

The History of Teaching English as a Foreign Language, from a British and European Perspective

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This article offers an overview of historical developments in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching methodology over the last 250 years. Being based on periods rather than methods, it is intended as an alternative *kind* of account to the ‘method mythologies’ which have tended to dominate professional thinking for the last thirty years. Thus, we structure our account according to four periods characterized by main concerns and overall approaches, revealing greater continuity and overlap among teaching theories and practices than in accounts which accept discrete, bounded ‘methods’ as the primary unit of organization. Confronting a conception of the past typically presented as universal but in fact reflecting a USA-centric perspective, our alternative, UK-focused and, to some extent, European version of history asserts the value of explicit geographical contextualization and indicates a new direction for the history of EFL teaching — ‘beyond method’, and in multiple locations.

KEYWORDS English as a Foreign Language (EFL), English Language Teaching (ELT), English language, history of education, language learning, language teaching, history of language learning and teaching (HoLLT)

Introduction

Since the publication of Howatt (1984) thirty years ago there has only been a limited amount of original research into the history of English language teaching for speakers of other languages. This contrasts strongly with work in relation to French, which has burgeoned over the last twenty-five years (see Besse, this issue). The historical

research studies which *have* been carried out since 1984 go some way towards fulfilling Stern's (1983: 83) call for 'studies of particular aspects', although much remains to be investigated. Some important monographs have been published about English teaching in particular countries, largely in languages other than English; note especially the work published in German by Klippel (1994); Lehberger (1986; 1990); and Macht (1986; 1987; 1990). Indeed, since 2000 there has been a marked increase in substantial doctoral work on the history of English teaching in Germany (Doff, 2002; 2008; Franz, 2005; Kolb, 2013; Ruisz, 2014), mainly under the supervision of Friederike Klippel at Ludwig Maximilian University in Munich. In Japan, no fewer than two academic societies have existed in recent times for the history of English studies there: *Nihon eigakushi gakkai* (The Historical Society of English Studies in Japan) and *Nihon eigokyoikushi gakkai* (The Historical Society of English Teaching in Japan). However, in the UK, just three doctoral theses over the last thirty years — to our knowledge — have adopted a fully historical approach to aspects of English language teaching (Evans, 2003; Smith, 2005a; Hunter, 2009). There has been additional foundational work by Howatt & Smith (2000; 2002) and by Smith (1999; 2003; 2005b), and the development of the 'ELT Archive' at the University of Warwick (<http://www.warwick.ac.uk/elt_archive>) has begun to raise consciousness of needs for historical research within the wider profession. Finally, monographs on the history of two specialist areas — EFL learner dictionaries (Cowie, 1999) and English language testing (Spolsky, 1995; Weir et al., 2013) — deserve to be highlighted, as does a recent comprehensive history of the teaching of refugees and immigrants in Britain (Rosenberg, 2007).

Although these developments have been promising, the research that has been carried out has had relatively little impact on professional discourse, where oversimplified 'procession-of-methods' views of the past have remained common (Hunter & Smith, 2012: 432). 'Potted histories' have tended to prevail which reproduce a kind of mythology intended to set off the past from the present, itself viewed as superior (*ibid.*). Highly influential in legitimizing this kind of approach, we would suggest, have been Richards & Rodgers' book, *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*, first published in 1986 and in its fourth edition already, and Larsen-Freeman's (1986) *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*, an even more reductive, ahistorical account, also in its fourth edition.

The limitations of such accounts have recently been indicated by Hunter & Smith (2012) and we shall be focusing on three of the major limitations here, namely (1) they tend to over-emphasize the prevalence of breaks or 'paradigm shifts' rather than continuity and tradition (or, at least, they highlight differences between methods rather than similarities); (2) they give equal weight to all the methods selected for consideration rather than indicating relative historical importance; and (3) they presents methods as universal in relevance rather than as locally as well as historically constituted phenomena.

We suggest, then, that there is a pressing need for a replacement kind of overall history of mainstream EFL methodology to serve as an antidote to the method

mythologies which are so dominant — an account concise and memorable enough to have impact, and yet based on original research rather than a kind of handed-down hearsay, and not *misrepresenting* the past by means of artificial method boundaries. In this article, we therefore propose a synoptic structure within which the history of EFL methodology, from a British and European perspective, might be easy to grasp as a whole, and which can thereby be used as an alternative, or at least complement to, existing method-based accounts, for example in teacher education settings.

In countering the idea of constant paradigm shift and instead demonstrating continuity, a *periodization approach* is both necessary and problematic. Here, building on but synthesizing and, in the process, revising our previous separate work,¹ we present a new division into four periods of activity over the past 250 years, each of which seems to be sufficiently different from the other three to stand alone. In theory this would simply result in three transitions as one period moved to the next. However, the overview is not as straightforward as that. Up until the end of the second period (around 1920), there is a clear focus on Europe, but with very little consideration of teaching *English* as a foreign language as distinct from the teaching of other languages. In the 1920s, however, work connected specifically with the developing role of English outside Europe — in Asia, especially — suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, became dominant in the mainstream history of ELT (English Language Teaching for speakers of other languages), as seen from our UK-based perspective. This is not to deny the importance of continuing developments in European school systems (for details of which see Puren (1988) on France, for example, or the group of studies cited above on Germany), but simply to say that during the years up to around 1970 the mainstream history of TEFL was to be more influenced by the work of English language teaching theorists in countries like Japan, China, and India, brought back to the UK after World War II, than by contemporary work in Europe, or by any particularly new thinking in Britain itself. Thus, our overview has a two-stage structure: the first stage refers to ‘Modern Language Teaching in Europe (1750–1920)’, and the second to ‘English Language Teaching beyond and within Europe (1920–2000+)’. Each stage is sub-divided into two periods each.

