

## THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGE – AN ANALYSIS OF THE “SILENT WAY” AND THE “NATURAL APPROACH” METHODS

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### ABSTRACT

*Language is important to life. Its origin is as old as man. In Nigeria and some other Anglophone countries, English has grown to become the gateway to the international community. It is a tool for unity, bringing all ethnic groups together. It is also a tool for social participation, be it political, religious or otherwise. It also serves as a link to the world. Given all the benefits of the English language, it is then appropriate that it is learnt proficiently. However, how can it be learnt unless there is an effective teacher to teach the language using effective teaching methods? It is therefore imperative that language teachers adopt different methods of teaching language to help learners learn and hone their skills (be they receptive or productive skills) in their use of the English language. This work is the first in a series discussing various methods of teaching language. It begins with the silent-way and natural approach methods.*

### INTRODUCTION

Language can be defined as a system of communication in speech and writing that is used by people of a certain or particular area or country. It can also be seen a systematic means of communicating by the use of sounds or conventional signs and symbols. With language, almost everything can be described. Reading and writing are therefore parts of the language skills.

Reading could be said to be an interaction between the reader and the print. This may include surveying a text, gazing at a material or interpreting prints. It is important to learn to read and to read to learn. But what can be read? This brings us to writing.

Writing as an aspect of the language skills is indeed a skill that needs to be properly taught and learnt. There are different types of writing and also different reasons and purposes for which we write. Some of the types of writing include arguments, story, description, letter (formal and informal), requests and minutes of meetings. According to Azikiwe (1998:156-157), “the different types of writing depends basically on the type of information that they convey”. These could include narrating an event or something else that has happened which the writer witnessed or describing something as it is or somebody. A writer can also imagine a situation which is unreal at the moment and then write on it. It can also involve persuading an audience (readers) to agree with the writer’s viewpoint on a matter by defending a point of view through convincing arguments. A writer might also write to communicate knowledge about a given topic to others who may have little or no knowledge about it.

This however, goes to show that every piece of writing must have a purpose and an audience. This will guide one in the choice of language. The writing must also communicate since writing is a social activity. Writing is a planned activity and comes from the mind, and as such, written expressions should be such that can show discoveries about self and the environment.

These are however, different approaches and methods to the teaching and learning of language and it is on that premise that this work will be based. The work seeks to examine some methods of teaching and learning of language and the uses and importance of those in the reading and writing experience. Primary focus will be on the “silent-way method” and the natural approach method”.

Let us though take a skeletal look at the different methods of teaching language.

### Methods of Teaching and Learning of Language

There are many methods and they include;

1. Grammar-translation method (1890s – 1930s)
2. Cognitive approach (1940s – 1950s)
3. Audio-lingual method (1950s – 1960s)
4. The natural/direct method/communicative approach (1960s – 2000s)
5. Total physical response/TPR (1960s – 2000s)
6. The silent-way (1960s- 2000s)
7. Suggestopedia (1960s – 2000s)
8. Community language learning/CLL (1960s – 2000s)
9. Total immersion technique
10. Reading method

11. Technological approaches
12. Lexical approach
13. Focus-on-form approach
14. The play method
15. Oral method
16. Eclectic way
17. Basal method
18. Whole language approach
19. Story telling approach
20. Cooperative language learning
21. Anticipation method
22. Substitution table method
23. Brainstorming and creative writing
24. Gurrey's method
25. Responsive writing method
26. Reading and writing method.
27. Structural method
28. Total physical method

What are involved in each of these methods? In the grammar translation method for instance, the language students are expected to translate cumbersome volumes from classical Greek or Latin or even the mother tongue into English. There is the exhaustive use of dictionaries of grammatical rules in English, sample sentences, exercise drills which are aimed at practicing the new structures. There is very little opportunity for real second-language acquisition. There are memorization of verb paradigms, grammar rules and vocabularies. The application of this knowledge is directed on translation of literary texts focusing on developing students' appreciation of the target language literature as well as teaching the language. This is particularly common for those students who wish to study literature at a deeper level. This method is highly structured making the teacher to control all the activities in the class.

The focus of this paper however will be on the "Silent-way" and the "Natural Approach" methods to teaching language. Subsequent papers in this series will discuss other methods of teaching language.

