ESL class with the CLT approach, the teacher's role is that of facilitator. The teacher sets up exercises and then gives direction to the class, but the students have much more speaking opportunities than they have in a traditional ESL classroom. The classroom is stress free and student centered. In addition, teachers utilize a variety of techniques (e.g., dialogues, role plays) to get students involved and use peer

tutoring, pairs, or small groups to increase class interaction and communication-in-context practices. Class activities focus on information negotiation and information sharing as well as language functions (e.g., giving instructions) in order to help engage students in meaningful and real lifelike language use. Students can be motivated to learn by their desire to communicate in meaningful ways about meaningful topics.

Content-Based Approach

The *content-based approach* combines language learning with subject matter (e.g., math, science) learning in an ESL class. This approach sharply contrasts with the traditional ESL instruction in which language skills are taught in an isolated way. The foundation of the content-based approach is the principle that language learning is more successful when students use language as a means of acquiring information. Although all students in class are second-language learners, ESL teachers make use of grade-level appropriate curricula in a content area to teach ESL students. Thus, the content-based approach can help ESL students develop both language and academic knowledge. At the same time, however, ESL teachers face challenges and may need more training in various content areas.

In adopting a content-based approach, teachers are in charge of choosing a subject of interest to students. Language-focused follow-up exercises (e.g., plural versus singular in math) are included to help students draw attention to the target language skills or linguistic features needed to learn and talk about that subject. Teachers monitor students' English output and provide immediate feedback. Teachers should differentiate between achievement in language skills and achievement in the subject matter when evaluating students. ESL teachers may ask this critical question: How much content best supports language learning?

Sheltered English Instruction

Sheltered instruction is a commonly used approach today. It uses English as the medium of content area instruction. The instructor can be an ESL teacher or a content-area-trained teacher to use a variety of strategies and techniques to make the instruction comprehensible for ELLs. Structured immersion classrooms may include both ESL and English-proficient students. Sheltered English instruction serves as a bridge and

connects the ESL instruction with the academic mainstream instruction (e.g., regular math instruction designed for English-fluent student). It provides subject instructions to ESL students while emphasizing development of English language skills. In addition, all students and teachers in class socialize with culturally appropriate classroom behaviors. However, this approach requires students to have already acquired some English language skills. Teachers are also required to have some appropriate training in sheltered English instruction before teaching the class.

In sheltered English instruction, teachers create a stress-free learning environment and use multiple sources, such as physical activities, visual aids, and body language, to teach key vocabulary for concept development in subject areas. Teachers not only adopt multiple techniques to make content area materials comprehensible for ESL students but also understand ESL students' second-language-acquisition process and cultural differences. The sheltered English instruction approach may include a primary language instruction component. Teachers make effective use of students' native languages in the classroom in order to make lessons taught in English more comprehensible. Interactions with English-proficient students may also be incorporated in lesson to increase ESL students' opportunities of practicing English in a natural way. Sheltered English instruction is a key component in most bilingual education models, as it is used to gradually increase English content area instruction as students make the transition from native language to English language instruction.

Whole-Language Approach

Different from the phonetic approach that focuses only on fragmented language, such as phonemic awareness and phonics drills, the main characteristic of the *whole-language approach* is that language teaching should not be separated into component skills, but rather experienced as an integrated system of communication (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). Rather than focusing on language as a mechanical skill, it is taught as a connection to students' existing language and life experience. Language used in class must be meaningful and carry out authentic functions. Teachers who use the whole-language approach teach students to use phonics (sound-based), semantic (meaning-based), and syntactic (structural and context) cues when reading to help the students make meanings from the texts they

read. In short, the whole-language approach addresses the importance of meaning and meaning making in English teaching and learning. In addition, the whole-language approach to some extent draws on an interactional perspective of language learning and advocates cooperative learning and participatory learning by using authentic language.

The four language skills are integrated in class and are improved simultaneously. Students read and write with others in class. Student-centered classroom empower students to learn according to their interests. ESL teachers adopting the whole-language approach usually use authentic literature for ESL students to develop and practice their reading skills. Writing is also for real audiences.

Natural Approach

The *natural approach* was developed by Tracy Terrell in the 1970s. This approach advocates that comprehensible language input is essential for triggering language acquisition. Terrell focuses on improving basic personal communication skills in her teaching and views communicative competence progressing through five stages: (1) the preproduction stage of aural comprehension, (2) early speech production, (3) speech emergence, (4) intermediate fluency, and (5) advanced fluency. In other words, comprehension typically precedes production, and students' progress occurs naturally.

