Approaches to language learning

Since the 19th century, different approaches have been implemented. Evolutions results from the discipline itself with the prominence of cognitivism and constructivism on behaviourism but also from external causes such as the needs and categories of learners or the institutional goals. Even if language didactics only appeared at the end of the 19th century, using the best methods to teach foreigners the language has always been a concern in Europe, first for Latin and Greek and later, with the development of geographical mobility.

The traditional method

Called "grammar-translation" method, it is based on the reading and translation of literary texts into a foreign language, not focused the everyday communication language. Translations, memorisation of sentences, application of grammatical rules, repetitive exercises used to take a prominent place in the learning process. It is the teacher who mastered the whole process by choosing the texts, exercises, asking the questions and correcting the answers. The language used in the classroom was the mother tongue and interaction was always in one direction from the teacher to the students. The learner had to know by heart and the meaning of the words was learned through translation into the mother tongue.

The "direct method"

"Direct method" started in the beginning of the 20th. It reflects the changing needs of foreign language learning in order to promote the development of economic, political, cultural and tourist exchanges. Its objective is practical and aims at an effective mastery of the language as a communication tool. It includes three main features:

- Direct: avoiding the intermediate use of the mother tongue (translation being an "indirect" exercise)

- Oral: practice in the classroom and learning pronunciation through interactions with the teacher. The transition to writing was seen as a means of fixing what the learner already knew how to use orally.

- Active: interrogative (question-and-answer between teacher and students), intuitive (learning by observing), imitative and repetitive (intensive and mechanical repetition).

Learners were active and their participation was required for sketches, expressive reading... around daily life topics. Indeed, the learner's motivation was considered a key element in the learning process.

The Structuro-Global Audio-Visual Global Methodology (SGAV)

Developed in the early 1950s at the Institute of Phonetics of the University of Zagreb, the SGAV methodology aims to teach everyday communication in the spoken language of everyday life. Here also, language is above all a means of oral expression and communication. Learning must focus on understanding the overall meaning of the structure and was performed through "audio" and "visual" elements. Starting from recorded dialogues around situational images the learner is led to access a communication situation in a global way. It is only after about sixty hours of class that a transition to written language is made, and this through dictation. Writing is considered to be an activity derived from oral expression and we will have to wait for the communicative approach to really consider writing as a competence. The SGAV method doesn't take into account the language and professional needs nor the real motivations of learners. All, schoolchildren or adults, were confronted with the same content and very slow progress, often unsuited to the time that could reasonably be spent. Other difficulties are the significant costs (tape recorder/language laboratory, etc.), and the system constraints: reduced number of learners, intensive weekly teaching, long-term training (2 to 3 years).

The communicative approach

The communicative approach started in the 1970s in reaction to the audio-oral and SGAV methods from which it kept the idea that a language is a communication tool but adding to it the social interaction. It is not enough to know vocabulary and grammatical rules, it is also necessary to know which language to use in a given context in order to achieve an effective communication. It is focused on the needs of learners that are analysed in advance so that the teaching contents can coincide with them. A consequence is that written expression skills are becoming increasingly important as needs can take many different forms: understanding written information, writing a memo, providing written guidance, etc. Also in that approach, the teacher must use genuine documents, from everyday personal or professional life and also able to illustrate the culture of the country (newspaper articles, TV shows).

The action-oriented approach

The action-oriented approach developed in the mid-1990s focuses on the tasks to be carried out within an overall project. The learner is seen as a social actor who needs to accomplish tasks (which are not only linguistic) by mobilising the strategies that seem most appropriate.

According to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, "a task is defined as any purposeful action considered by an individual as necessary in order to achieve a given result in the context of a problem to be solved, an obligation to fulfil or an objective to be achieved. This definition would cover a wide range of actions such as moving a wardrobe, writing a book, obtaining certain conditions in the negotiation of a contract, [...] ordering a meal in a restaurant, translating a foreign language text or preparing a class newspaper through group work. "

Learning situations are thus constructed from work or daily life situations, using genuine universes such as housing, mobility, family, health, education, professional life, etc. The more the teaching reflects the motivations and needs of learners and the more they will adopt an active and creative attitude. The action must encourage interaction that stimulates the development of a competence components (knowledge, know-how, know-how, interpersonal skills, learning skills) as well as the ability to communicate.

The competency-based approach

This approach comes from the industry and proposes to focus on technical and professional scenarios that allow the learner to approach jobs in their operational dimensions. The communicative approach is already in some ways part of this one. As a result, vocational language training has developed. Particularly correlated to the work on the professional project, the "French for Specific Objectives" aims to teach not French but rather some French to achieve the objective of vocational integration. Thus, language learning can be linked to the person's professional aspiration and directly rooted in the host country professional life.

Conclusion

Pedagogical approaches in language teaching cannot provide a satisfactory response uniformly for all targets and contexts but by using the variety of approaches, it is possible to design programs to train, in a short time, adults with skills and know-how to activate, with specific needs for a quick social and professional integration.

Resources

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