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A Historical Overview and Current Trends in ELT

Abstract: English language teaching can be characterised as a discipline that is primarily an application of theories or a practical area of work which is rooted in larger theoretical orientations. It is important to understand these theoretical orientations or the deep structures of ELT. This helps us to be better informed as teachers about what sort of decisions we make, and about the decisions that are being made by other participants in the curriculum. We have choices in everything we do in the teaching- learning process. And we need to understand what our choices actually entail, from where our choices are rooted and what assumptions we hold when we make our choices. In other words .we will see how theory and practice are related.

The history of ELT is linked with developments in many fields and especially with linguistics, applied linguistics, the psychology of learning and education. Indeed it is as inextricably linked with psychology. This paper shows the relationship among these areas that is beginning to stand autonomously as a discipline as it were, with its own body of research and theories.

How did ELT develop? What were its beginnings? And what has it emerged to be today? These questions are examined in terms of general worldwide perspectives and

narrower national perspectives. This historical perspective is presented as an overview and is brief in nature.

Key words: Communicative competence, Behaviourism, Cognitiveism , Direct learning methods, CLT Paradigm

Introduction:

EARLY BEGININGS: Language teaching can be traced as far back as Panini's grammar Latin and Greek translations, etc. Ascham {1513-1568} both {1564-1614} and Plotz {1819-91} were early exponents of form focussed teaching, whereas Montaigne {1533-92} Locke {1632-1904} Comenius {1592-1670} Hamilton {1769-1831} and others were more focussed on conversation and direct leaning methods than on the rules of grammar.

HISTORY OF ELT; A Discussion by stern {1983, chapter 6} begins systematically form 1880. He has divided the history of ELT into 4 periods.

Period-1; 1880-to world war-1

Period 2; World War 1 and the inter war years to 1940

Period 3; World War II and post war decades to 1970 and

Period 4; seventies and early eighties

Period I; 1880-to World War I

1880 is significant because the reform of language teaching was at its height in Western Europe. The Phonetic alphabet was felt to be an important need particularly for teachers of English in France, Germany and Scandinavia. A serviceable international system of spelling reforms and sounds was discussed in terms of spelling reforms and shorthand

systems. It was the French Linguist. Paul Passy, who in 1880 was instrumental in the adaptation of the IPA systems by the International Phonetic Association.

The IPA was based on Henry Sweet's "Romic", Sweet was an academic language teacher, who stands in this period as a reformist in language teaching. Other academicians like Sweet were Victor, Jespersen and Passy, whilst prominent teachers in secondary schools were Walter and Klinghardt in Germany and Widgery and Macgowan in England. This was also the period which witnessed the influential work of Francis Goussier {1892}. The Foundation of Modern Language Association of America {MLA} took place in 1883 and the Modern Language Association of Great Britain was established in 1892. Certainly, this period was one which looked out modern language teaching as opposed to earlier preoccupations with classical languages more scientifically and rigorously than before.

Period II World War I and the interwar years to 1940;

In this period, language teaching developed the basic tenets of vocabulary selection and graded readers. The famous word counts by Thorndike {The Teacher's word Book, 1921} and West {Glossary} and Ogden and Richards' Basic English {1930} together with Palmer's publications {The Scientific Study and the Teaching of Language 1917; The Oral Method of Teaching Languages 1921, The Principles of Language Study, 1922} and WEST'S publications

{Bilingualism, 1926 ; Learning To Read a Foreign Language, 1926} for all instrumental in establishing the basic principles and tenets of the structural approach to language teaching. Behaviorism offered a model of language learning that upheld the pedagogic principles of spaced, controlled, meaningful repetition. Graded vocabulary based on frequency counts and graded readers (to support the reading method, essential for ESL,

development) together with the systematic teaching and drilling of the structures of the language received premium, centralized materials production was at its heights. Syllabuses and materials were produced centrally and “scientifically” by experts, taking into account the learner’s cultural, cognitive and linguistics needs and expectations.

Linguistics, which began as philology, also had come into its own, Bloomfield’s influential language came out in 1933, and its impact was felt in the next period.