An ESL classroom using the natural approach includes the following:

1. Students are not forced to speak English until they feel ready to do so.
2. The teacher is the source of English input and uses variety of materials and classroom activities.
3. The teacher creates a stress-free learning environment and does not correct student errors in front of the class.
4. Facilitating the interaction of students in pair or small groups to practice newly acquired structures is a major focus in class. The grammar structure should be learned in a natural order.
5. Activities incorporate a wide variety of visual aids (e.g., picture), hands-on manipulative, and realia.
6. Classes are student centered.
7. Formal grammar instruction should be kept to minimum.

The natural approach provides ample guidance and resources for ESL students at the beginner levels but has limitations in teaching advanced English learners. Moreover, since this approach allows the delay of oral production until speech emerges, it is hard to manage class activities to meet students' different speech-emerging timetables.

Cooperative Language Learning

Cooperative language learning (CLL), as its name indicates, aims at getting students involved in language learning by using cooperative activities while developing communicative competence. This approach is influenced by an interactive perspective of language learning and a theory of cooperative learning. CLL also embraces some principles of communicative language teaching. A major characteristic of CLL approach is that it can raise students' awareness of language structure, lexical items, and language functions through interactive tasks.

By using such an approach, teachers can increase students' frequency of English language use and variety of English learning practices, because the CLL approach helps develop students' critical thinking skills as they need to collaborate with their peers to design plans for their group, to challenge others' views, and to provide constructive criticism as well as alternative solutions. It fosters opportunities for students to be resources for each other. Advantages of the CLL approach include enhancing students' self-esteem and promoting students' motivation; however, some students may be unaccustomed to working collaboratively with others on academic tasks. Thus, teachers may need to give extra attention to collaborative skills, such as disagreeing politely and asking for help and explanation. Teachers may also need to be aware of factors such as different cultural expectations, individual learning styles, and personality differences that can affect the successful application of the CLL approach.

In an ESL classroom with the CLL approach, pair and small-group work are emphasized to carry out class activities and learning. Teachers use peer tutoring and peer monitoring to build up cooperation in learning. By facilitating collaboration, teachers devalue competition among students and thus decrease students' stress or fear in language learning. The classroom is student centered; teachers need to ensure that every student in groups participate in activities. Cooperative

interaction usually follows a teacher-directed presentation of new material.

Task-Based Language Teaching

The *task-based language teaching* (TBLT) approach uses tasks as a core unit of instruction in language teaching. The basic premise of TBLT is that language should be learned through a set of meaningful communicative tasks that involve students in comprehending, producing, or interacting in the target language. In other words, tasks should go beyond pure practices of language skills. This approach emphasizes the meaningfulness and authenticity of language use, which also links to the communicative language teaching approach. Engaging students in task-based activities can help students contextualize and activate language learning. In short, tasks provide opportunities for language input and output.

ESL teachers working with TBLT link the curricular goals with communicative goals. Furthermore, teachers identify types of tasks (e.g., academic related, social related) that enhance learning and variables that may affect the success of task completion (e.g., English proficiency level, the complexity of the task). As Susan Fezz describes, tasks adopted in a TBLT classroom can be either those that students might need to achieve in real life or that have a pedagogical purpose specific to the classroom. When evaluating students, teachers should focus on the process of completing the task instead of the product.

Conclusion

Although each of the approaches described here has its own characteristics, considerable overlaps of these approaches are commonly observed in different ESL instruction. The choice of approach naturally depends on student factors such as age and proficiency level and the availability of resources within the learning environment. Appropriate approaches to English language teaching are the keystone of teachers' choices of teaching methodology.

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See also Audio-Lingual Method; Communicative Approach; Grammar-Translation Method; Natural Approach; SIOP; Whole Language

Further Readings

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ENGLISH FOR THE CHILDREN CAMPAIGN

State education agencies reported that the number of limited-English-proficient students in the nation's schools rose from 2.1 million in the 1990–1991 academic year to more than 3.7 million in 1999–2000. A congressionally mandated study found that these students received lower grades, were judged by their teachers to have lower academic abilities, and scored below their classmates on standardized tests of reading and math. Subsequent responses to these problems have run the gamut. Some policymakers have advocated bilingual education as a remedy, while others have taken the opposite view and blamed bilingual education for the inequities. The latter argue that bilingual education programs are responsible for retarding the acquisition of English by children who need desperately to have an age-appropriate command of that language. Beginning in the 1980s, sentiments against bilingual education became increasingly critical as more and more communities adopted bilingual education programs. Shortly after taking office, President Ronald Reagan announced that it was erroneous and unaligned with American concepts to have bilingual programs in order to preserve students' native languages and that such programs would not allow students to achieve enough English proficiency to participate in the job market. Many people listened. By feeding on the frustration of policymakers and the increasingly harsh rhetoric surrounding debates over these programs, proponents of