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## On the mortality of language learning methods

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This text is more detailed than the actual lecture, which did not allow, because of time constraints, to mention many nuances and citations.

Corrections, comments, or criticisms are very welcome.

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### **Abstract:**

Considerations on the rise and decline of methods to learn foreign languages. An assessment of why methods are born, bloom, disappear and... resurrect or reincarnate.

I am honored to give the Barker Lecture today. I pay tribute to the personality and work of James L. Barker, whom BYU remembers as an internationally renowned scholar in linguistics and a major contributor to the actual strength of our language programs.

My topic is "mortality of language learning methods". In the interest of time I will often say "methods", meaning "foreign language learning methods".

### **1. Introduction**

## 1.1. A sweeping change

A number of years ago, our methods experienced a sweeping change. Up to then, more grammatical approaches had been used, with word-lists and translation, and an emphasis on writing. The critique against this approach started in the sixties when the communicative nature of language was stressed. Since then the movement became all encompassing, but few people here know the names and publications of the Europeans who did the groundwork for this sweeping change. To cite a few:

- Already in the sixties the German Gottlieb Heness stressed in his *Der Leitfaden für den Unterricht in der Deutschen Sprache*, natural communication as the core activity of language learning.
- Also in the sixties the Frenchman Claude Marcel stressed in *L'art de penser dans une langue étrangère* the need to connect directly to the foreign language, thus avoiding the discursive detours of grammar and mother tongue.

In the seventies the ideas of these and other pioneers caught on and we saw an international maturing of the conviction that something fundamentally different had to be done to improve language learning. In many countries, methods based on direct communication and on authentic input sprang up. Word-lists, grammar, and translation were ousted.

- In France François Gouin next produced his *L'art d'enseigner et d'étudier les langues*, proposing methods that use enactment and physical response to integrate lively language around "centres d'intérêt", without grammar and translation, and which met with immense success.
- In Germany, Wilhelm Viëtor embodied the principles of the new movement in his famous *Der Sprachunterricht muss umkehren* - a plea for the spoken language as basis for instruction.

During the eighties and nineties, this vast movement took further shape, with hundreds of studies and new textbooks published and appropriate media developed to back this direct way to teach languages.

As Schweitzer and Simmonot wrote at the turn of the century in their *Méthodologie des langues vivantes*: "No period in the history of living languages has shown as noticeable progress as the last few years. Everywhere, under the impetus of the necessities of modern life, the teaching of foreign languages has undergone profound reforms, whose happy results can now be seen".

Indeed, what a movement of change and reform it was!

I should add the dates of the works I have mentioned: Heness: 1867, Marcel: 1867, Gouin: 1880, Viëtor: 1882, and the period summary by Schweitzer & Simmonot: 1903:1, cited and translated in Kelly 1969:382.

I described what happened in the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This vast movement of change was called the Reform movement with the Direct Method as its main approach. Overall the principles were: immediate contact with the target language, lively interaction, no translation, no word-lists, inductive rule-formation for grammar, emphasis on oral use. All over the Western world ministries of education and professional organizations adopted these principles under various names and variants: reformed method, phonetic method, intuitive method, natural method... .

And then, in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, came the decline and death of the Direct Method, in spite of all the enthusiasm that it had engendered in many countries.

There were two main reasons for it:

1. The growing disappointment by teachers when the promises were not fulfilled: even after several years of direct language learning, large numbers of students remained at a level of frustrating inadequacy. In 1909 Breymann and Steinmuller, who had thoroughly documented the movement, summarized its downfall as follows: "The Reform has fulfilled its mission. It has laid the ghosts of the grammatical method, which made a fetish of the study of grammar with excessive attention to translation... But what the grammatical method neglected, practical and correct use of the spoken language, the reform movement has pushed to extremes. In making mastery of the spoken language the chief objective, the nature and function of secondary schools was overlooked, because such an objective under normal conditions of mass instruction is only attainable in a modest degree... . Average pupils, not to mention weaker ones... soon weary, are overburdened and revolt. Early adherents of the new method, after their enthusiasm has been dashed by stern realities, have gradually broken away" (cited in Titone 1968:39).

The next year, 1910, the Direct Method received its coup de grâce in Paris: an international conference of language teachers voted overwhelmingly to abolish it.

2. The second reason for the decline was thorough linguistic, psychological and pedagogical analysis, conducted since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which indicted the one-sidedness of the Direct Method and reevaluated the place of all the components. The times, indeed, were highly scientific, laying the foundation for many modern disciplines and leading to major discoveries and inventions - think of Louis Pasteur, Marie Curie, Sigmund Freud, and Thomas Edison. There were also brilliant language learning researchers such as

- F. Franke, *Die praktische Spracherlernung auf Grund der Psychologie und der Physiologie der Sprache*, 1896.
- Otto Jespersen, *How to teach a foreign language*, 1904.
- Paul Passy, *De la méthode directe dans l'enseignement des langues vivantes*. Cambridge 1899.
- Henry Sweet, *The practical study of languages*, 1899.

These researchers took into account aspects such as the peculiar learning situation in school environments, the psychological profile of the learner, the impact of grammatical insight, the value of contrastive analysis and of the mother tongue, the application of frequency norms to ensure better progression, the dynamic relations between the skills, and so on. Though communication and functionality were kept as the main goals of language learning, the research led to a new era of well thought-out, balanced methods, which are often called the eclectic methods, and which would last through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

This introduction has set the tone for my lecture: a strong language learning methodology that dominated Europe and the America's for about 30 years, from 1880 till 1910, finally died, to be replaced by a successor.

