

Beyond Traditional Approaches and Methodologies: The New Roles of Texts

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The European Conference on Language Learning 2019
Official Conference Proceedings

Abstract

With the recent focus on bringing technology into learning environments and creating concept-based curricula, the role of a text in English as a Second Language education remained unchanged. At the same time, Language Acquisition has begun taking place outside of classrooms with no consideration of emerging and developing trends. Through a thorough study of academic journals and language publications, this paper will critically analyse the traditional approaches to texts in English Language Teaching. It will then indicate the incipient opportunities for various types of texts to become a means to equip individuals with language tools beyond traditional approaches and methodologies. Subsequently, it will present how a classroom can be turned into not only a cultural interpolation but also a favourable environment in which learners can practice their interdisciplinary recognition and their critical thinking skills. As a result, the focus from 'what to teach' which entails standard reading comprehension tasks introducing language in context is shifted onto 'how and why', to provide learners with strategies and occasions to experience, exploit and process a text in order to be ready to take a stand in the modern world.

Keywords: Language acquisition, Culture studies, Curricula, Critical thinking

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Introduction

With the focus on passive mind training in the in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century that shifted onto active acquisition and communication, language learning and teaching has developed significantly. The influences of past methods and approaches are clearly visible in modern classrooms with no regard to technological, cultural and social changes. Different methodologies influenced the way texts are perceived and how they are utilised; nevertheless, many language teachers still decide to process texts in view of a single approach.

Traditional approaches and methodologies

The roles of texts in English Language Teaching have always been limited to fit the purpose of current approaches, methodologies or trends that have emerged to reflect existing foreign language learning needs. In the early nineteenth-century Europe, the knowledge of classical languages such as Latin or Greek reflected one's affluence, educational background and knowledge of culture, which gave the way to the Grammar Translation approach. This approach perceived texts as mind training materials consisting of either synthetically created sentences or classic literature. The following were used for translation purposes only and treated a foreign language with a narrow adherence to traditional teachings and doctrines that perceived it as a set of rules to be acquired in a linear fashion (Klapper, 2006:104). Furthermore, as listed by Kelly (1969), reading of classical literature took place in the early stages of language learning and as a consequence little to no attention was given to the context or meaning throughout the process. This analytical and systematic approach to target language learning gained a wide and unquestionable popularity despite the lack of theoretical underpinning to provide its pedagogical functionality (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As Harmer (2007) points out, the Grammar Translation approach is still commonly applied as referring to learners' mother tongue is a natural process that takes place at every stage of language learning for the purpose of facilitation; nevertheless, it could also obstruct a natural language acquisition; therefore, the approach is not practiced in its original form.

In contrast to the straightforward Grammar Translation method, the historical situation on both continents created a need for military personnel to learn foreign languages. In the face of World War II, it was essential for learners to master situational language for speaking and listening purposes (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Snow, 2014). The American Audiolingual approach was again structured around grammar points, at the same time, the British Oral Situational Approach was informed by situations and contexts that required categorised vocabulary clusters (Hawkins, 1981). Both approaches were informed by the Direct Method that stressed the importance of experience hence, demonstration and the use of authentic objects were applied. Furthermore, the theoretical underpinning for the Audiolingualism and Oral Situational Approach consisted of the works of a structural linguist, Leonard Bloomfield and a behaviourist, Burrhus Frederic Skinner. The texts used to teach in accordance with these methods were mainly oral, recorded or written, artificially constructed to present a grammar aspect (AL) or vocabulary cluster (OSA) in context. Again, texts were approached in a controlled manner to create habits, spoken rather than written. As both approaches were based on the Direct Method's assumption that a foreign language should be acquired in a natural way that resembles L1 acquisition,

the role of texts and written communication was withheld, since similarly to small children, this form of communication is not used at the initial stages of language development (Klapper, 2006).

Following the development of cognitive theories proposed by Chomsky which perceived language learning as patterns that can be stretched over new experiences in order to test their application and correctness, new methods that approached texts as meaningful, functional constructs emerged. The Communicative Language Approach was created in order to stress the importance of input, which according to Krashen's theory, needs to be comprehensive, meaningful and challenging enough (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Snow, 2014). Therefore, the texts used in the classroom to facilitate the development of learners' 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1971) were authentic and meaningful in order to present language and cultural notions. The texts were of different genres and often offered a task to fulfil or a problem to solve. In order to combine various communicative functions, aims and perceptions, the functional-notional syllabuses were designed and followed (Wilkins, 1976). The texts, however, were often modified or randomly selected and as a result exposed learner to a dogmatized input which was often incomprehensible, irrelevant and demotivating.

