

English Language Teaching Approaches: A Comparison of the Grammar-translation, Audiolingual, Communicative, and Natural Approaches

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Abstract—This work compares four of the most widely used teaching approaches in foreign language contexts; Grammar-Translation, Audiolingual, Communicative, and Natural Approaches. For the comparison, seven features were considered; supporting theories, creation purpose, materials and techniques used, and the roles of teachers, students, and students' mother tongue in the teaching-learning process. A checklist was created to provide a visual representation of the characterization of the features compared in each approach. Several texts and articles were reviewed to be accurate in the characterization of the information. The results show that the characteristics of each approach were determined for the epoch in which they were proposed and promoted. Some characteristics such as the use of books overlapped all approaches compared in this work; others were unique to certain approaches, supporting theories, for instance; and, others were common in two or three approaches, as in the case of the use of conversations and the role of learners as active learners, to cite some examples.

Index Terms—ELT approaches, materials, techniques, ELT theories, teacher's role, students' role, mother tongue, L1

I. INTRODUCTION

The increasing interest in understanding how languages are learned have led linguists and psychologists like Chomsky, Skinner, Krashen, Vygotsky, and others, to study and develop theories that suggest explanations for this intellectual process. These theories, in turn, have become the foundation of language teaching approaches that attempt to provide a framework for the teaching of languages such as English, in both foreign and second language contexts. The emergence of language teaching approaches date back from the early nineteenth century. In that century, linguists of western European countries proposed the Grammatical or Grammar-Translation Approach to teaching dead languages, such as Greek and Roman. Individuals learned these languages through translation of classic literature.

The nature of the Grammar-Translation Approach made it to center on the written form mainly, paying little attention to the oral form (Mondal, 2012; Canale & Swain, 1980). With the introduction of the Grammar-Translation Approach, language learning became of interest not only for European countries but for the United States as well. Indeed, as a strategy to defeat their enemies in the World War II, the U.S. government decided to supply its troop with staff fluent in different languages. Therefore, the government requested American universities to prepare foreign language programs for military, resulting in the setup of the Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP) in 1942. The ASTP aimed at developing the military's conversational proficiency in different foreign languages. This training program had a duration of around two years. However, since it was determinant in the triumph of the United States in the World War II, it had great influence in the academic community of this country. As the United States developed into a significant international power, American universities became popular and students from all over the world wanted to enroll in

their academic programs. These universities established rules for foreign students to be admitted in their programs such as the compulsory completion of English language training. These factors made way for the positioning of a new language teaching approach, the Audiolingual Approach, which was based on the methodology applied to teach the military forces (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Soon, the field of language learning gained major interest. Linguists criticized the methodology and doubted about the efficacy of approaches that existed in that period. Therefore, they proposed new models for their teaching, emphasizing language comprehension. It is in this time then that James Asher (1969/1981) as well as Stephen Krashen (1981/1982) along with Tracy Terrell (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) introduced two teaching approaches that emphasized language comprehension. They are the Total Physical Response and the Natural Approach (NA). The latter was proposed in the late seventies by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell. Krashen argued that language acquisition required meaningful and natural interaction in the target language (Krashen, 1981). He noted that speakers should be concerned with the messages they were conveying and understanding instead of the form of their utterances. In other words, the learner must be able to make the meaning clear but not necessarily be accurate in all details of grammar (Krashen and Terrell, 1983). The NA, in fact, aimed at fostering the communicative competence the same way a baby learns his mother tongue. This approach was framed within the behaviorist philosophical current (Saville-Troike, 2006) and grounded on Krashen's five hypotheses for second language learning (Krashen, 1982; Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Another approach that emerged in those days was the Communicative Approach, also known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). It appeared in the 1980's as a response to *Progressivism*, the philosophical current that modified the conception of the student's role in the learning process from a receptive individual to an active participant. Therefore, passive grammar-translation practices in language learning were overruled by active social interaction through CLT (Mitchell, 1994). According to Savignon and Berns (1984), it was David A. Wilkins who made one of the first contributions to CLT with his notional syllabus and its focus on linguistic function. In addition, Anthony Howatt (1984), also highly known for his experimentation with CLT, developed one of his most valuable concepts by making a clear distinction between teaching the language through structured communication and through the spontaneous discovery of the language itself. The second one being regarded as more effective than the first one.