I will structure the rest of my presentation as follows:

- a quick overview of trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> century
- variables that make the success of a method
- reasons for the decline and death of a method

But first I must define what I understand by this key word - "a method".

## 1.2. Definition of method

A method is a teaching-learning model that emphasizes a core concept as the key solution to successful language learning.

It can be viewed on three levels:

- normal level: a specific method as a descriptive framework with its own name, such as Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning or Total Physical Response,
- smaller level: a specific textbook of such a method, which is more concrete as application, but may deviate more or less from the method it claims to follow;
- broader level: a grouping of specific methods that have a common emphasis or core idea, such as, in fact, the Direct Method which I mentioned in the introduction. The so-called communicative approach of the past 25 years is also a conglomerate of various specific methods. In that sense the word "approach" is better suited as it suggests a broader front in which specific methods can exist. Sometimes the term "methodology" is suggested as a grouping of similar methods.

In this presentation I look essentially at methods in high school and college environments, not at peculiar situations, such as natural immersion for younger children.

## 2. Main trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> century

It would take me too long to even briefly overview methods since antiquity. Suffice it to say that these centuries have had their own specific methods and their great minds. I refer you to Louis Kelly's *25 Centuries of language teaching* (1969) or Christian Puren's *Histoire des méthodologies de l'enseignement des langues* (1988).

Let me only give a very brief overview of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

After the demise of the Direct Method, the period between 1910 and 1940 was one of intense research and in-depth clarification. Here was a generation of researchers who had witnessed the death of a major movement. They had seen how dogmatism and narrow-mindedness had led to excesses and they realized the need for a balance between the components. In 1917 H.E. Palmer published his famous *The scientific study and teaching of languages*, pinpointing the criteria to place language learning on a scientific foundation. Between 1927 and 1931 the MLA published its 17 volumes of the American and Canadian Foreign Languages Study treating all aspects of foreign language learning.

I could continue to cite dozens of major works of that period. The methods themselves, commonly called "eclectic methods", reflect this search for balance. There were many variants under various names, one of the most widely used being "the active method". Indeed, these methods did not reject the good that the Reform Movement had stressed, namely communication as a vital aspect of language learning. Dialogues in daily situations remained the core material in most textbooks, but with open book, in careful gradation, and preceded or followed by the clear identification of new lexicon and grammar, with many appropriate exercises for correct integration, including translation exercises. One of these textbooks was *Effective French for Beginners*, written by James L. Barker, whom we remember today by this lecture. It was published in New York in 1925 and is a most remarkable product of insight and balance.

At one point one strategy was especially stressed: the importance of progressive reading in the foreign language. Intensive reading of graded readers was therefore strongly recommended, to the point that the 1930s are sometimes referred to as the period of the Reading Method.

By 1940, however, behaviorism and a view of language as habit-formation became the emerging trend. As the Second World War brought with it a sudden, extreme need to know foreign languages, in the U.S. the Army Method was developed, a very intense language program for intelligence officers. It was a rigid, drill and practice approach, but which still used translation for efficacy and some grammar to provide a framework (Angiolillo 1947; Moulton 1961). After the war, the method survived in a limited way. But overall the eclectic methods remained the most widely used until the end of the 1950s.

Then two historic events gave an incredible impetus to the sleeping methodology of behaviorist habit-formation.

(1) In the U.S. it was the Sputnik shock of 1957: the realization that the Russians were ahead in space spurred important reforms in education. For foreign languages a revised Army Method was launched as the miracle method for schools: the audio-lingual method, also called the New Key. It stressed drill and practice with stiffened guidelines: no translation, no grammar, emphasis on audio-oral habit-formation, in the line of the predominant psychological school: behaviorism.

(2) In France it was the independence of the French colonies around 1960 that gave the impetus to profound reform. In order to keep these new states within the French realm, and to counter the danger of Anglo-American cultural take-over, the French government made a massive effort to impose French as the lingua franca. A specific method, SGAV ("Structuro-global audio-visuel"), based on behaviorist principles with audio, pictures and slides, was adopted as the miracle solution. It was launched with incredible means through newly created national agencies and through the French embassies that were reinforced with so-called Bureaux pédagogiques, not only in all the ex-colonies, but also in almost every country. SGAV was hailed as the ultimate method to save the French hegemony through language.

In many countries, the audio-revolution was imposed by the educational system and gratefully stimulated by the publishers and the vendors of tape recorders and language labs.

In the U.S., however, devastating critiques, one of the best known being Wilga Rivers' *The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher* in 1964, quickly undermined the movement. The acute question was: "Could the New Key be a wrong key?" (Mueller 1970). It led to one of the largest experimental investigations ever conducted in methods' comparison, the Pennsylvania project by Philip Smith, between 1965 and 1969 (Smith 1970). Though such a huge project had inevitable weaknesses, the results were convincing: the audio-approach offered no advantages, while a more cognitive approach, using the mother-tongue and a grammatical framework, led to better results. Audio-lingualism died almost instantly and was replaced by former eclectic methods, though experimentations with new probings continued, such as with transformational grammar.

In France and its satellite countries, however, the audio-visual method would continue for many years. First, the French were totally unaware of what was happening in the U.S., and second, their political, economic, and academic grip on the method was enormous.

In the U.S., meanwhile, a "new" movement was growing, but this time outside the regular school system. Renewed attention was being paid to methods that could help adults gain a quick practical command of a language, geared to survival communication in business, diplomacy, and tourism. The movement downplayed

grammar and stressed the immediate use of practical sentences. It received its academic impetus from research in second language acquisition by adults in immersion situations, of which Stephen Krashen is, of course, the most cited.