In both the synoptic overview presented below and in the ensuing commentary, we fill in details about these four periods with reference to two further headings: (i) a

¹ Howatt (1984) identifies the following phases of twenty years each in the twentieth-century development of ELT: a ‘foundation phase’ (from the beginning of the century until Harold E. Palmer’s departure for Japan); an inter-war ‘research and development phase’ (1920 to 1942); and a ‘phase of consolidation’ from the end of World War II to around 1960 (p. 213). Here, we subsume Palmer’s relatively isolated early work within the ‘Reform Period’, partly in order to emphasize that the roots of ELT lie in Reform period thinking. As Smith (2003; 2005), focusing on the two periods of 1912–36 and 1936–61, has emphasized, there was considerable methodological continuity between the inter-war and the post-war periods, to a much greater degree than tends to be acknowledged in US-oriented accounts. We wish to continue to stress this in our own account and therefore avoid using World War II as a watershed moment. Finally, we make this period end in 1970, not 1960, for reasons explained in the text.

short phrase identifying what seems to us to have been the ‘core concern’ of the period in question, and (ii) the names of what we perceive to be the ‘main’ teaching methods commonly associated with each period. Although, for reasons already explained above, we favour a primary division by periods rather than by methods, we wish to show how different methods which are commonly discussed can be ‘mapped into’ the periods we have identified, in order to maintain a continuity with existing thinking in the profession.

Synoptic Overview

Stage I: Modern Language Teaching in Europe (1750–1920)

1. The Classical Period 1750–1880

Core Concern: Emulating the teaching of classical languages

Associated Teaching Methods: [The Grammar-Translation Method]
[The Classical Method]

2. The Reform Period 1880–1920

Core Concern: Teaching the spoken language

Associated Teaching Methods: [various Reform Methods]
(see *Jespersen, 1904: 2–3*)

The Natural Method (*Heness, Sauveur*)

The Berlitz Method

The Direct Method

Stage II: English Language Teaching beyond and within Europe (1920–2000+)

3. The Scientific Period (1920–70)

Core Concern: Scientific basis for teaching

Associated Teaching Methods: The Oral Method (*Palmer*)
The Multiple Line of Approach (*Palmer*)
The Situational Approach (*Hornby*)

The Oral Approach (*Fries*)

The Audiolingual Method

4. The Communicative Period (1970–2000+)

Core Concern: Aiming for ‘real-life communication’

Associated Teaching Methods: Communicative Language Teaching
Task-based Language Teaching

Stage I: Modern Language Teaching in Europe (1750–1920)

I. The Classical Period (1750–1880)

Core Concern: Emulating the teaching of classical languages

Associated Teaching Methods: [The Grammar-Translation Method]
[The Classical Method]

Summary

This was the period during which what we now call the Grammar-Translation Method was the standard classroom approach. Although lip-service was paid to the importance of utilitarian objectives, the principal aim of most foreign language teaching in schools was typically literary, if only to deflect some of the criticism coming from the classicists that modern languages were ‘soft options’. The central role of grammar teaching is familiar enough, but it is not always known that the addition of practice exercises consisting of sentences for translation was prompted by the needs of younger learners. It is therefore rather ironic that it was this feature which attracted the most adverse attention later on, giving rise to a host of ‘pen of my aunt’ jokes. Exaggeration and excess became the hallmarks of the method by the late nineteenth century, and these, together with the continued failure to treat the spoken language with the respect it deserved, led to a demand for root-and-branch reform that had to be addressed.

Background

Modern foreign languages were learnt and, to a limited extent, taught in western Europe for centuries before they appeared on the curricula of schools around the middle of the eighteenth century. Throughout the ensuing period, which we term the ‘Classical Period’ due to the way the teaching of Latin and Greek served as a model for instructional methods, English played a relatively minor role — indeed, the population of Britain and the USA combined in 1800 was less than half that of France (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).² However, there was a growing clientele among the educated classes on the European continent for English literature and works on specialist topics such as philosophy and theology, so a reading knowledge was highly valued. The cultural tide was running in favour of the national vernacular languages and by 1800 it had drowned the last surviving utilitarian uses of Latin as the medium of instruction and communication in universities across the continent. ‘Latin has died twice’, as Widgey (1888: 6) said later: ‘once as the language of ancient Rome, a second time as the *lingua franca* of Europe: she is built into the framework of the world; cannot we let her rest there?’.

² The nineteenth century saw a tripling of the British population and a more than tenfold increase in that of the USA, so that the population of Britain and the USA combined exceeded that of France and Germany combined by 1900 (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

The logical consequence of the cultural transformation that the departure of Latin entailed should have been the adoption of the mother-tongue as the leading subject in formal education in Europe, and there were moves in that direction. However, this did little to dent the self-confidence of supporters of the classics. Latin, they argued, was more important than ever before. Utilitarian aims in education were essentially trivial, and the true value of the classics remained what it had always been: training the minds of the country's (male) youth. This 'mental training' claim was reasserted at every opportunity with no serious attempt to justify it or even explain what it was supposed to mean. There were significant voices against it at the time, for example the German classicist Böckh who, in 1826, accepted that 'the classics indeed afforded material fit for mental training', but demanded that 'unless some more powerful reason can be brought forward [...] they should be banished from our schools' (quoted by Widgery, 1888: 7). Needless to say, this call was not heeded.