Initially supported by books only, then coursebooks, tapes and the use of language labs, language learning and teaching have experienced a tremendous enhancement with the implementation of computers, the internet, tablets and mobile devices. Technology has adapted a variety of texts that are utilized in structured way, for example they serve as materials for reconstruction, gap-fill or re-ordering material (Klapper, 2006). Furthermore, the multimodality of texts is an attractive feature for software users as it provides constant feedback, rewards and a selection of content that can support learning processes. Texts have become easily accessible and many tools were created to deliver them in various forms, for example digital, hyperlinked texts, audiobooks, speech recognition tools, virtual libraries, streaming services and many more. The accessibility to countless resources has shifted responsibility for learning processes onto a learner and at the same time, it has irreversibly changed the roles of teachers in modern world.

TABLE 1. – the author's own resource

Method or approach	Text forms	Text purpose	Approach to errors	Method aim	L1	Classroom interaction
Grammar Translation	Artificial sentences and passages, classic literature	Material for translation which draws attention to grammar structures	Errors result from student's insufficient knowledge of structures/ Solution: more practice	Training the mind, promoting analytical thinking and problem solving	Used for instructions and drawing comparison with L2	Teacher centred; students are passive

Audiolingual and Oral Situation approach	Artificial dialogues and role plays, vocabulary lists	Texts facilitate speaking in context, to present grammar/vocabulary use	Errors to be avoided at any cost/ Solution: drill and memorisation	To train speaking in context and listening to native sounds	No L1 in the classroom or laboratory	Teacher centred; students are active but not activated
Communicative Language Teaching	Authentic and meaningful texts, often adapted or graded texts of different genres	Texts present language functions and notions in meaningful context to facilitate learners' progress	Errors derive from the process of natural acquisition and are tolerated	To teach 'communicative competence' (Hymes, 1971) with application of sociolinguistics and cultural studies; integration of skills	L1 to be avoided in the classroom	Various interaction patterns inside and outside of classroom: pair work, group work
Technology Enhanced Language Learning	Variety of multimodal texts, both artificial and authentic; literary and non-literary	Text present the language contexts and use and serve as input for reconstruction	Errors are immediately revised to reinforce correctness	To integrate and/or supplement traditional learning processes with technological tools; to give learner control	Preferably no L1	CMC, interactions controlled by learners/users
Concept-Based Curriculum Approach	Variety of multimodal and interdisciplinary and authentic texts; literary and non-literary	Texts provide a conceptual lens for the interdisciplinary content which exposes learners to the new and/or unfamiliar experiences	Learners' errors provide feedback to teachers and expose students' cognitive processes; they inform further actions	To establish transferable understandings across and beyond a concept-based curriculum	L1, L2 if relevant to the topic, translanguaging	Learners become practitioners

The aforementioned approaches and methods capture the everchanging relationship between existing trends, resources available and foreign language learning needs. As presented in the Table 1, the chosen approaches and methods demonstrate an increasing learner independence that grows in correlation with greater understanding of texts. This interdependence; however, requires a revised approach to language learning and teaching that can no longer benefit from one methodology. As Celce-Murcia et al. (2014) indicate, no method or approach should be supreme to other, since the current, complex circumstances in the post-method era call for new learning and teaching strategies. Similarly, Erickson and Lanning (2014) emphasise the necessity of an educational model shift from the traditional, two-dimensional model of 'what and how' to the three-dimensional model of 'what, why and how, which promotes higher-order thinking and independence. As a result, the Concept-Based Approach to syllabus design is proposed to integrate subjects across the curriculum to stimulate practice beyond skill-based approach, so learners have a chance to become practitioners in a particular discipline (Tomlinson et al., 2002). In pursuance of transferable understanding of concepts, learners are required to interact with facts and principles globally across various disciplines in sufficient depth. Thus, texts become a medium that exposes learners to new and unfamiliar opportunities which are to be explored and utilised within the given concept. Both literary and non-literary texts in traditional or digital form create an occasion for learners to process information, internalise knowledge in different contexts, critically analyse facts, solve problems and create new approaches to the subject matter. Through literary texts learners may experience a plethora of emotions and affects, which generate greater intercultural involvement and may result in empathy building and social cohesiveness.

Conclusions

Approaches to texts have varied in the history of foreign language teaching. From very rigid perception of literary texts during the popularity of the Grammar Translation approach, through semi-authentic, cut-and-paste understanding of passages in Communicative Language Teaching, to unobstructed accessibility to various texts with limited interactive exploitation in Technology Enhanced Language Teaching. As current developments and academic underpinning allow teachers to build their competence in view of various methodologies and approaches, it is crucial to provide learners with strategies and occasions to experience, exploit and process texts in a conceptual and integrated manner. Texts allow students to internalise the subject knowledge beyond the curriculum so that they can be ready to take a critical stand in the modern world.

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