A similar development took place in Europe where the young European Community launched in the early 1970s a vast research movement around communicative needs for adults to foster professional exchanges between the member states. These were the Threshold Level inventories, where the keywords "functions" and "notions" emerged, tying in with linguistic research in pragmatics and the theory of speech acts, and with socio-linguistics and the concept of intercultural competence.

From these bubbling, diverse, and often ill-defined tendencies emerged a movement called the communicative approach, very comparable to what had happened in the 1860s and 1870s: a rejection of the past, presented as a failure, a mistrust of grammar, of translation and word-lists, an emphasis on the ability to do something with the language in real-world situations, and of course a strong commercial push to compel the educational system to follow the new principles. The communicative approach includes many specific methods, some stressing the immediate production of language, others asking to postpone speaking in favor of a receptive phase, still others stressing the emotive aspects of language learning. But all have as their core concept practicality-in-action. The communicative approach lived its heydays in the 1980s. During the 1990s the original concept went into a slow agony, of which its own supporters are not yet always aware.

History is indeed repeating itself: since the mid-1990s a growing current is separating itself under the name post-communicative language learning. It opposes the idea that language learners are just role players in a functional world, directed by criteria of practicality, and that a method should impose the way they learn. The post-communicative trend stresses the individual needs and learning styles of the student, thus recognizing varieties of approaches, including a revalorization of insight and structure if helpful, and within a constructivist view of learning. These past few years eclectic approaches (or "revised" communicative approaches) are thus again emerging in various forms.

### **3. Variables that make the success of a new method**

#### **3.1. A "new" idea**

A new method draws its originality and its force from a concept that is stressed above all others. Usually it is an easy to understand concept that speaks to the imagination.

- During the Reform Movement, the key word was "direct", in contrast to the detour of indirect theory.
- The Reading Method claimed that intensive reading was the obvious activity that language learners could constantly practice on their own, to better integrate language and strengthen the basis for the other skills.
- The audio movement stressed habit-formation, "like a child learns his mother tongue".
- The communicative approach used the key-words "functional", "real-world", "authentic", "proficiency", and the easy slogan: "Teach the language, not about the language."
- In the present, post-communicative approach, key concepts are "learner-centered", "content-based", "collaborative".

Typical is that such a single idea, which only represents a component, becomes the focal point as if being the total method. This publicity-rhetoric gives the impression of total reform, while often all that happens is a shift in accentuation, or the viewing from a different angle, because many common components remain included in each method.

I put "new" between quotation marks, because many "new" ideas are rediscoveries of ideas that have blossomed in decades or even centuries past. The package and the jargon are, of course, different.

"The language teaching field is more beset by fads than perhaps any other area of education. The 'best' methodology changes at incredibly frequent intervals, depending on which charismatic 'scholar' happens to have drawn attention to him or herself lately." (Kaplan 2000:ix).

### **3.2. Denigration of others**

To succeed, a new method must proclaim that current methods are a failure. That is not difficult to do, because language learning is a disappointing endeavor. For every successful language student, a dozen others have stopped along the road or find the end mark unsatisfactory. Only a small group finally breaks through and becomes fluent. It is therefore easy to claim that previous methods have failed, that the mastery of foreign languages is a national disaster, that students study a language for years and are still unable to order a meal or purchase bread.

The fact that methods are often identified with a single concept (cf. 3.1) makes it easy to focus criticism on that concept. The audio-methods accused the former methods of being only grammatical or only concerned with reading, not speaking. The communicative approach hammered the audio-methods for being purely behaviorist and for training only lower-order skills. The present post-communicative trend reproves the communicative approach for being only functional and for neglecting the unique personality of each student.

Such critiques are often unfair, because methods are complex and quite often contain nearly all components. But each method pays the price for having publicized its uniqueness as a single concept, which in turn will be attacked by the following method.

### **3.3. Success guaranteed**

The promises for success could be the topic of a study of educational rhetoric. Methods and textbooks do not hesitate to claim that students will soon be able to converse freely with natives, read books and articles fluently, listen without frustration to the media, etc. In a textbook, in the objectives per chapter or unit, one can read statements such as: "This Unit will enable you to conduct conversations at work". The unit then contains one or two standard dialogues in an office. The user is led to believe that those dialogues are sufficient to be able to function in all circumstances.

### **3.4. Scientific "proofs"**

A new method likes to claim it is scientifically proven. It refers to research to support its principles. The publicity and the introduction to a textbook will carry the familiar phrase: "Recent developments in foreign language research have shown that... " or something to the same effect. There is, of course, a great deal of valid language learning research going on, not only in Second Language Acquisition, but also in the many related linguistic fields -- pragmatics, socio-linguistics, ethnography. However, it is most remarkable that true researchers rarely get involved in developing a method, while those who did not do the research claim research results to back their method.

Such use of scientific "proofs" for a method is, quite often, a delusive art, based on the selective citation of statements and on quick generalizations. Terms are often used without clear definitions, and certainly without an understanding of their ambiguities and complexities -- terms such as "inductive", "deductive", "functions", "speech acts", "proficiency", "lower-order", "higher-order", thus exploiting a slippery jargon that impresses the uninitiated.

The researchers themselves sometimes suffer to see their names and work misused to back a method they did not invent. Sometimes they will protest it, but their voices are only heard in the limited professional circle of their specialty, not on the larger market where the method is being commercialized. For example, Daniel Coste, the author of *Un Niveau-Seuil*, which was used as the basis for the notional-functional methods, lamented the way in which these methods totally neglected the grammatical component of his research (Coste 1980, 1982). Lozanov, the Bulgarian theoretician behind suggestopedia, has been bewildered by the misuse of his name and theories in American superlearning approaches.