The first negative consequence of the continuing hegemony of classical languages, in particular Latin, was the attempt by modern language teachers to emulate the classics in the design of their teaching materials: the familiar pattern of grammar rules in the mother-tongue being followed by paradigms and vocabulary lists with an emphasis on exceptions. There was, however, one significant improvement, namely the provision of practice materials in the form of sentences to translate into and/or out of the new language. This innovation is normally credited to J. V. Meidinger, a German teacher of French, who introduced it in his *Praktische französische Grammatik* in 1783. Ten years later a similar course appeared for English, written by J. C. Fick and called *Praktische englische Sprachlehre* (1793). His claim that it was suitable 'for German pupils of both sexes' (*für Deutsche beyderley Geschlechts*) reminds us that the arrival of modern languages in schools was to be particularly helpful in raising the intellectual content of education for girls. This in turn increased their employability as governesses, a much-coveted role for many at this time.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century the restrictive nature of what later came to be called the 'Grammar-Translation Method' (or occasionally the 'Classical Method') was not too severe. True, it was all rather dull, but it prepared pupils to read the literature of the foreign language, which was the commonly accepted goal at the time, and, if lessons were 'extended' a bit by energetic teachers, there might be some more practical outcomes like a small measure of conversational fluency. As time went on, however, and as the need for practical skills in the spoken language became more obvious with improved travel and communication, there were increasing criticisms of the inability of the profession and/or its publishers to come up with anything more relevant than increasingly arcane grammar rules, increasingly silly sentences for translation (for example, in the books of H. G. Ollendorff), and increasingly lengthy and wearisome lists of exceptions for memorization.

So far as English was concerned, the impact of traditional methods was relatively slight. English was not very widely studied in European schools in the first half of the

nineteenth century, which was dominated mainly by French as the continental *lingua franca* in succession to Latin and as the second language of choice in countries like Russia. Less widely taught languages like English did, though, feature strongly in adult self-instructional courses, which offered a more varied and in some respects more sensible approach to instruction.

The Grammar-Translation Method

As mentioned above, the typical bilingual, grammar-based approach of this period has come to be named ‘The Grammar-Translation Method’ and the reasons are obvious enough. This label does not appear until the twentieth century, although versions of it are common as descriptions, as in, for example ‘old-fashioned grammar and translation lessons’. One early instance is Viëtor’s reference to the *Grammatik- und Übersetzungsmethode* in a lecture published in 1902. In addition, there were other candidates which have dropped out. In 1925, for instance, Harold Palmer claimed that ‘up to forty years ago, the only system of language-teaching generally recognized or practised (in Europe and elsewhere) was the one that is generally alluded to as “The Classical Method” [which] treats all languages as if they were dead’ (Palmer, 1925: 2) These two names of methods are listed within square brackets in our Synoptic Overview above as a reminder that the labels themselves really belong to a later era.

Indeed, the word ‘method’ (or ‘system’) was generally used *during* the period only by authors whose ideas failed to make much headway. Among the better known method-makers at the time were Hamilton (1829), with his interlinear translation system; Fenwick de Porquet (1830), who believed in instant translation into the target language, and Prendergast (1864), with his ‘Mastery system’ for generating manifold sentences from a single, complex sentence.

2. The Reform Period (1880–1920)

Core Concern: Teaching the spoken language

Associated Teaching Methods: [various Reform Methods]
(see *Jespersen, 1904: 2–3*)

The Natural Method (*Henness, Sauveur*)

The Berlitz Method

The Direct Method

Summary

The dominant theme of this period was the need to promote the teaching of the spoken language as the main pedagogical priority since, it was argued, speech is the primary foundation of all language activity. The influence of the new science of

phonetics is obvious here, and this period represents the beginning of a long history of connection between language teaching and linguistics. Another important point to note is the way speech-dependent methods made language learning accessible to and often successful with learners (whether school pupils or adults) who had previously been rejected as ‘unsuited’ to foreign language learning. As we shall see, there were several strands of influence and variations within the ‘Direct Method’ which emerged out of this period.

Background

The Reform Period was among the most effective periods of change in language teaching history. Things actually improved and the changes lasted — although not everywhere, and not everywhere to the same degree (indeed, the use of translation has continued to be favoured in many contexts until the present day, particularly in higher education).

A central point to bear in mind is that there were *two* stories of reform, not one, though they shared ideas, and they both emerged around 1880. The first was the pan-European Reform Movement, which was concerned with foreign language teaching in secondary schools and entailed shifting the main pedagogical emphasis away from traditional topics like grammar and literature and towards a practical command of the modern spoken language. For the sake of clarity we shall refer to the ways of teaching which emerged here as ‘Reform Methods’, though the term was not used at the time and ‘Direct Method’ started to be used as the umbrella term after the turn of the century.

The second strand, which began as ‘The Natural Method’ in private language schools in the United States, involved the development of a methodology that made foreign languages accessible to the adult population generally — not only a classically educated elite — and focused on the teaching of conversation. It first came to wider public notice as the ‘Berlitz Method’ but ended up being subsumed under the ‘Direct Method’ label towards the end of our period.