Each of these approaches has made important contributions to second and foreign language teaching and learning. They have been proposed considering the constraints of former approaches and as a response to the needs of the society of each time. At the beginning, language was learned only as part of the common practices of wealthy people. Then, it was learned due to the necessity of survival in wartime and as an academic requirement. Times changed and language learning passed from being a privilege, survival mechanism, or an academic requirement for some people to become a practice for any person who wanted to learn a second/foreign language.

In the upcoming sections of this work, we compare seven features of four of the most widely used teaching approaches in foreign language contexts; *Grammatical, Audiolingual, Natural, and Communicative Approaches*. The characteristics contrasted refer to the theories that support each approach, the reason that motivated the creation of these approaches, the resources, and techniques used for teaching a class within these approaches, as well as the role of teachers, students, and the learners' mother tongue in the language teaching-learning process. For this purpose, we have created a checklist that illustrates the attributes of each approach (See Table 1), accompanied by a discussion of their features.

TABLE I
CHECKLIST FOR COMPARING ELT APPROACHES

CRITERIA AND PARAMETERS		ELT APPROACHES			
		Grammatical	Audiolingual	Communicative	Natural
1	Supporting Theories				
	Behaviorism or Conductism		X		
	Krashen's Hypotheses about Second Language Acquisition			X	X
	Universal Grammar (Innatist)			X	X
	Socio-Cultural			X	
	None	X			
2	Creation Purpose				
	To teach classical languages	X			
	To teach people who needed to travel/study in other countries		X		
	To teach people from the army to communicate in wars		X		
	To teach European languages and allow Europeans to communicate			X	
	To teach any person willing to learn				X
3	Materials Used				
	Realia				X
	Physical objects				X
	Observable actions				X
	Books	X	X	X	X
	Audio		X	X	X
	Visuals		X	X	X
	Audio-visuals		X	X	X
	Language laboratory		X		
	Worksheets	X			
	Authentic materials			X	X
4	Techniques Used				
	Drills	X	X		
	Translation	X			
	Memorization	X	X		
	Role-plays			X	X
	Dialogues / Conversations		X	X	X
	Reading and comprehension activities			X	X
	Vocabulary exercises	X		X	
	Games			X	X
	Hands-on activities			X	
	Oral presentations			X	X
	Pair and group work			X	X
	Mind engaging tasks			X	
	Listening activities		X	X	X
5	Teacher's Role				
	The teacher is accountable for creating an appropriate environment (full of comprehensible input) for language learning				X
	The teacher is the center of the class at certain grade		X		
	The teacher is the center of the class. All the class turns around him.	X			
	The teacher is a guide.			X	
6	Student's Role				
	Active learner		X	X	X
	Passive learner	X			
	Goes from passive to active, depending on the stage of language learning				X
7	Students' mother tongue role				
	Students are banned from using it		X		
	Students can use it as a support			X	X
	It is important in the learning process	X			
	The teacher speaks only in the target language		X		

Elaborated by the authors

II. SUPPORTING THEORIES

Behaviorism or conductism is the base for language teaching approaches such as the *Audiolingual*. This theory promotes language learning through the formation of habits in the new language. In this respect, Larsen-Freeman (2003) notes that within behaviorist approaches, teachers require students to memorize or immediately recall the target

language without thinking. “Language learning is a process of habit formation. The more often something is repeated, the stronger the habit and the greater the learning” (Larsen Freeman, 2003, pp. 43). Richards & Rodgers (2001), on their part, state that, according to the behavioral psychology, there are three important elements in learning. These elements correspond to stimuli that elicit behavior, a response caused by a stimulus, and a reinforcement when the response is appropriate.