A common form of falsification is citing research that does not really prove what is being claimed. I take the examples below from the field of language learning, but virtually any field could produce similar examples:

- "The advantages of this strategy are supported by the findings of so-and-so (year) who reported significant effects on the reading skill."
- "The importance of this psycholinguistic approach has been demonstrated by so-and so (year)."
- "Psychologists have long since discovered that language learning happens outside conscious rule-formation."

Without checking what so-and-so really said, or whether that person's "discovery" is actually supported by convincing evidence, or without worrying about the identity of the "psychologists," new authors reuse such references in citations and quotations, even reinforcing the absolute character of the "discovery." It leads to the uncritical acceptance of generalizations that can be passed on for decades. Under the telling title "Future Schlock," Lawrence Baines (1997) analyzes such "mythologizing data" as they are applied to educational reform. (The preceding paragraph is taken from Decoo 2002:38).

### **3.5. The ultimate medium**

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, technological media have been closely connected to a number of new methods. If I may paraphrase Marshall McLuhan's famous statement "the medium is the message", I would say that quite often "the medium makes the method". I mean by this that the possibilities and limitations of the medium determine the boundaries of the method, because the method can handily use the medium to promote itself, while the normal way would be that the method evaluates to what extent the medium could be useful. Examples are easy to find.

The most recent is the Internet. We are being bombarded by statements that the new information age will radically change education. Our methods, we are led to believe, are to become web-based interactive programs allowing the student lively and authentic contact with the target language and culture. Some post-communicative methods mold themselves into that framework by adopting as their core concept task-based activities on the web, while existing methods jump on the bandwagon by including similar activities.

Thus, to heighten its own *raison d'être* and its impact, a method will state that the new medium is radically changing the perspective on education, implying that methods without that medium have become obsolete. An atmosphere of high expectations is created. If you don't follow, you're hopelessly out of fashion.



But this line of reasoning has been going on for more than a century. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Phonetic method hails Edison's phonograph as the ultimate revolution for language learning. In 1902 the International Correspondence Schools adopts it as their core instrument. The American Army introduces it in 1906 for language learning. The famous Linguaphone follows in 1920. In *My Fair Lady* it is the method used by professor Higgins to teach Eliza Doolittle -- and the miracle happens.

In the 1930s the radio is discovered as the miracle means to bring education to the millions. The Modern Language Journal hails it as the system by which "high school classes everywhere may learn French, German or Spanish given by a native speaking his own language" (Monroe 1931:213, cited in Kelly 248). The existing phonographs already did the same, but the fact that it would now come from a magic distance made it into a hype. And indeed, one must concede that at least till the eighties, the radio, and especially the overseas services of the BBC and the Voice of America, have provided an enormous amount of language courses, especially ESL.

Then there is the invention of the tape recorder. In the 1950s "Hear your own voice" becomes the slogan of new methods. Around this medium the language lab is developed. The audio-methods mold their drill and practice to it, while hailing the medium as the new ultimate method. In the sixties, under great pressure to be in, all schools install language labs and proudly display them in open houses to attract students.

But then television breaks through. School television is soon hailed as the new miracle in education. The medium makes the method, for suddenly the keywords become "visual contact", "real-life experiences". In fact, in the 1950s and 60s school television triggered the same hype as now with the Internet, with exactly the same words. Language courses flourished on television since the early 1950s and a whole pedagogy was developed to have the students take active part in the lessons.

Then follows the computer. The promotional articles of 20 years ago promised us that within a few years language learning would have become a totally individualized interactive experience, with only marginal need for teachers or classrooms. It is also interesting to see that in the middle of the communicative movement, early computer assisted language learning veered back to a lot of lexical and grammatical drill & practice and that this was accepted without murmuring. The medium made the method.

And now Internet. The irony of Internet as the new panacea is that it has less functionality compared to a well-designed CD-rom for language learning. Even so, it is newer and thus creates a momentum on which new methods jump to enhance their own credibility.

To avoid misunderstandings, I have not said that media cannot have a significant impact on language learning. I only pointed at the use of the medium as a variable in making a method succeed and at the tendency of some to inflate the potential impact of a new medium.

### **3.6. Official endorsement**

Essential for the broad implementation of a method is official endorsement by ministries of education, school boards, and professional organizations. Schools and teachers come under great pressure to adopt the method, if officially endorsed.

However, official bodies are usually slow to recognize a new method, because of bureaucratic procedures, or caution, or because of the financial implications of the change. For example, the Direct Method, which started in the 1880s and had already spread all over the Western world by 1900, was only officially adopted in 1901 by the

French ministry of education. The irony was that the official adoption came at the time when the method was already dying. In 1910 the international conference of language teachers voted to abolish the Direct method, but it would take until 1925 for the French ministry of education to do the same.

On the other hand, ministries may sometimes be quick to impose a new method. Such was the case with the audio-methods of the 1960s, under pressure of political circumstances and of the hype with language labs.

The relation between a method and official endorsement raises questions as to the collusion of power and interests in the introduction of methods. Who are the actors in the decision-making process? When the same people have ties with publishers, media-producers, professional organizations, testing services, school boards, consultancy positions, and ministries of education, we cannot speak any more of a "clean" situation. It brings us to the next variable.