Reform Methods

The Reform Movement was inspired by Wilhelm Viëtor’s pseudonymous pamphlet *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren!* published in 1882. Any intellectual support the Classical Method might once have enjoyed had been replaced by a growing interest in the spoken language, as evidenced both in the new science of phonetics and the work of the ‘neo-grammarians’ (*Junggrammatiker*) associated with the University of Leipzig. Viëtor, a non-native speaker teacher of English in Germany, had been influenced by both, and his famous pamphlet was an exercise in what we might now call applied linguistics. To summarize his suggestions for classroom methodology, which were taken up virtually unchanged within the ensuing Reform Movement, Viëtor argues for a lesson design that puts exposure to the foreign language first — in his

case in the form of a connected text. This text provides the basis for all the detailed classwork on pronunciation and the intensive question-and-answer oral work which lie at the heart of the approach. Grammar is dealt with ‘inductively’, that is, after the text study, and is very tightly restricted to the language in the text.

There was clearly an appetite for change, and there followed a speedy transformation of the academic and professional pressure group which began to take up Viëtor’s ideas into a full-scale pan-European Movement among language teachers by the end of the century. Their tactics of gaining formal adoption of Reform principles by various scholarly and professional associations helped to secure a positive (if not perfect) outcome when the Prussian *Lehrpläne* (‘curricula’) were revised in 1891 (Brebner, 1898: chapter 6). One of these accepted English as an option in the high-prestige *Gymnasien* for the first time, and another gave blanket approval to the adoption of utilitarian aims (‘practical knowledge is now considered the main object in modern language teaching’: Brebner, 1898: 50). France also adopted reform proposals formally, in 1901–02 (see Puren, 1988).

Although there were many different names given to particular ‘methods’ within the Reform Movement at the time, probably the only area of serious internal disagreement was whether or not to use phonetic transcription. Teachers influenced by phoneticians like Sweet believed that transcribed texts were essential, but others remained unconvinced, and their use fell from favour.

The Natural Method and the Berlitz Method

Within the Reform Movement, with its focus on teaching in schools, the ‘spoken language’ was understood essentially as the spoken version of a written text, understanding and oral ‘retelling’ of which was viewed as central. The Natural and Berlitz Methods for adult language learners, on the other hand, set out to teach conversation, as is clear enough from the lesson designs, for example Berlitz’s (1898) Lesson 1: *What’s this? It’s a book. Is it green? No, it’s blue*, and so on.

The initial ideas came from a German emigrant to the USA called Gottlieb Heness, an educationalist, and his French colleague Lambert Sauveur, who developed what they called ‘The Natural Method’, which was a conversation-based method dependent on the teacher’s ability to teach the meaning of new words by object lessons, pictures, mime, context, and so on, as Sauveur makes clear in his (1874) book for students, *Causeries avec mes élèves (Chats with my Students)*.

When Maximilian Berlitz decided to set up his own language school in Providence, Rhode Island, in 1878, he adopted the ‘Natural Method’, with some modifications. He acknowledged this in his textbooks in the early years — ‘The Berlitz Method is based on a system of language instruction generally called the “Natural Method” (first used by Professor Heness)’ (quoted by Finotti, 2010: 18) — although this acknowledgement later disappeared. And these textbooks were designed to work with adult students for whom a utilitarian, conversation-based foreign language course

was entirely appropriate. Many students had specific purposes in mind — and such aims must have been particularly important when Berlitz brought his ideas to Europe in the late 1880s (cf. Pakscher, 1895).

What he found in Europe when he arrived in the late 1880s was an even greater demand for his work, and his schools were very popular indeed. This success stimulated the establishment of rival schools claiming to use the same methods, but Berlitz was very quick to protect his rights in law, and it seems likely that the phrase ‘the Direct Method’ began to be used by language school proprietors to get round the Berlitz ‘ban’. The umbrella of ‘Direct Method’ also came to take in the ideas of Gouin (1880), whose ‘Series’ inspired typical Direct Method classroom action sequences like ‘I’m walking to / opening / closing the door’, and so on.

The Direct Method

The collection of secondary school methods which we have called ‘Reform Methods’ were not given a memorable collective name at first, although ‘Direct Method’ was, from the turn of the century onwards, increasingly used as a label for what was going on in schools, following the French government’s decision to centrally dictate a focus on the spoken language throughout the school system under the ‘Direct Method’ banner in 1901–02. As we have seen, the new ideas for adult learning involving structured conversation exclusively in the target language also came to be named ‘Direct Method’, having previously been termed ‘Natural Method’ and ‘Berlitz Method’. An unfortunate consequence of the confluence of school teaching and adult language school teaching under the ‘Direct Method’ banner was that, when this label came to be increasingly used in the early twentieth century, the (mainly non-native speaker teacher) school reformers’ ideas became forgotten in favour of ideas developed for native speaker teachers working in private language schools, where (for example, in the Berlitz schools) use of the students’ mother tongue was proscribed — assuming the teacher knew it at all. Following Puren (1988), we therefore prefer to use the term ‘Direct methodology’ to reflect the degree of variation within what came to be termed ‘Direct Method’, in order to counteract the way it was and now remains associated with one simple principle — ‘No translation is allowed’ (cf. Larsen-Freeman, 1986: 23). Indeed, it is important to remember that, within secondary school versions of Direct Method deriving from Reform Methods, teachers — following Viëtor — were quite happy to use the mother-tongue judiciously, for example to explain new vocabulary. However, translation *into* the language being learnt was, in general, firmly rejected within the Reform Movement as well as by Berlitz. With hindsight, it is a pity that this distinction between L2 to L1 and L1 to L2 translation did not survive the adoption of ‘Direct Method’ as a blanket term and that the many techniques and procedures developed by non-native speaker school teachers (‘Reform Methods’) have remained under-acknowledged. The Direct Method — in all its forms — was set, however, to strongly influence the subsequent era.