Following other pedagogical currents, we find the *Natural* and *Communicative Approaches*, which were grounded in the innatist theory called Universal Grammar and Krashen’s Five Hypotheses about Second Language Acquisition. The Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis and the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis are two of the hypothesis mainly emphasized. Universal Grammar (innatist) theory was promoted by *Avram Noam Chomsky*, who stated that a linguistic competence underlies in the Generative Grammar, a principle of rules that studies, among others, syntax, phonology, morphology, and semantics for the production of grammatical sentences of a language (White, 1989). Universal Grammar theory also points out that language notions are built-in the human brain and provide individuals with the ability to communicate. According to this theory, a child is aware of the function of nouns and verbs. It means that a child possesses notions of linguistic functions that will allow him to acquire a language (Chomsky, 1986). Humans possess an inherited mechanism; the inner grammar is innate and that is the reason why a language is learned. It was the inherent ability of an individual to understand and communicate, therefore, one of the factors that gave rise to the *Natural and Communicative Approaches*.

Regarding, Krashen’s Hypotheses about Second Language Acquisition, the Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis states that second/foreign language learning should be identical to the way children develop skills in their native language. This hypothesis claims that acquiring a language is an unconscious process and its outcome is unconscious as well. Therefore, language acquisition includes informal and natural learning (Krashen, 1982). The other hypothesis that lays the foundation for the *Natural and Communicative Approaches* is the Comprehensible Input Hypothesis which points out that “we acquire a language when we understand messages when we understand what people tell us and when we understand what we read” (Krashen, 2004, p. 1). Here, the *silent period* plays an important role. In Herrera & (2010) words, language learners going through the *silent period* produce little or no language at all; within this stage, they try to internalize the language they are being exposed to – words, sounds, and patterns of the language. In other words, in the initial phase of language learning through *comprehension approach-based methods*, the learners experience a state of silence until they feel ready to start producing the language. In this case, teachers who teach a foreign language following the *Natural and CLT Approaches* do not promote habit formation through stimulus. On the opposite, these educators give language learners opportunities to interact with the new language in situations similar to those they experienced when developing their mother tongue.

The Sociocultural theory was also fundamental in the development of the *CLT Approach* through the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) developed by Vygotsky (Herrera & Murry, 2016). The ZPD concept indicates that an individual possesses the ability to learn. However, to fully master a skill, said individual requires the support of a more knowledgeable peer. This concept had a high implication in the conception of how a language should be learned. Linguists took advantage of this advance in education and used interaction and communication as the foundation of language teaching. Therefore, Vygotsky’s work, widely known and respected up to this date, contributed with one of the fundamental aspects that brought about the *CLT Approach*.

Each of these approaches is funded in well-known pedagogical currents developed according to leading pedagogical orientations of each time. In the case of the *Grammar-Translation Approach*, there is no evidence of the language learning theories that would support its functionality (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach just followed a set of defined teaching and learning techniques, but no theories laid the foundation to prove that these techniques had a, said, neurological effect on the learner.

III. CREATION PURPOSE

All of the language teaching approaches mentioned in this article had a specific creation purpose aimed at fulfilling the needs of the time in which they were developed. For instance, the *Grammar-Translation Approach* was created in order to teach students traditional languages and the literature written in those languages. Tradition, culture, and knowledge were highly relevant components in the early nineteenth century and previous centuries. Therefore, the Grammar-Translation method was developed to give individuals access to those components. However, different times require different measures. The 20th century arrived and World War II came along. This gave origin to *Audiolingualism*, which was intended to teach U.S. military personnel the languages spoken by the countries that fought in this war. Not many years later, the *Audiolingual Approach* was used to teach people who wanted to travel and study in the USA. Later on, the economic integration of European countries came across. In the case of the *Communicative Approach*, it was the need of communication among Europeans what allowed it to emerge (Chang, 2011; Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Two important events took place in the 20th century. The United States became a world referent and globalization took place in this century, resulting in people willing to learn a second language, mainly English, to be up to date with the changes. Therefore, language teaching became an important area of discussion worldwide. The need of theories that truly developed the language in functional ways was required. As a result, American theorists such as Krashen and

Terrel conducted a lot of empirical studies to determine which aspects accurately influenced the acquisition of language. Their research resulted in the creation of the widely known *Natural Approach* as part of the comprehension current (Krashen and Terrel, 1983).