### **3.7. Commercial push**

Methods represent money, huge amounts of money. Language business is a billion-dollar business. New methods generate new money. Publishers like to see a trend die and a new powerful one stand up, especially if it matches their timing to bring out new series. Textbook authors become commercial representatives, touting the merits of their method and the weaknesses of the competition.

#### **3.7.1. An ethical issue**

However, if the author is also a researcher or university professor, we may have a problem of academic ethics. In medicine and pharmacology, society has become very sensitive to the absolute neutrality and objectivity of research. Strict rules, under the control of official bodies like the Office of Research Integrity, govern these disciplines. Such scrupulousness is not surprising since false data in the health sciences have the potential to affect people's lives directly. It is misconduct to assert unproven scientific statements to promote a medical technique or a certain medication, or to manipulate research data to prove their excellence. The motivation for such misconduct is money and academic recognition. Nowadays the system punishes such practices severely.

However, in language methods, it is not uncommon to see academic authors of textbooks or of software make unproven statements or refer to non-existent experimental research to promote their product, in ways that would be totally unacceptable in the health sciences.

I do not mean to say that professors cannot be involved in the production of educational material, but such requires from them a lot of probity and self-control.

The ethical problem also extends to the choice of a textbook at the author's own institution. In some European schools, there is a rule that if a teacher writes a textbook, that textbook will not be used in at his or her institution, so as to avoid manipulations and ill feelings. If that rule does not exist, then the minimal agreement is that the author will totally withdraw from the choice-making process.

#### **3.7.2. Commercial reincarnation**

Another aspect of commercialization is the ability of existing textbooks to adapt to new trends, for a publisher does not want to lose his piece of the market. For example, during the audio-revolution of the 1960s, eclectic textbooks were quick to add audio-tapes, eliminate translation exercises and grammar overviews, keep all the rest, and call themselves audio-lingual. A similar movement happened with traditional methods of the 1970s that transformed themselves into communicative ones. The same is happening now with communicative textbooks of

the 1990s. As the post-communicative movement is emerging with new keywords, "revised" editions of the communicative textbooks are quick to integrate fashionable jargon in their introduction, even if the authors have only a fuzzy idea of what it means - terms such as process-oriented, holistic, higher-order, constructivism... . The original method dies quietly, but the same content is reborn with some slight adaptations. Since we talk in terms of mortality, this procedure might be called the *reincarnation* of methods.

### **3.8. Grasp on teacher training**

Up to the 18<sup>th</sup> century teachers became teachers solely because of their knowledge. Their function was to pass on content. The strategies to do so were mainly left to the personality and creativity of the teacher.

With the development of more specific methods in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, strategies in presenting and training materials became very precise. The inventors of these methods wanted teachers to conform to their views and follow their techniques, taught in training sessions, usually in summer schools. We see the founding of private language schools, such as Berlitz in 1878, with specific class procedures.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, teacher training in the educational system started to impose specific techniques inasmuch as ministries of education or school systems adopted methods officially. This was the case with the Direct Method in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the 1960s a very strict obedience to specific classroom strategies was required of teachers to implement audio-lingual and audio-visual approaches. Lesson plans and activities were laid out per minute. Teachers were made to believe that any diversion from that order would endanger the efficacy of the method.

Nowadays much depends on the viewpoint of the teacher trainer, whether in pre-service or in-service. The one trainer will give a balanced overview of methods and a sense of complexity and variables, entrusting more responsibility to the individual teacher in making classroom decisions. Another trainer, convinced there is only one best method, will impose it. This is particularly the case if the teacher trainer is also the author of a method. This leads to mono-methodological indoctrination and strict guidelines to follow set procedures.

Teacher organizations may also have a similar impact according to who is calling the shots at the top. Pluralism and variety may be replaced by narrow-mindedness and fanaticism if board members are selected because of their adherence to one method.

Publishers like to cooperate with those who are involved in teacher training or in teacher organizations because of the impact this can have on the sale of their textbooks, especially if one "best method" is the cement that binds them. However, this raises ethical questions because of the collusion of interests when the leaders of a teacher organization push one method in close collaboration with publishers, or if a person is paid to train teachers and at the same time imposes on them the method that brings in royalties.

## **4. Reasons for the decline and death of a method**

### **4.1. Disappointment**

Methods often make promises they cannot keep. Even if some methods succeed in being more effective for certain skills, language learning as a whole does not become easier. In drawers and in attics all over the world one can find the textbooks, cassettes, tapes or software programs that people once bought to learn a foreign

language, enticed by the publicity that promised them fluency in a few months or even weeks. And they abandoned it.

The next items give more precise reasons for the disappointments.

## **4.2. Inappropriate for other situations**

New methods always work well as they are being launched by skilled and enthusiastic personalities, and presented in experimental or commercially prepared situations, with brilliant teachers, well behaved and responsive students, and small classes. Many of us have seen such convincing demonstrations with methods such as the Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and Suggestopedia.

Problems arise when such methods are transferred to less ideal situations, where classes are large, 30 or more students, motivation is low, and discipline difficult. Experimental findings cannot easily be generalized to other situations. Methods die in such places because of a growing dissatisfaction over the promises made, often also because teachers do not have the personality or the energy to act as the method demands. However, in privileged circumstances with motivated teachers such methods may continue to thrive. Such is the case with the Silent Way or Suggestopedia, which continue to find supporters throughout the world.

Inappropriateness can also be the consequence of a major breach between learning situations as such. The most spectacular one of the past two decades is no doubt the transfer of the original communicative approach to school situations. The approach of the 1970s was meant to provide motivated adults with quick survival contact-skills, usually through a short and intensive training, and with immediate application in the real world. However, in high schools and in colleges, the situation is usually different: younger students, broader objectives, a non-intensive program, and often no urgent need for contact with natives. Original communicative methods may not fit this different environment.