Stage II: English Language Teaching beyond and within Europe (1920–2000+)

3. The Scientific Period (1920–70)

Core Concern: Scientific basis for teaching

Associated Teaching Methods: The Oral Method (*Palmer*)
 The Multiple Line of Approach (*Palmer*)
 The Situational Approach (*Hornby*)
 The Oral Approach (*Fries*)
 The Audiolingual Method

Summary

The importance given to phonetics within the Reform Movement helps to explain why language teaching theorists throughout the subsequent ‘Scientific Period’ (1920–70) were so concerned to justify their ideas according to insights from the new social sciences: particularly linguistics but also, increasingly, learning theory derived from psychology. Towards the beginning of the period, Harold Palmer pioneered an experimental orientation to the development of methods and materials which was only partially followed up in the post-World War II era. The basis for selection of vocabulary and, later, grammatical ‘structures’ or ‘patterns’ received a lot of attention. By the end of the period, key features of all good teaching practice were considered to be the use of drills and exercises aimed explicitly at the formation of correct habits in the production of grammatical structures which had themselves been scientifically selected. In the British ‘Situational Approach’, the presentation and practice of new structures were contextualized in classroom ‘situations’ in a manner reminiscent of Gouin and Berlitz.

Background

After the First World War, the centre of gravity for the development of progressive thinking on the teaching of English as a foreign language shifted from Europe and the USA to a remarkable triumvirate of expatriate language teaching theorists working in Asia: Michael West in Bengal, Lawrence Faucett in China, and — especially — Harold E. Palmer in Japan. There was not much relevant enterprise of any note *within* the UK, and Palmer’s Institute for Research in English Teaching (IRET), founded in Tokyo in 1923, pre-dated by almost twenty years the establishment of the Michigan English Language Institute (ELI) — established in 1941. Palmer’s major achievement was to synthesize and systematize ideas from the Reform Movement and Berlitz Method traditions, which were then carried forward via A. S. Hornby (himself a colleague of Palmer’s in pre-war Japan) to inform the post-war UK methodological orthodoxy of ‘situational language teaching’. In this emerging Palmer-Hornby ‘tradition’, there was some though not a lot of influence from the USA where, from the 1940s onwards, Charles Fries developed his own ‘Oral Approach’ via appeals to

structural linguistics, and where advocates of the ‘Audiolingual Method’ and associated language laboratories later added in references to behaviourist psychology. Although, as time went on, Hornby increasingly paid tribute to Palmer’s — and thus, indirectly, the Reform Period’s — influence, US advocates of the Oral Approach and the Audiolingual Method did not, choosing instead to refer only to the most recent background science.

The Oral Method and The Multiple Line of Approach

At London University Harold E. Palmer spent the years 1915–21 setting up innovative courses on methods of language learning and teaching and writing three groundbreaking books (Palmer 1917; 1921a; 1921b). None of these is specifically directed at English teachers — they all deal with language teaching in general, even though Palmer’s formative years had been as a native-speaker English teacher inspired by the Berlitz Method. In 1922 he left London for Japan, having accepted an invitation to offer professional advice to the Japanese government on the future specifically of *English* teaching in secondary schools. He was to stay there for thirteen years, and his work under the auspices of the research institute he set up in Tokyo (IRET) was to have far-reaching consequences for the development of EFL teaching methodology in the twentieth century.

Palmer’s belief that the methods and disciplines of scientific enquiry could be applied to the teaching and learning of foreign languages in a manner that would create a unified practical methodology had been manifest in the title of his first major work: *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages* (1917). He explored the same theme further in the so-called *Memorandum on Problems of English Teaching* (1924), in which he expressed his hope that a collaboration between linguistics and psychology would ‘result in the placing of linguistic pedagogy once and for all on a truly scientific basis’ (Palmer, 1924: 2). This remained the unchallenged theme of EFL methodology for the next half-century or so, and justifies the shift to a ‘Scientific Period’ that we see in the structure of its history, even though in many ways Reform Period ideas remained influential.

The work Palmer carried out in Japan was partly derived from his (1921b) *The Oral Method of Teaching Languages*, which constituted a serious attempt to synthesize and systematize Direct Method ideas on the teaching of conversation independently of texts. Most of the exercises are in drill form and follow what later (with the advent of audiolingualism) became known as a stimulus-response model. However, Palmer was quite aware that ‘the Oral Method should rarely stand alone’ (Palmer, 1921b: 11). For the Japanese school context he engaged teachers in trialling specially produced resources and materials in accordance with a principled, eclectic system which he termed ‘The Multiple Line of Approach’ (Palmer, 1924). On this experimental basis it became clear that school readers would need to be at the centre of instruction, and the integration of a Berlitz-based model with a Reform Method one was the major outcome, entailing a shift in research focus to the production and oral exploitation of appropriately graded textual material.