IV. MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES USED

The nature of each approach and the techniques suggested in each of them have delimited the types of materials needed to teach either a second or foreign language following the notion. In this sense, books have been one of the most widely used materials throughout history. They have complemented the teaching-learning process of the four approaches compared in this work. In the *Grammar-Translation Approach*, the learner was expected to develop reading skills, writing skills and knowledge of grammar in the target language. To achieve this objective, learners traditionally used books as the base for the translation of words, phrases, or complete texts from one language to another (Natsir & Sanjaya, 2014). Students also used books to complete grammar and vocabulary exercises. The memorization of grammar rules and vocabulary played an important role in this approach as well. Teaching practices have changed with the past of the time; however, even though the *Grammar-Translation Approach* has been replaced by other approaches, we can still see some of its practices in EFL classes today. For instance, in some cases from time to time and in others on a daily basis, EFL teachers have their students complete worksheets containing vocabulary and grammar exercises. Teachers also prompt their students to work on the memorization of grammar structures and repetition of written structures (written drills).

The *Audiolingual Approach*, which, as we may remember, was grounded in the Behaviorist current. Practitioners of this approach viewed that repeating phrases through controlled practice of common language patterns and language chunks would lead to mastery of the target language (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This pedagogical viewpoint made of drills a key feature of this approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). But unlike the *Grammar-Translation Approach*, in the *Audiolingual Approach*, the application of drills emphasized the repetition of oral structural patterns. According to Machado, Ramos, & Ramos (2016), this approach focused on improving the knowledge level of the students through the correct pronunciation and grammar, enabling the learner's capacity to respond quickly and precisely. To accomplish its goal, besides books, the *Audiolingual Approach* also utilized audio materials. Audio recordings provided learners with listening practice and books the written input. Students had to listen, read, and memorize structures, chunks of phrases, and even complete dialogues. In addition to its basic practice, these days, EFL teachers also use visuals, songs as audio materials, or a combination of both visual and audio resources to make drills more interactive. Likewise, to support the practice of drills, teachers regularly make use of language laboratories, aiding the learners to achieve a better listening and repetition practice.

The *CLT Approach*, on its part, promotes the use of a wide variety of techniques and materials to achieve the development of communicative competence in language learners and make them more actively involved in their learning process. From the beginning of this approach, oral production has been highly emphasized (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, teachers who demarcate their classes under the *CLT Approach* position have students participate in activities where they put their language knowledge into practice through interaction with their peers. Peer interaction contributes with the encouragement of peer support, an important factor in *CLT-driven* language classes. Role-plays, dialogues/conversations, games, hands-on activities, pair and group work are just some of the possible examples of the techniques used in this approach. Oral presentations and vocabulary exercises are used for this purpose as well. Reading and comprehension activities are also used to motivate speaking discussions. The number of techniques used in this approach is unlimited. It depends on the teacher's creativity and imagination. In this sense, Littlewood (1981) as cited in Richards & Rodgers (2001) add other examples of *CLT-driven* techniques such as "comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences; working out a likely sequence of events in a set of pictures; discovering missing features in a map or picture; one learner communicating behind a screen to another learner and giving instructions on how to draw a picture or shape, or how to complete a map; following directions; and solving problems from shared clues" (p. 76). Overall, any mind engaging activity aimed at promoting students' functional communication, social interaction, and their speaking skills development is welcome in this approach.