## **4.3. Inappropriate for other languages**

A new method is usually developed from the perspective of a specific language. But next the principles are applied to any language as if language learning is the same for all. This is not the case. Each language has its variables - like the amount of elements to be mastered to come to a certain level of communication, the syntactic complexity, the linguistic distance between mother tongue and foreign language, the degree of cultural dissociation, etc. These variables require methodological adaptations.

The communicative approach, for example, was mainly developed in the context of ESL, but in its initial years ESL is an easy language enabling to quickly reach a fair level of communication. If you compare ESL to French, French requires six times more elements to be mastered to reach a similar first year communicative level. Already in the first year of study, French requires a student to learn some 20 different articles in front of a substantive (definite, indefinite, contracted, partitive, each in combination with masculine, feminine, singular, plural, and tied to negation and place of the adjective); it requires a staggering amount of verbal forms, agreements of adjectives and pronouns, etc. To neglect this complexity in a so-called authentic language approach is fatal for the not-so bright student: integration of the elements falters, frustration grows and motivation plummets. German, Norwegian, Russian, Japanese -- each of these languages requires more or less adapted methods. If a so-called universal method is imposed, it may lead to disappointment and to its decline.

## **4.4. Shift in the main educational trend**

Language learning methods are nearly always the reflection of a broader educational movement. When the trend changes, methods follow.

The grammar-translation method of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was part of a school system that greatly valued training in mental discipline, in reasoning, in grammatical and literary analysis. But around 1870, a profound educational reform, rooted in the industrialization of society, opened the windows to the world and wanted students to become active, modern, and engaged. Creative and experimental work was requested in the arts, sciences and mathematics. The Direct Method in foreign languages was simply part of that movement.

Next, the return to more traditional, eclectic methods in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was rooted in a movement of protection or restoration of values, against leftist and unconventional forces that attacked traditions and undermined power and stability.

The communicative approach was part of the vast educational reform of the 1970s, which again stressed real-world experience, authentic encounter with life, with the industry, and with applications.

We should also note that specific educational movements lay at the root of specific language methods. Caleb Gattegno's *The Silent Way* or Lozanov's *Suggestopedia* actually encompass all disciplines. Language learning is only one of them.

The post-communicative movement is part of the educational trends of the past years, which turns the school into a house of personal learning and discovery, task-based, collaborative, with process-input, the teacher as guide, and the like.

It will be interesting to see to what extent the September 11<sup>th</sup> shock may feed the next educational reform, just like the Sputnik-shock of 1957. When society has to become protective and strictly controlled for its own safety, it may also infuse into education more rigid norms, more discipline and a tighter grip on knowledge. Within that spirit, language teaching may also return to the stressing of grammatical rules for correctness. Language methods are seldom independent islands: they are deeply embedded in the broader spectrum.

At the same time, the controversies that rock language learning methods are part of the general battles that oppose modernists versus traditionalists, cognitivists versus mentalists, proponents of standardized tests versus those who favor portfolio assessment, etc.

But the bottom-line is: when the overarching educational trend dies, the related language methods die too.

#### **4.5. On the gravestone: the neglected component(s)**

Although the decline and death of a method is due to various factors, as described above, there is usually only one factor that history identifies and remembers as the cause of death, namely the (perceived) missing, or neglected component(s). We can read in introductions to new methods that

- the grammatical approach failed because it missed lively communication;
- the direct method failed because it neglected the backing of insight;
- the audio-methods failed because they neglected cognitive learning;
- the communicative methods are failing because they neglect careful progression and lower-order automatization.

One could even define a method as follows: "A language teaching method is an approach that neglects at least one important component." That deficiency is its Achilles heel, which will ultimately cause its death because criticism concentrates on that one neglected aspect.

## 5. Conclusions

### 5.1. The swing of the pendulum

The traditional image of the pendulum is appropriate, because major trends do not shift overnight. A new idea usually starts slowly, not as an extreme, but as a corrective emphasis. However, some fundamentalists may jump on the key word, overemphasize its importance, publishers will smell the money and, given the right circumstances, the movement is launched. Then it takes the pendulum a few years to undermine existing methods as obsolete and to gain momentum.

After years of such emphasis there follows the growing disappointment, the criticism, and slowly the pendulum is set in reverse towards variety and eclecticism. Traditional components are restored and methods return to revered values, which, after a number of years, will be sensed as antiquated and the cycle starts again.

How long does one swing of the pendulum take? If one looks at the more recent past, for main trends 20 to 30 years seem an average. Direct methods roughly from 1880 to 1910, eclectic methods from 1910 to 1940, audio-lingualism from 1940 to 1970, with a short cognitive-code reaction in the decade around 1970, communicative methods from the early seventies to the mid-nineties, post-communicative methods since then. Such a period of twenty to thirty years corresponds logically with the professional lifespan of the advocates. Young fundamentalists, in their thirties, may tie their careers to a new trend and keep it alive until their retirement. Meanwhile a new group of young advocates will try to make their original mark by criticizing their predecessors, while the overall rhythm is controlled by commercial interests: publishers and related organizations will only support a new trend if it suits the cash register. The success of a main trend is thus dependent on the combination of all the variables I mentioned under part 3 of this presentation.

The 30 year cycle has a witty side to it. If someone accuses you of being 20 years behind in your methods, just answer: "That's wonderful. It means I'm 10 years ahead of you."