The Oral Approach

Palmer returned to the UK in 1936, but was unable to gain sufficient support for the establishment of an equivalent to IRET in the UK. The mantle for seeking a scientific basis for language teaching moved to Michigan, where Charles C. Fries incorporated principles of contrastive linguistics into the design of teaching materials, believing (erroneously, as it was to turn out) that structural differences between the mother tongue and the target language would account for the major learning difficulties. The Oral Approach began to be promoted outside the USA on an assumption of scientifically underpinned universality. However, the need for contextually oriented *experimentation* of the kind promoted by Palmer was not acknowledged: language learners everywhere were viewed as essentially the same, with the same (scientifically analysed) lexical and grammatical patterns following the same (scientifically graded) acquisition curricula.

In a short space of time Fries and his colleagues had raised the profile of what, under his leadership, came to be called ‘applied linguistics’, a label that adorned the sub-title of the new (1948) Michigan-backed journal *Language Learning*.

The Situational Approach, and Audiolingual and Audio-Visual Methods

Back in the UK there were also developments towards the constitution of a ‘home base’ for TEFL, even if — initially at least — on a rather smaller scale. The British Council demonstrated a new commitment to the future of English as a foreign or second language by issuing the journal *English Language Teaching*, with A. S. Hornby as its first editor.³ Hornby, in particular, made many contributions to the emerging field of ELT, by disseminating the pre-war work carried out in Tokyo and by gaining a wider exposure for certain strands of Palmer’s thinking (though not the full panoply of ‘Multiple Line of Approach’). In 1950 Hornby coined the phrase ‘The Situational Approach’ to show how a teacher can convey meaning when there is no obvious support like a picture. His answer, a continuation, of course, of Direct Method ideas as well as those of Palmer, was: you invent a classroom *situation*. For example, the ‘situation’ of opening a window could be used to characterize the contrasting meanings of verb forms in sequences like: ‘I’m going to open the window’ . . . ‘I’m opening the window’ ‘I’ve just opened the window’ — with all the appropriate moves and gestures (the influence of Gouin’s Series Method, via Palmer (e.g. Palmer & Palmer, 1925), is evident here). More generally, and much more usefully from a language teaching point of view, you simply describe an imaginary situation and hope the students get the point.

The Situational Approach, or ‘Situational language teaching’, was the dominant approach in British TEFL in the 1960s, a decade full of activity in Britain, and in that respect a complete change from anything that had gone before. The after-effects of the war had passed and there was growing affluence in Europe and beyond, making trips to the UK, summer schools, special courses, and so on, increasingly affordable

³ This was in 1946, but it was not until 1971 that the word ‘Journal’ was added, by which time the journal’s title, in abbreviated form (‘ELT’), had come to stand for the profession as a whole.

and well attended. However, was there anything really new? The new EFL course-books published in the 1960s were constructed on the basis of a structural syllabus that drew on the work of Hornby and colleagues from the 1950s and which often attempted to provide meaningful contexts for drill work in the form of pictures, dialogues and other forms of ‘situation’. A few did purport to represent ‘real-life’ situations, but this was still embryonic.

There were, though, new forms of technology. The development of tape recorders enabled production of a huge piece of machinery with the ultimate in ‘scientific’ names — the language laboratory. Manufacturers sold it on the back of ‘intensive drilling’, introducing teachers in Britain to the so-called ‘Audiolingual Method’ from the USA, which seemed little different from Hornby’s Situational Approach apart from the relative lack of contextualization, the lack of meaning-focus.

With the heavily formal package of Audiolingual Method incorporated into the language laboratory technology, it crossed the Atlantic just as anxiety at the absence of personal and social relevance in foreign language teaching was beginning to cause concern. From France, the appearance of the Audio-Visual Method (developed originally for the teaching of French as a foreign language), which used a filmstrip technology to present social situations accompanying tape-recorded dialogues, had already caused a major stir among teachers in the UK. Here was an approach that took the depiction of meaning more seriously than in Situational Approach, it seemed, while the Audiolingual Method and language laboratory appeared to many as the antithesis to meaningful teaching, despite their shiny scientific credentials.

4. The Communicative Period (1970–2000+)

Core Concern: Aiming for ‘real-life communication’

Associated Teaching Methods: Communicative Language Teaching
 Task-based Language Teaching

Summary

From around 1970 some of the ideas, aims, and procedures which had dominated English language teaching for the preceding fifty or so years began to change once more, and gradually the label ‘communicative’ began to be applied. The basic common purpose of the changes was clear enough, namely to shift the aims and priorities of language teaching away from the acquisition of well-rehearsed skills in their own right and towards the confident use of those skills in the attainment of purposes and objectives of importance to the learner in the ‘real world’. We are probably, as yet, too close to the communicative movement — which has yet to run its full course — to ascertain from a historical perspective what was completely new and what was carried over from previous periods. Considerable excitement was generated by the appearance of what appeared to be revolutionary new ideas, and the communicative ‘paradigm shift’ is often linked in existing accounts to momentous shifts in background theory (Chomsky, Hymes, etc.). There is no doubt that there were new ideas aplenty, but when the dust eventually settles on the ‘Communicative Approach’,

continuities between its ‘weaker’ forms, at least, with what went before are likely to become more apparent, not least in the Presentation and Practice phases of ‘P[resentation]-P[ractice]-P[roduction]’ lesson sequences, which continue to be represented in coursebooks.

Background

What came to be known as Communicative Language Teaching or ‘The Communicative Approach’ brought together a variety of different but related initiatives. A major initial driving force was the Council of Europe project to create an internationally valid language assessment system, which in turn led to a fresh approach to course design through the specification of objectives in semantic/pragmatic rather than the traditional syntactic terms. There were also English for Specific Purposes projects, including the development of English for Academic Purposes. Finally, there were new kinds of communicative activity or ‘task’.