In terms of materials employed in *CLT-driven* classes, we identified the use of books, audio resources, visuals, audio-visuals, and authentic materials. Some teachers use audio, visual, audio-visual materials that are included in the course books. Other teachers go further and use authentic resources, while others a combination of both. Larsen-Freeman (2003) considers that to achieve the communication goal of the *CLT Approach*, simple texts and advanced reading found in books or other authentic sources are important. According to this author, the level of difficulty of these materials should be in accordance to the English level proficiency of the students. In this respect, students will be encouraged to read to gain knowledge of the language to accomplish communicative competence meaningfully, rather than reading texts that are not understood by them. Audio and visual materials and the combination of both are used to prompt language usage and generate discussions in the target language. These materials enable the construction of connections between physical objects or abstract information and the target language. Authors make emphasis in the use of visuals. For instance, Larsen-Freeman (2003) argues that the use of visuals such as picture strip stories elicit speaking. Pomavilla, Villavicencio, & Soto (2015) suggest that in order to discuss text content, it is necessary to use visuals because these materials boost comprehension of the information in the L2. In this sense, Ramírez (2012)

mentions that visuals can be used to practice everyday phrases. This author highlights that the communication ability increases through asking and answering questions among the teacher and students; visuals help students to get acquainted with new vocabulary.

To conclude this section, we analyze the *NA*. This approach, like the *Audiolingual* and *CLT Approaches*, aims at fostering communicative skills, but in this case, the foreign language is learned through natural communicative situations, like when a baby learns to speak his mother tongue. The *NA* was grounded in the notion that both first and foreign language learners “need an extended period of receptive learning to comprehend the language they are learning before they begin producing in that language.” (Gary & Gary, 1981, p. 332). Such phase is what Krashen named as the silent period (Gibbons, 1985). During this period, teachers are expected to provide the learners with plenty of comprehensible input through a variety of materials so that they can grasp the language and be able to develop the tasks planned by the teacher. Richards & Rodgers (2001) argue that this approach does not have its own techniques. According to these authors, the techniques used in *NA*-driven classes have been adopted from other approaches and methods such as the *CTL Approach* and Total Physical Response. Accordingly, the *NA* promotes the use of role-plays, dialogues/conversations, reading and comprehension activities, games, oral presentations, and group and pair work like in the *CLT Approach*. It also favors the use of listening activities as in both the *Audiolingual* and *CLT Approaches*, but with a marked difference.

Regarding resources, similar to the other three approaches, the *NA* also promoted the use of books as they provide reading sources. Terrel & Krashen (1995) mention that reading is an important academic skill. Therefore, language learners should be prompted to do pleasure reading to aid them to develop the target language naturally. Realia and physical objects available in the classroom and its surroundings, as well as observable actions, are key materials in the *NA*. English teachers use these materials to provide students with comprehensible input without having to translate the language into the students' L1 (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Krashen, 1982). In the natural approach, it is necessary to have students involved in real-life-like situations where they can experience the target language naturally. In this sense, audiovisuals help students to listen and observe actions related to different activities performed in a given situation. Terrel & Krashen (1995) assert that performing tasks that resemble daily-life situations with authentic materials such as reading notes, signs, advertising, and personal letters are helpful to develop the target language. Reports, essays, lectures or movies with academic content, textbooks, and literature are also authentic materials that can be used to reach the purpose of the *NA* in academic settings. All these materials help the instructor to prepare the context so that the learner can acquire the target language spontaneously.

V. TEACHER AND STUDENT'S ROLE

The role played by teachers and students in the teaching-learning process differs according to the essence of each approach as well as customs and ideological conceptions of the decades in which they were proposed. The *Grammar-Translation Approach* was promoted in a period when the teacher was seen as the center of the class; all the class turned around him instructing the language (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Liu & Shi, 2007). In this approach, the teacher was the main source of information, therefore, he needed to have a profound knowledge of the target language. The student, on the other hand, had no opportunities to actively participate in his learning process. His role was limited to listening to the teacher, memorizing grammar structures and vocabulary, translating, and completing activities assigned by his instructor.

In *Audiolingualism*, the teacher was positioned as the center of the class at a center grade. He needed to be a good model for imitation and provide students with tape recordings of native speakers for utterance accuracy. The teacher directed the language learning process, but in this case, students' participation was motivated. Students were required to follow and respond to the teacher's instructions (Larsen-Freeman, 2003; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Therefore, only in such sense, students were given opportunities to be actively involved in their learning process.