Of course, this is a very generalizing and somewhat simplistic view of history, just like any categorization of periods. Although we present history in periods with a dominant methodology, the reality is that in all ages past, a vast array of differing methods have existed in the shadow of the main trends. Many other medium- or mini-trends may live their own shorter or longer life. For example, in the heydays of the so called grammar-translation method of the major part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were many practical communicative textbooks on the market, to help the millions of emigrants, who went from European countries to America, to learn English. Similarly, during the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the audio-methods or the communicative approach were forbidding translation and grammar, a number of textbooks or individual teachers kept working with those elements.

It would be wrong to view the swing of the pendulum as a futile exercise. Basically, it is a dynamic thing, obliging us to question our principles, to foster research, to adjust where needed, to modernize content, and to revitalize language learning. In that sense I do not wish this presentation to leave a negative or cynical impression. We need the swing of the pendulum, for at every full movement some things will be improved. The

negative side is when, within the swing, some particular method is so gripping that it actually undermines the progression students could have made.

## 5.2. The ignorance about the past

Of all disciplines, language learning is one that is the most ignorant of its own past. Theories and techniques are presented as new, while in truth they had already been invented decades before, had blossomed and then died. Proponents of new methods are often convinced that theirs is the first sweeping change and that the past was either a dreary picture of students obliged to cram wordlists and grammar rules, or drilled with rote memorization.

The reasons for this ignorance seem twofold:

- First, a lack of academic courses in the history of methods: very few universities offer such content to applied linguists or future teachers, while in nearly all other disciplines a knowledge of the major historical advancements belongs to the core material. Even worse, if a short historical overview is given, it is often the limited and false picture of a past of inefficient grammatical and behaviorist methods, which preceded the present, much more effective new age.
- Second, the fact that it is rather easy to become an "instant expert" in language learning. In other disciplines, ignorance about past achievements would immediately and painfully show: an astronomer cannot afford now to announce that he has discovered a new planet called Pluto; or an engineer that he has invented a better way to fly than the hot-air balloon, namely an airplane. But in conversations, and even in papers and publications on language learning, we run into such blatant statements by self-proclaimed "specialists". This situation is also reinforced by the common view that teaching a language does not require specialization, that a school can hire any "native speaker" to do the job, or that a one-day training makes a T.A. competent to teach a 101 or 102 language course. True, he or she may perform well within the strict framework that a method provides, but it is a far cry from knowing about and understanding even a small part of second language acquisition research. However, such persons sometimes start to make authoritative statements about the best way to learn a foreign language.

## 5.3. The function of scientific research

What I just said does not of course apply to the scores of well-qualified researchers who study language learning. I have already stated that it is most remarkable that true researchers rarely get involved in developing a method, probably because they are so conscious of the enormous complexity of the variables. However, there are noteworthy exceptions -- and their methods are always characterized by balance and variety.

In her book *Approaches to research in second language learning*, Donna Johnson states: "The importance of research is not so much that it supplies definitive answers to questions such as 'What is the best way to learn a language?' or 'What is the most effective method of L2 teaching?'" It does not. Rather, research can help us gain a richer understanding of the many interrelated factors involved in learning" (1992:5).

Since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century this research – even if sometimes repetitive – has provided us with a tremendous amount of fascinating analyses and explanations, from various interdisciplinary domains. I would be amiss if I did not stress this positive side of our profession, and thus counter the negative image that the very topic of this lecture may evoke. Thousands of studies have improved and are still improving our insights in aspects such as motivational variables, aptitude valuation, curriculum construction, development of forms of

bilingualism, acquisition orders, transfer modalities, fossilization, taxonomies of practice forms, efficiency criteria for media implementation, evaluation procedures, testing validation, and scores of others. Major books, peer-reviewed journals and edited volumes provide us with an incredible wealth of research data and refined insights.

Still, many unresolved questions remain, especially in pioneering domains such as neurolinguistics and SLA, for example:

- Insofar as we can identify various kinds of cognitive input, which input is automated to what kind of proficiency?
- To what extent is automatization an acceleration process of neural connections?
- If UG - Universal Grammar - is still working at a certain age for automatization of a foreign language, how does it relate to the original development of the mother tongue?
- How does the interaction work between automatization and "still cognitive reflexes" which an L2-learner evidently uses?

But how do we assess the function of all this research as it relates to methods? The disappointing aspect is that it is quite easy to launch, as part of a method, an unproven idea or a biased accentuation which may spread all over the profession as an easy slogan, while it may take years of experimental research to disprove it and the results of that research may only reach a handful of people. For example:

- A recurring viewpoint is that translation is totally forbidden. "Students should never translate, or they will never be able to think in the foreign language". Already in 1910 H. Büttner undercut this myth in his major work, *Die Muttersprache im Neusprachlichen Unterricht*. In the 1960s and 1970s several major experimental studies, such as those by Dodson (1967), Butzkamm (1973), Olsson (1973), Meijer (1974) further demonstrated the usefulness of translation for certain aspects. Though there remain many complex questions as to the ideal place of translation in the learning process, at least we have learned that we should "never say never".
- Another example of an unproven statement, part of the educational trend in favor of self-discovery, and that has spread in communicative methods, is: "Students who, through guessing techniques, infer the meaning of new words, will remember those words longer". The painstaking, longitudinal research of Mondria (1996) not only disproved this statement, but also calculated the time-efficiency gains in the "direct teaching of meaning".
- One more example: Some post-communicative methods like to oppose "lower-order thinking", which they equate to rote memorization, to "higher-order" skills. The former are to be avoided, the latter are the core objective. Recent experimental research by Hulstijn and his team at the Kohnstamm Institute (University of Amsterdam) indicates that higher-order skills cannot function properly in the foreign language without well developed levels of lower-order automatization (Hulstijn 1999).