Initially, the changes did not make many waves. They seemed to involve more of an extension of existing methodology than a replacement for it, and the public display of the new ideas took some time to appear in course materials, conference presentations and the like. There was no massively radical move like the assault on translation had been a hundred years earlier. However, it gradually became clear that the whole environment had altered. A new focus on the learner and on learning which had already begun to emerge in the 1960s had resolved itself into a focus on *purposeful use* in the classroom, and other modifications in presentation and practice followed naturally from the new emphasis.

The notional-functional syllabus

During the 1960s, as more visual technologies became available, the idea of ‘real-life situations’ as the defining settings for teaching specific features of language had spread and the growing use of situational dialogues to illustrate how language was used was a further move in the same meaning-oriented direction. The popularity of the first TEFL television course (called *Walter and Connie*) was another straw in the same wind. However, ‘situations’ on their own were too diffuse — what was needed was a way of talking about and categorizing ‘bits’ of situations and how they built into full-scale conversations. ‘Questions’ and ‘commands’ were familiar enough as the functional equivalents of syntactic forms like interrogative and imperative, but when this idea was extrapolated into other areas of communicative activity, it created useful sets of ‘language functions’ (‘asking for things’, ‘making suggestions’, etc.) which, with the more familiar term ‘notions’, could be used to specify the semantic content of a teaching syllabus. A substantial framework for the teaching of meaning was developed within a major research and development project in Europe which counts as the first large-scale essay in the communicative approach. Often referred to as the ‘Threshold Level project’ (as described in some detail by John Trim in Smith & McLelland, this issue), this project was established by the Council of Europe at a conference in Switzerland in 1971. The starting-point was the need for internationally recognized foreign language specifications (cf. Council of Europe, 1973) which in turn required achievement targets applicable to all the languages involved. Clearly

this could not be a formal syllabus since all the languages were syntactically different but, provided it was reasonable to assume that all the participating languages shared a comparable array of linguistically encoded meanings (at least at the ‘threshold’ (i.e. intermediate) level of attainment set by the project), then a semantic basis was a plausible one (e.g. Wilkins, 1976).

By the mid-1970s the first specifications following the new model had begun to appear (e.g. Van Ek’s (1975) *Threshold Level English*) and it was not long before course designers began to use their new post-structuralist freedom to devise more meaningful texts and activities than had been possible in the past. Among the first, and perhaps the best known, were the books in the ‘Strategies’ series by Brian Abbs and Ingrid Freebairn (1975–82). A corner had been turned and EFL classrooms were set to reap some of the benefits of this renewal of influence from Europe.

English for Specific Purposes

The key feature of initiatives such as the Threshold Level was their commitment to language teaching operations that were explicitly designed to achieve something useful and concrete. If you did the work seriously, you should be able to *do something in a foreign language* at the end of the lesson that you could not do before. ‘Doing things with words’ was one of the mottos of the communicative movement and chimed well with the title to J. L. Austin’s 1955 lecture series, published as a hugely influential book in 1962 (Austin, 1962). The importance of links between the language classroom and the ‘real world’ found an echo in all communicative initiatives, but the clearest connection was made in programmes which explicitly aimed to prepare students for the linguistic demands inherent in their plans for the future — that is, everything from practical job training schemes to high level university studies.

The history of specific purpose teaching is more difficult to track than other aspects of ELT because only a small amount of activity in the field is on public display in the form of publications, courses and the like. There were ESP projects around the world which attempted to modernize the teaching of English and relate it more effectively to the perceived needs of different groups of learners. We now know the field that emerged out of this as ‘special/specific purpose’ language teaching, but labels such as English for Specific Purposes (ESP) did not emerge immediately. Meanwhile the demand for such instruction in English came as a consequence of the growing role of the language worldwide, a role that was not always welcomed but which was becoming very difficult to resist.

Communicative activities and tasks

Whatever the part played by comprehension and affect in getting there (both of these being factors which came to be significantly more emphasized in the Communicative Period), the ultimate aim of communicative language teaching was successful linguistic interaction in the foreign language in the ‘real world’. However, spontaneous interactive speech is never easy to organize in the classroom, particularly if the teacher feels the need to monitor the students’ efforts in a large class, so the new approach made considerable use of activities like role-playing, improvisation, simulation, and cooperative problem-solving or task-based work, an activity that proved remarkably

versatile in a language learning context. A graded series of tasks, particularly if they were familiar from everyday life, could provide a series of meaningful objectives as shown, for instance, in the so-called Communicational Teaching Project run by N. S. Prabhu in schools in South India around 1980, which also exercised skills being acquired by the children in other lessons, for example, arithmetic.

Teachers need to know whether they are engaging students in *practice* to cope with the demands of communication in a foreign language, that is, teaching language for communication at some later time (and this ‘weaker version’ has remained the pedagogical norm), or whether they are committed to a view, like Prabhu’s, which gives communication a much ‘stronger’ role in language acquisition in the sense that effective communicative experiences are needed for the successful extension of communicative competence — ‘communicating to learn’ and not just ‘learning to communicate’. Prabhu’s work highlighted this distinction and emphasized the feasibility and desirability of what later came to be called ‘Task-based Language Teaching’, that is, designing a syllabus made up of tasks, not aspects of language pre-digested for the learner, whether structures, notions or functions. As the ‘communicative movement’ entered the twenty-first century, Task-based Language Teaching had perhaps been the strongest manifestation yet of an overall move from focus on form (Oral Approach, Audiolingual Method) or on form plus literal meaning (Oral Method, Situational Approach) to ‘aiming for “real-life” communication’ in the classroom.