### **The Silent - Way Method**

A major maxim in the silent-way method as propounded by Benjamin Franklin is "tell me and I forget, teach me and I remember, involve me and I learn". The silent-way is a language-teaching method created by Caleb Gattegno in 1963. This method makes use of silence extensively as a teaching technique. As the name implies, silence becomes a major tool of the teacher. This moves the focus of the classroom from the teacher to the students thereby ensuring cooperation among them. This approach is quite powerful. The teacher is heard only when the students are struggling.

This method to the teaching and learning of language was introduced following the failure of some methods that insisted on learning through mimicry or repeating what is heard spoken around.

As earlier stated, this started in the 1960s and transcends into the 2000s. The method is such that the teacher keeps or remains silent while pupils output the language on cue through perpetual prompting. This agrees with the philosophy of the cognitive psychologists and transformational generative linguists who agree that language learning should be considered as rule formation. Hence, language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes or cognitive to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring. So, the basic principle of the silent-way method is that teaching should be subordinated to learning. This is in keeping with the active role ascribed to the learner in the cognitive code approach (Azikiwe, 1998, p. 80).

This method can be termed as the "production before meaning" school of thought and practice. The teacher is active in setting up classroom situations while the students do most of the talking and interaction among themselves. Just as its name goes – silent-way, the teacher is seen but not heard. All four skills which are listening, speaking, reading and writing are taught from the beginning. Student errors are expected as a normal part of the learning experience. One of its importance is that the teacher's silence helps to foster self reliance and students' initiative. The theoretical idea is that students must be subordinated to learning and must develop their own inner criteria for correctness. One of the reasons for this introduction was to give students a truly spoken facility.

### **Features Uses and Importance of the Silent-Way Method**

1. The teacher will be silent while learners discover and create the language;
2. The learning begins from the unknown to the known;
3. Students develop proficiency by themselves and are held responsible for their mistakes;
4. It is against the idea that language is learnt by repeating after a model;
5. The teacher encourage the learners to produce the language;
6. Students interact with physical objects;
7. It promotes student-student interaction and relationship;
8. It makes the teacher hold back from doing things that the students should and can do themselves;
9. It helps the learners to learn more of the language when left to themselves during the activities;
10. It encourages concentration;
11. The teacher expresses the meaning by gestures, actions, miming and making structures of rods;
12. Autonomy and initiative are inculcated in the students;

13. It fosters retention of learnt material;
14. The students learn to make self- corrections;
15. It allows students/learners to learn more at their own paces since this respects individual differences;
16. Students initiate their teacher;
17. It is best for adults who start learning;
18. There is a dominance of learners;
19. It reduces the speech of teachers while the students speak more;
20. Students provide feedbacks to help plan the next work;
21. The silence helps the students to learn;
22. It reduces tension since the interactions are not teacher-student but students' discussion.

There are other activities that are involved in the silent-way method. A color-coded phonics (sound) chart called a "fidel", with both vowel and consonant clusters on it, is projected onto a screen to be used simultaneously with a pointer, thus permitting the pupil to produce orally on a continuous basis in the target language, via a sequence of phonemes or sound units. Brightly colored Cuisenaire rods, which are also used in mathematics, are integrated into this method. This is used as manipulative. They are used for pupils to learn spatial relationships, prepositions, colors, gender and number concepts, and to create multiple artificial settings through their physical placement lines or blank spaces on a chalkboard representing syllables, devoid of letters in them. This memory experience helps the students to recall lessons learnt.

The silent-way method begins by using a set of colored rods and verbal commands in order to achieve the following:

1. To pass onto the learners, the responsibility for the utterances of the descriptions of the object shown or the actions performed;
2. To avoid the use of vernacular;
3. For students to correct their pronunciation errors through manual gesticulation on the part of the instructor;
4. To avoid modeling of correct pronunciation;
5. To create simple linguistic situations that remain under the complete control of the teacher;
6. To let the teacher concentrate on what the students say and how they say them drawing their attention to the differences both in pronunciation and in the flow of words;
7. To avoid reliance on and the use of structured textbook or an outlined syllabus in the early processes of learning;

8. To generate a serious game-like situation in which the rules are implicitly agreed upon by giving meaning to the gestures of the teacher and his mime;
9. To permit almost from the start a switch from the tone voice of the teacher using the foreign language to a number of voices using it. This introduces components of pitch, tone and intensity that will constantly reduce the impact of one voice and hence reduce imitation and encourage personal production of one's own brand of the sounds;
10. To provide the support of perception and action to the intellectual guess of what the noises mean, thus bringing the arsenal of the usual criteria of experience already developed in one's use of the mother tongue;
11. To provide a duration of spontaneous speech upon which the teacher and the students can work in order to obtain a similarity of melody to the one heard, thus providing melodic integrative elements from the start.