Period III: World War II and the post war decades to 1970

In this period, the American wartime language programmes gave the onus of language, planning and teaching to the linguists, and at the same time placed great emphasis on language teaching. Indeed, this period witnessed the great linguistic paradigm shifts from philology, to descriptive linguistics to transformational generative grammar. In fact, the same year, 1957, reflected the publication of the work of two great theoreticians: B.F Skinner’s Verbal Behaviour and Chomsky’s

Syntactic Structures. The debate between behaviourism, on the one hand, and cognitive psychology from which emerged the new paradigm in linguistics. Language Teaching was certainly influenced by these changes, although Chomsky himself in his address to teachers at the Northeast Conference in 1966 said” I am frankly, rather sceptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been in linguistics and psychology”(Chomsky 1966;43).

After 1957, linguistics developed as a discipline in different ways. Universities established Departments of Linguistics (Edinburgh and Washington), and Tesol was founded in USA in 1966. Linguistics and Language teaching were brought closely together, as seen in Halliday, McIntosh and Stevens influential book The Linguistic Sciences and Language

Teaching (1964). First Language laboratory was established at Ealing College, UK IN 1961 . This period also witnessed major experiments already referred, to on Comparative Methodology Experiments, example the Scherter-Wertheimer experiments at the University of Colorado in 1961 (published in 1964).

In language teaching major publications like William E. Mackey's Language Teaching Analysis a definitive book on language methodology came out in 1965, and the first experiments on immersion

Classes began at Montreal, Canada in 1965, where the question of bilingualism was beginning to be addressed. In 1968, the Modern Language Centre of Ontario Institute of Studies was established. In the same year the Bilingual Education Act was passed in, USA, Whilst in 1969, the Official Languages Act established French and English as official languages.

In India the post independence or post 1946 Scenario, established the need for a link language, which had been English, but which was considered to be also a colonial remainder of British dominance. The three language formula was finally proposed after much debate (Kothari Commission 1966), which even today is still hotly discussed. In terms of language teaching methodology, there was the clear establishment of the structural approach, Jean Forrester's teaching without lecturing, Branden J.Carroll's support of the structural method, (Madras, the snow ball effect), Ken Moody's substitution tables focus on low- cost aids, all supported the structural approach. However language teaching was sent to be primarily the teaching of literature till about 1958, but after publication of CIETC influential Book language through literature the English teachers in universities were divided into definite camps.

PERIOD IV: Seventies and Eighties.

This period was a period of great “happenings” in ELT.

1. First, psychology made an impact on language teaching with several new methods.

The Silent Way (Gattegno), CLL or community Language Learning (Curran), TPR or Total physical Response (Asher) and Suggestopedia (Lozanov)

2. In spite of these methods, however there was an emphasis on individualization of learning, which resulted in a reaction against methodologies, but which focussed more on the learners. Stern describes this as a break with the method concept, where learner centeredness removed the focus, as it were from a teacher performance.

3. Individualization, or learner centred classes, focussed on learner’s needs and purposes for language learning, which had several consequences. One of these was the establishment of ESP courses, The emphasis on social contexts and needs appropriacy of use, brought into prominence the concept of Communicative Competence (Dell Hymes) (as opposed to the earlier grammatical competence) where situations and domains of use were the categories that decided appropriacy. Fluency replaced the notions of grammatical correctness, as an aim in teaching and meaning-based study replaced form-focussed study. The communicative approach or CLT as it is called, took off very rich form work done at the Council of Europe in the early Seventies, resulting in the publication of National Syllabus. Halliday, DellHymes and other sociolinguists, had a great role to play in these developments.

The CLT Paradigm: The CLT Paradigm took off in this period. Its characteristics were many, Keith Morrow (1981) lists the principles of CLT as:

1. Know about what you are doing.
2. The Whole is more than the sum of its parts.
3. The processes are as important as their focus.

4. To learn it, do it.
5. Mistakes are not always mistakes.

A brief elaboration of these points is necessary:

1. Know what you are doing. By this Morrow means that the learners should be always learning to do something. He says, 'Every lesson should end with the learner being able to see clearly he is doing something. The focus is relevance for the learner, where learning is seen to lead to a purposeful end. Purpose or needs they are important. This is what CLT claims. There is also an emphasis on laying down clear Communicative Objectives in teaching as well as the need to focus on language skills'.