This rift between unproven statements or biased accentuations on the one hand, and serious research findings on the other hand, creates in our profession two realms, one of easy-slogan-users and the other of in-depth researchers. This rift has plagued us for many decades. As the easy-slogan-users are the most vocal and the most visible, language learning as a subdiscipline is often suffering from a lack of esteem from the side of other portions of the language profession -- linguists and literary analysts. The in-depth research in the many facets of language learning, confined to its realm of specialized publications and expert conferences, is hardly known outside those circles.

On the other hand, we should also concede that methods give practical guidelines within a total concept, while some research has a tendency to remain at the level of theoretical models or to focus on refined topics from a



limited disciplinary angle, without bothering about practical solutions. The research most useful to the profession is of course geared to pedagogical applications. It is interesting to note that this kind of research is much more developed in certain countries and for certain languages, for example ESL-research in the Anglo-Saxon world.

#### **5.4. The great illusion**

Behaviorism, cognitivism, structuralism, audio-lingualism, functionalism, constructivism... In our overviews, we like to make categorical contrasts as a way to structure our grip on reality. We stress certain characteristics in order to clearly differentiate between things. We work with -isms. I do not deny that this is often helpful and that main trends and even specific methods can be identified by these -isms.

However, what strikes one when analyzing textbooks, is, in many cases, their final close resemblance even if they pretend to come from differing -isms.

When one looks at a present-day so-called communicative textbook, one basically finds the same elements as in textbooks of the Renaissance, or any other past century.

A present-day method may claim to reject translation, but students will translate, and the teacher will use translation when helpful and effective. The method may be against explicit grammar, but somehow it will make sure that students grasp the rule and train it. It may claim to only use authentic material, but it will present the simplest authentic material first and cleverly manipulate texts and situations so as to ensure a needed progression. It may claim to be against word-lists, but will select within the authentic material the words to be learned as "active vocabulary" and present them in... word-lists, with translation. Without publicizing it, a smart textbook tries to rectify the most obvious glitches of its own methodology, so teachers and students would not be too frustrated over certain features.

Similarly, a more traditional method, with a prominent use of grammar and vocabulary, will tend to also add more authentic input, so as to respond to the pressures of "real-world experience".

On the other hand, a fanatical method, with intolerant viewpoints, could severely hamper a student in his potential to progress. If a student wants to translate, let him translate; if he hankers after insight, give him grammar.

And all wise methods must concede that the final key to successful language learning is tied to two variables that the method does not have in hand: the motivation of the students and the intensity of their personal work. Motivated people nowadays learn a foreign language just as successfully as 2000 years ago. Successful language learning comes only partially from the method; it depends so much on the student.

#### **5.5. The next method?**

The following is fiction, to be situated somewhere in coming years. I quote from a book someone will write some day.

"The decline of the prevailing methods around 2010 was due to the following:

- There was too much dependence on personal initiative and learning attitudes of the individual student, whereby only the very best became successful. Scores of students were left drowning without buoys.

- The method totally misjudged the mental expectations of students who view school-bound learning within a framework of cognitive grip and clear progression.
- The method worked with a "real-world approach with authentic texts" to avoid translation and grammar. However, many of the better students were actually, after each lesson, spending excessive time and effort in deciphering these authentic texts through translation in the mother tongue and figuring out the grammar. The method thus encouraged doing what it strongly pretended to avoid.
- On the other hand, by telling students not to worry about detail or precise comprehension or production, but to be satisfied with approximation, the method fostered slovenliness among many other students.
- Though the method had valid final objectives, it wanted to reach those objectives much too quickly in non-intensive programs. It neglected gradation and careful content-selection.

The new approach stresses the following:

- A deflation of the importance of oral skills: if students are not needing immediate contact with natives, there is no reason to give absolute priority to oral skills, which they can hardly practice outside class. Moreover, a stronger receptive basis at first will facilitate the development of oral skills at a later stage.
- Therefore, since reading is the skill they can practice most outside class, this skill must be stressed, starting from graded texts to ensure fluency and contentment, to selected books, magazines and the Internet.
- The writing skill has also gained in importance, because it allows quick electronic communication with pen pals, chat groups and classes abroad. Moreover, on the college level, the language curriculum requires many written tasks at the upper level. Therefore, renewed attention is given to "disembedded" language skills, i.e. grammatical analysis, especially in those languages that require strong analytical reflexes to write correctly because of agreements and various syntactical spellings for the same sound.
- While for several decades language learning has been viewed as only functional, its complementary value for intellectual development has been partly restored: as a core subject on the curriculum, language lends itself admirably to analysis and insight, to mental training, just like mathematics. The famous slogan of the new approach is: 'It is an insult to civilization to despise grammar'."

An interesting exercise for students would be: jump 30 years further and describe why this new approach failed around 2040.

A final thought: the constant change in methods is a fascinating phenomenon. It reveals how complex language learning really is and how much further research is needed to better understand the intricate mechanisms and the many variables that play their role. But above all, the history of language learning methods teaches us academic humility: to recognize complexity and to avoid extreme and simplistic standpoints.

## 6. References & related readings

(I) = accessed on the Internet. I do not give the URL because it may no longer be valid by the time the reader consults it. Sometimes the reference points to well-known journals that can be consulted online. In other cases, an Internet search using key words from the reference's title should lead to the new URL if the material is still available online. In any case, the citation provides sufficient information about the original publication.

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