The importance and uses of the silent-way method has earlier on been outlined. Yet for the purpose of emphasis, it has to be noted that the greatest strength of this method lies in its ability to draw students out orally, while the teacher takes a 'back seat'. It gives students a spoken facility. It also helps the students to use the language for self-expression, that is, to express their thoughts, perceptions and feelings. This can be achieved by their being independent of their teacher to develop inner criteria for correctness. Here, learning starts from the basics – sounds. This is based on what the students already know from their mother tongue. The teacher's constant observation opens the way for him to know when they encounter any problem and be able to guide and help them sort out things, should his attention be needed. The "silent-way method" creates the opportunity of learning the four language skills together, since the students read and write what they hear and speak. This method does not relegate the mother tongue to the background since it is used when it is necessary. Students are seen in their natural settings and their errors are used for further work. The students learn self-correction.

The roles of the teacher and the students in the different methods including the "silent-way method" can be seen from the chart below as retrieved

from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/rodgas.tml>

Method	Teacher's Role	Learners' Role
Silent- way method	Observes, helps to correct negative feelings	Expresses self, corrects self

Situational language teaching	Context setter, error corrector, language modeller	Imitator, memorizer, pattern practicer.
Audio lingualism	Drill leader, needs analyst	Accurate enthusiastic improver
Communicative language teaching	Task designer, commander	Negotiator, order taker
Total physical response	Action monitor, counselor	Performer, collaborator
Community language	Paraphraser, actor	Whole person guesser, immerser, relaxer
Natural approach	Auto-hypnotist, director	Active participants
Suggestopedia	Authority figure	True believer

The “silent- way method” helps the hyperactive students. It must also be noted that the silent way method of teaching and learning language belongs to structuralism. To be a successful learner, one must be committed to language acquisition through the use of silent awareness followed by an active trial. This helps the learner to acquire inner criteria, as well as become responsible and independent.

From the light of the forgoing then, we have seen that children learn better and faster when they are involved and since that is what the “silent–way method” advocates, it is then one of the best methods of teaching language.

### **The Natural Approach Method**

This is otherwise known as the communicative approach or the direct method. It was originally developed by Tracy Terrell and Stephen Krashen. This acquisition–focused approach sees communicative competence progressing through three stages;

- (a) Oral comprehension,
- (b) Early speech production, and,
- (c) Speech activities.

All of these foster “natural” language acquisition, much as a child would learn his/her native tongue. Just as its name implies it means the creation of the environment similar to that in which the child learns his mother tongue in the learning of the second language (L2). Language is therefore taught the same way they could learn the mother tongue – directly and naturally through communication and trial and error. Without making attempts to translate into the mother tongue (L1), the language of instruction is used to help the students to use the second language communicatively. It is believed here, that meaning should be connected directly with the second language without going through the process of translating into the mother tongue of the learner as in the case of the grammar translation method. Reference to English equivalent is discouraged since its presentation of discussion in

the target language is a priority. Grammar learning here becomes inductive in nature without overt explanations given to the pupils. Teacher/student interaction becomes fuller, guessing of content, completing fill-ins, and doing exercise stake center stage. Accuracy in pronunciation and oral expression become vital. Examples to be followed become the main intention. Following an initial “silent period”, comprehension should precede production in speech, as the latter should be allowed to emerge in natural stages or progressions. Correct pronunciation is highly important here. This method is based on direct association between the object and the word, which, therefore, makes real objects, pictures, charts and the likes very important. The teacher uses instructional materials so as to create a vivid scene in the minds of the learners which enable the learners to realize the objects, words or situation themselves. For example, if the teacher wants to teach the concept of traffic crossing, she might bring a picture of someone crossing the road and vehicles coming. This will create the picture in the minds of the learners. When the students become confused, the teacher demonstrates or acts out the scene.