Discussion and conclusion

The starting point for this article was the perception that the history of foreign language teaching had become very closely associated with a rather lengthy and complex sequence of named ‘methods’, within which it seemed each one replaced the one before. Given the large number of named ‘methods’ of language teaching that appear in some sources and the way in which they are sometimes strung together as in a necklace of beads, it seemed that a broader historical map might provide a useful mental image of the past within which more detailed distinctions could be made as and when they were necessary. The map suggested in this article recognizes four major periods of activity separated from one another by transitions whose existence can, we believe, be justified by both the extent and the nature of the changes they reflect.

There are, of course, problems with the periodization we offer, as with any simplified view of the past. For example, a caveat needs to be noted regarding the decision to fix the starting point as the mid-eighteenth century, when modern foreign language teaching began to appear in the schools. It must, of course, be understood that the learning of modern European languages began very much earlier than this. Much of the work was autodidactic in nature, though small conversation classes were often available in urban centres taught by visiting native speakers. This self-study market did not die out with the advent of language teaching in schools, in fact it increased as modern methods of transport made contact easier, which helps to account for the continuing popularity of bilingual methods and materials well into modern times. It was not until very recently that simple, inexpensive technologies could bring a spoken

foreign language into the living room, and, in the absence of a good ‘live’ teacher, the desirability of at least some explanation in the learners’ mother-tongue is quite obvious.

It is tempting to assume that teaching methods replace one another and ‘old’ ones are thrown into the ‘dustbin of history’ but, as we hope we have shown, this is probably rather rare. Methods do not normally die a sudden death, though they may become less prominent. For example, the Grammar-Translation Method has remained very suitable for autodidactic students who need a bilingual approach and who can cope with the terminology. The Oral Approach and the Situational Approach may not dominate the classroom now, but the value of the structural syllabus and of situational presentation is still recognized, not least by coursebook writers. A second general point we wish to make is that method labels may tend to emerge retrospectively because naming has a useful mnemonic, referential, and sometimes dismissive function for later generations which was unnecessary for those directly concerned. Again, the ‘Grammar-Translation Method’ is a case in point. Language teachers in 1800 were not conscious of ‘following a method’, because they were doing more or less the same as everyone else during the ‘Classical Period’, namely just ‘teaching a foreign language’. Also, the fact that those involved with the Reform Movement did not come up with a unified method label may help to explain why there has been so much confusion over the meaning of the ‘Direct Method’, since this was *not* a label most of them acknowledged themselves. Thirdly, and finally, the success of new methods may have less to do with their supposed intrinsic merits than with the degree to which they correspond with teachers’ abilities or otherwise to use them, or with those of learners, who may have believed (or been told) that foreign languages were ‘too difficult’ for them. For example, the popularity of the Berlitz Method with adults may have been at least in part due to the latter factor.

From a historiographical perspective, not only have we offered an alternative to prevalent ‘method histories’ by means of our focus on *periods* and the continuities within and between them as well as the shifts of interest which underlay them, we have indirectly brought to prominence here the question of *whose* history to portray, in other words the main geographical centre of interest. Dominant method accounts have been US-centric and have tended to focus on the relatively recent period when a serious interest was taken in the USA in problems of teaching English to speakers of other languages. Here we have placed the focus more on the UK, and in so doing we have revealed the extent to which mainstream approaches have derived inspiration from developments in continental Europe (the Reform Movement, and, more recently, the Audio-Visual Method and work by the Council of Europe have been particularly highlighted). This focus explains why some of the methods emphasized in Richards & Rodgers (1986) and Larsen-Freeman (1986) have received very little prominence in our account (the Oral Approach and Audiolingual Method, in particular), or have not been mentioned at all (‘humanistic methods’ like the Silent Way or Desuggestopedia being a case in point).⁴ Viewing the development of EFL

⁴ If account is taken of implementation in practice and not just theoretical interest, we doubt that these ‘humanistic’ methods would be awarded much prominence even in a ‘mainstream’ US-focused history — despite being given so much attention in the influential accounts of methods by Richards & Rodgers (1986) and Larsen-Freeman (1986).

methodology from a British and European perspective has inevitably introduced a new kind of partiality — however, we would like to think that shifting the geographical focus away from the USA in this way can open up a space for further research. There is certainly a need for further decentring and localization of ELT history via accounts of practice and theory in multiple contexts, and here the work carried out in Germany and Japan which we referred to in our Introduction may serve as a useful model. Finally, in future work there is a need to liberate the history of English language teaching further from the dominance of ‘method’ than we have been able to here, for example via a recognition of the importance of history of institutions and of the ELT ‘business’, and by situating shifts in language teaching theory and practice much more consistently than we have been able to do here within broader social, political, economic and cultural transformations. We have attempted to present a ‘global account’ — with attendant limitations — of the kind Stern (1983) rejected in favour of more in-depth particularistic studies, and yet we would like to think that, by illustrating an argument that ‘method’ can be replaced by ‘period’ as the main way of conceiving of the professional past, we have opened up a space for other kinds of historical research work. At the same time, we hope that we have provided something of use and interest for teachers of English as a foreign language interested in learning from the history of their profession.

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