As time passed, the conception towards the roles of teachers and students experienced significant variations. Within the *CLT Approach*, the teacher left the role of authority to guide students and students transitioned to a more independent role. Littlewood (1981) situated the teacher in an observant position ready to provide assistance and enable interaction among students. Students, in their part, interact actively to convey meaning, solve problems, or accomplish tasks (Luzón & Soria, 1999).

The *NA* directed the role of the teacher as the provider of an environment where learners would have opportunities to experience the language through comprehensible input (Asher, 1969:1981; Krashen & Terrel, 1983; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). The teacher is accountable for getting the materials needed for the students, being the main resource the teacher himself. Through commands and observable actions (acted out and spoken by the teacher mainly), students get acquainted with the language. Regarding the learners, in this approach, they are expected to go from a passive to an active role. It means, when they undergo the silent period or pre-production stage of their learning, they have a passive role (Krashen, 1982). During this stage, they are only listeners and they try to understand and internalize the language. Once the students feel confident enough to start producing the language, they switch to a more active role. In this phase, speech emerges (Krashen, 1982) and students start participating in the class more actively (Larsen-Freeman, 2003) in activities such as role reversal, short dialogues, among others.

VI. STUDENTS' MOTHER TONGUES' ROLE

Like the other features of the approaches compared in this work, contrasting the function of the mother tongue in each of these approaches is also fundamental. The use of the student's L1 in the language teaching-learning process was determined by the foundations of each approach. For example, the leading force of the *Grammar-Translation Approach* was developing the student's ability to read in the target language as well as translate information from the L1 into the target language and vice versa (Larsen-Freeman, 2003). If learners were able to perform these actions, they were considered successful learners. Consequently, in this approach, the use of the student's L1 was central.

Audiolingualism tried to solve the need of developing language learners' oral skills by immersing the learners in listening activities in the target language and participation in drills. To accomplish this immersion goal fully, the teachers only spoke in the target language and banned students from using their L1 (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Larsen-Freeman, 2003). The *CLT Approach*, on the other hand, saw the need of applying students' mother tongue as a form of support for students (Celce-Murcia, 1991). This approach supports interaction, giving the students opportunities to negotiate and ask for meaning with more knowledgeable peers as well as with the teacher.

Finally, comprehension approach-based methodologies such as the *NA* view the use of the mother tongue from two perspectives; students can use it as a support to demonstrate that they have grasped what is being taught as well as to monitor their learning process (Krashen, 1982, Krashen & Terrel, 1983), however, in latter stages, they are expected to use the target language only. As for the teacher, he is expected to exclusively speak in the target language as he is the only source of contact between the language and the students (Krashen, 1982); body movements, actions, gestures as well as other materials are mainly used to convey meaning and support the students' comprehension process.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Each language teaching approach has emerged to provide a solution to the needs of society based on the social, economic, and academic requirements as well as pedagogical perspectives featuring in different epochs. Founded on such requirements and perspectives, and the analysis of the gaps of previous proposals, each approach has been developed with unique and common characteristics. The purpose of this work was to compare seven of features of *Grammatical*, *Audiolingual*, *Natural*, and *Communicative Approaches*, including the theories that supported each approach, the reason that motivated the creation of these approaches, the resources and techniques used for teaching, as well as the role complied by teachers, students, and the students' L1 in the language teaching-learning process.

From the data collected, we can conclude that the characteristics of each approach depended on the how the language was going to be used and the theoretical considerations that framed these approaches. Some characteristics overlapped the four approaches compared here, like the use of books. Other features were unique to a specific approach as in the case of the supporting theory of the *Grammatical* and *Audiolingual Approaches*; the creation purpose was also unique to each approach. *Grammatical* and *Audiolingual Approaches* shared certain characteristics; the same happened with the *NA* and the *CLT Approach*. As stated before, such features depended on the theoretical foundation of the approaches, the epoch, and the historical context in which they were developed.

In the field, sometimes, foreign language teachers proclaim themselves as devoted to a specific approach, however, their teaching practice indicates the opposite. Therefore, for future works, we consider that it would be interesting to dig into today's teachers' awareness of the features of each approach discussed in this work and learn to what extent, these characteristics are reflected in their teaching practice in foreign language contexts.

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