2. The Whole is more than the sum of its parts: Earlier, the structural approach emphasised the teaching of discrete units of grammar and of vocabulary items which were graded and built upon, in graded blocks year by year. Structural teaching implied mastery learning (Where one item is mastered before proceeding to the next). The Communicative approaches however called this a synthetic procedure, which involved the learning of forms, rather than of ways and methods of communication. An analytic approach, on the other hand took in the whole - i.e. time or speed of making an utterance, instant communication, fluency (as opposed to accuracy). To break up communication into components, would result in the teaching of something very different language learning in other words was not considered to be a cumulative process of 1+1+1 items resulting in the acquisition of a language

3. The Processes are as important as their form: What Morrow implies here is the need for practising communication in the classroom. He has identified three processes which can be used for effective teaching procedures. They are:

a. Information gap exercises: Where genuine communication, not piece of information asked for? (eg; Directions, instructions etc) . Prabhu adds reasoning gap exercises to these others have also spoken of opinion gap exercises.

b. Choice: It is necessary to choose not only the ideas but also the linguistic form for their expression. Controlled exercises and pattern drills do not allow students to practice this skill of making appropriate choices.

c. Feedback: If language is used for real purposes, then the interactional element is of prime importance. What do you say in response to someone? What strategies and tactics are to be used for effective communication?

4. To learn it, do it: There is no point in learning the correct grammatical labels, if they are not used correctly. The emphasis is on the learners, then on problem solving, and on tasks only by practising, can you learn to communicate. This means that the organisation of tasks is very important. Prabhu (1987) for instance, has a pre-task that precedes every task. Others have clear instructions on methodology, on how teachers have to operate with tasks in class.

5. Mistakes are not always mistakes : These “ mistakes” are all part of process of learning, which is what inter-language studies focus on, when it claims that in reaching towards the target language (TL) learners have to go through stages of approximation to the (TL).

Grammar Teaching: CLT questioned the teaching of grammar, as an end in itself. Its reluctance of focus on form based teaching, in fact had resulted in formal grammar not being taught in the communicative classrooms. Today however, grammar teaching has come back to its own again. It has comeback, moreover, in a different guise, informed as it is with cognitivist ideas, with CLT ideas and further with ideas derived from a consideration of bilingualism. In other words grammar teaching is not the same as it used to be; bilingual

education discusses the inclusion of L1 into L2 and it can be seen that there are many models of bilingual education. (Partial or immersion etc). See Treuba et al (1969) for more details in Canada for instance, Montreal and Quebec have involved with the immersion type of bilingual education, where Anglophone children study in the French medium and Francophone children study in English medium. This experiment is related to Canadian government policy and has had more than 25 years of history.

Other trends: Other teaching- learning trends have been learning distance CALL or computer assisted language learning, teacher development, collaborative learning ie with group and pair work and so on.

Management in ELT has become very important with a major focus falling on the generating of funds to support ailing educational budgets, which are receiving less and less of central funding. More Esp courses therefore are being floated; and several universities in the U.K have set up separate wings for fund raising.

CLT in India: In India, we need to consider both bilingualism and CLT, to discover our own models. So far, we have borrowed ideas from the west- which itself is not a bad thing- provided we are able to properly address the development complicated nature of our own teaching- learning situations as they arise.

The CBSE materials and syllabus are CLT in a big way, so are the state Board texts of west Bengal, Tamilnadu, Maharashtra etc .Some University eg, Bombay, Madras and Kolhapur have also been involved with communicative texts for some time now. Texts are even written by teachers, as opposed to experts, so curriculum development emerging from grass roots level has also become a more observed feature, though it is true that teachers assisted by experts in text construction.

This shift of decision –making to the teacher, is also seen i in rudimentary ways, in terms of the learner .By accessing the learners, more opportunities for decision-making are being given to them, which means more sharing of power structures in the classroom . This is basically , the process and procedural syllabus, which has been referred to earlier. This sharing of power is perhaps a very important spin-off of CLT, which focuses on interaction in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Behaviourism had influenced structural linguistics, which in turn has influenced the structural approach to the teaching of English (eg. Fries and Lado). Word lis, the IPA system and the behaviourist methodology of teaching marked a systematic approach to the study of languages.

The cognitive perspective was the most important influence on the language teaching. Chomsky’s LAD hypothesis, supported cognitive psychology and methodologies which eventually questioned the notion that the input had to result in learner input ,or even that output was solely dependent on classroom input. Communicative competence was felt to be as important as grammatical competence and sociolinguistic and applied linguistic discussions on the contexts of language use, influenced the CLT paradigm in the language teaching. This put the emphasis further on language meaning and its use, appropriacy and fluency, as opposed to the earlier form-focussed objective of correctness, usage and practice. The inter language hypothesis, further, strengthened the need for trial of existing repertoires of language for further language development to occur. Issues on bilingualism with the study of motivation and language policy and planning. New syllabus designs were influenced, moreover, by ideas from first and second language acquisition

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