

Teaching English as a second language: methods and techniques

Language teaching came into its own as a profession in the last century. Central to this phenomenon was the emergence of the concept of "methods" of language teaching. The method concept in language teaching—the notion of a systematic set of teaching practices based on a particular theory of language and language learning—is a powerful one, and the quest for better methods was a preoccupation of teachers and applied linguists throughout the 20th century.

The Grammar-Translation Method

This is a traditional teaching methodology that emphasizes the study of grammatical rules of the target language using translation exercises. Instruction is given in the mother tongue of the students. The aim of this method is for students to develop an ability to read prominent literary texts and to write in the target language accurately. This method does not give emphasis to speaking or to listening skills.

The Audiolingual Method

This method is based on the principles of habit formation of behaviorist psychology. It relies on the repetition and memorization of dialogues and set phrases. Grammar is not taught through direct instruction but through the repetition of language patterns. This method was developed as a reaction to the lack of speaking skills of the Grammar-Translation method.

The audiolingual lesson includes

- new materials presented in dialogue form
- structures and skills are sequenced
- vocabulary controlled
- patterns are taught using repetition and drill

The Total Physical Response

James Asher developed this method by claiming that "the assimilation of information and skills can be accelerated through the use of the kinesthetic sensory system." The method uses commands to convey information and to elicit a physical response from

the students. The method allows students to begin to speak when they feel they are ready.

The steps in the Total Physical Response:

- teacher says command and perform the action
- teacher says command and both teacher and student perform the action
- teacher says command and students perform the action
- teacher tells one student to perform an action
- reverse the roles or students give each other commands

Communicative Language Approach

This methodology was developed as a reaction to the Grammar Translation and the Audiolingual methods. This method emphasizes the development of communication skills in authentic language use and classroom activities where students are engaged in real-life communication exchanges in the target language. Language in this method is studied in context that includes the linguistic and social contexts of the language.

Communicative Approach Lessons

- practical “real-life” situations and focus on functions of language
- cooperative groups, pairs....
- no restrictions placed on use of the native language.

Teachers of English as a second language, here or overseas, need to know a few simple methods to overcome the language barrier with their students.

Teaching English to speakers of other languages is both challenging and rewarding. More and more internationally minded people are choosing to teach English as a Second Language both in the United States and abroad. Whether in the United States, another English-speaking country, or in countries around the world, the teacher of English as a second language will need to keep in mind the following simple guidelines:

- Use non-verbal cues. Facial expressions, hand gestures, and other non-verbal cues are a great way to overcome the language barrier. For example, when explaining the concept of tall, raise your hand high into the air. When explaining the concept of cold, shiver and chatter your teeth.

- Use visual aids. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words, and this is particularly true when teaching English as a second language. Visual aids can be used to teach everything from vocabulary to prepositions. In addition to instructional advantages, visuals keep lessons interesting for the learners. If possible, get access to an overhead or slide projector for effective presentations.

- Put students in groups. If the teacher is constantly talking, learners of English as a second language will never get a chance to practice. Group work gives students an opportunity to practice the language. Groups work the best with 2 to 5 people; with any more people, not everyone gets a chance to participate. It is also a good idea to group students with different first languages together when possible.

- Use bi-lingual materials. If the teacher speaks the same language(s) as the students, the situation will be greatly simplified. But not many teachers have the luxury of speaking the same language(s) of his/her students. Bi-lingual materials can help a teacher of English as a second language to draw on a student's native language without knowing it him/herself.

- Repeat and rephrase. Teachers of English as a second language need to repeat everything at least three times. They should also vary the wording of their remarks. A student may know one set of vocabulary but not another – even when the topic of discussion is the same. Even if the student does understand a concept upon first explanation, he/she will still benefit from the repetition and variation of language. It will expose him/her to new words and phrases.

- Don't over-correct. Our first instinct as teachers of English as a second language is to correct student language errors. Over-correction, however, can make students reluctant to use the language. If afraid of being corrected every time they speak, students will simply stop speaking – and therefore learning – the language. Of course, there are appropriate times to correct language mistakes. If a concept – for example the past tense – has been discussed at length in class, it is appropriate to correct students when they form the past tense improperly.

- Create a safe atmosphere. Learning English as a second language is not an easy thing emotionally. Students will feel self-conscious about their lack of English ability and will thus be reluctant to use the language. The job of the teacher of English as a second language is to create a safe and supportive environment, one in which the student will be comfortable experimenting with the language. That means that laughing at or putting down others can not be tolerated in any way, shape, or form.

- Don't forget about 4 language skills: hearing, speaking, reading, writing.