As earlier mentioned, the natural approach is similar to the direct method, concentrating on active demonstrations to convey meaning by associating words and phrases with objects and actions. Associations are achieved via mime, paraphrase, and the use of manipulatives. Terrell (1977) focused on the principles of meaningful communication comprehension before production and indirect error correction. Krashen’s (1980) input hypothesis is applied in the natural approach. It focuses on the oral language. Reading and writing are taught from the beginning. Although speaking and listening skills are emphasized, grammar is learned inductively. It has a balanced, four-skill emphasis. This should be a content practice; hence, teachers are cautioned that they should not expect unrealistic results from the Natural Method after only two years of study.

This drive also stresses the purpose of writing and the audience for it. The student writers are encouraged to behave like real life writers. They should always ask themselves while writing: Why am I writing this? Who will read it?

The answers to these questions will inform or determine how the writer writes, the tone and the language. Here, learners do their best since their works will be read not just by their teachers but others. Students learn to think L2 (the second language- English) as soon as possible and acquisition of vocabulary should also be through the natural way, not by memorization. Since “communication is the main purpose of language learning in this method, therefore, students need to learn how to make statements in the second language. Azikiwe (1998, p. 73).

The lessons here are presented as in the real life situation and this allows the students the opportunity to use language in real life contexts. The topics should be tangible and real which the students can easily identify with around. The students are taught to use the language and not to demonstrate their knowledge about it by memory rules. They practice orally first and then their writings are based on that. For example, the learners might be interviewed orally and then be asked to write about that experience or incident they witnessed and have related.

This method though, if not properly used cannot accommodate the bright and dull, the fast and slow learners alike, and can also lead to disorder, inaccuracy and incomprehensibility. Yet, it is still a good method, since it provides similar learning situations to those through which the child learns L1. The teacher uses L2 sketches, and other concrete representations to teach the learners. Errors in speech are not corrected aloud. Now enters the era of glossy textbooks, replete with cultural paintings, glossaries, vocabulary lists and glazed photographs. A deliberate, conscious approach to the study of grammar is considered to have only modest value in the language learning process. Pairing off of students into small groups to practice newly acquired structures becomes the major focus. Visualization activities that often make use of a picture file, slide presentations, word games, dialogues, contests, recreational activities and empirical utterances provide situations with problem solving tasks which might include the use of charts, maps, graphs and advertisements, all to be performed on the spot in class. Now the classroom becomes more student-centered with the teacher allowing for students to output the language more often on their own. Formal sequencing of grammatical concepts is kept to a minimum.

#### **Uses and Importance of the Natural/Direct/Communicative Approach Method**

1. It teaches communication first of all which is paramount in the lives of humans;
2. It provides the natural basis for language learning;
3. The foreign language is taught and learnt without translation or the use of the learners' mother tongue;
4. The teacher encourages foreign language use which is the means of wider communication;
5. Language learning becomes similar to language acquisition;
6. It uses pictures, posters, videos and object for easy and retentive learning;
7. The natural approach is more natural, easier, less formal, less rules-based, but rather on interaction;
8. It calls for and advocates active participation of the students
9. It provides large amount of input.
10. Uses the oral mode of language, questions and answers
11. Pronunciation plays an important role
12. It encourages fluent speaking
13. New words are introduced in context
14. It encourages the use of language materials
15. It introduces more and more target language. The features include:
  - (a) Never make a speech, ask questions.
  - (b) Never imitate mistakes, correct.
  - (c) Never speak too much, let students speak.
  - (d) Do not use the book, but have your lesson plan.
  - (e) Do not jump around, follow your plan.
  - (f) Keep the pace and time of the lesson.
  - (g) Never speak too slowly, loudly or fast.
  - (h) Never be too impatient.
16. It does not encourage large class situation
17. It prefers native speakers in the learning
18. It provides a large number of comprehensible language input.
19. It lowers the affective filter
20. It helps in both acquisition and conscious learning.

#### **Conclusion and Recommendation**

Irrespective of the different approaches, types and methods of language teaching, the teacher is free to make informed choices of which methods to use and when to use them. Since no method is completely the best, the language teacher is advised to give every method a chance in his teaching. The plans and presentations of the material are what matters most in the teaching of any language skill.

Since teaching is an interaction, it is expected that preferred methods will be those getting both teachers and students involved. Also, language is a living subject and as such should be taught with

vigor and enthusiasm. Therefore, a combination of different methods is recommended.

Finally, the words of William E. Bull in this work, Spanish for Teachers: Applied Linguistics (1965) stands: "The superior teacher has regularly gotten super results regardless of the method" and any given method is only as effective as its implementation.

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