UNIT 3 APPROACHES, METHODS AND TECHNIQUES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING (ELT)

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3.1 INTRODUCTION

Different theories about the nature of language and how languages are learnt (the approach) imply different ways of teaching language (the method), and different methods make use of different kinds of classroom activity (techniques). (Longmans Dictionary of Applied Linguistics, 1985).

The objective of any language classroom is to enable the learners to learn the target language and use it. This is done best when they are involved actively in the learning process.

A teacher who has a rich repertoire of techniques to teach different skills and sub-skills is more likely to succeed in this objective than one who has a limited number of techniques at command. He/she will need to function as an informed decision maker in order to judge the needs of his/her learners and decide when to use which technique. By doing this the teacher will be able to not just use appropriate techniques but also be able to provide variety, in order to sustain the interest of the learners.

3.2 OBJECTIVES

This unit will enable you to:

- differentiate among approach, method and technique in the context of teaching and learning of languages;
- understand the role and rationale behind the various methods used in English language teaching;
- familiarise yourself with some major methodological trends in the history of ELT;
- develop insight into the role of the teacher in using various methods and techniques effectively.

3.3 WHAT IS A METHOD?

The dictionary defines a method as a way of doing things. Methods deal with the ‘how’ of teaching. Methodology indicates the sequence to be followed in a language task/activity and the role of the learners and the teacher in this sequence. A method can be said to include three components:
3.3.1 Components of a Method

a) Approach

The practices in language teaching are based on the theories concerning the nature of language and language learning. These theories together form the first component of a method. We shall look at these theories in this section. The two main views of language learning are as follows:

The behaviourist view of language learning: Behaviourists believe that learning, both verbal and non-verbal, takes place through the process of habit formation. Learners are exposed to the language in their school/college, family and neighbourhood. They try to imitate the people around them. If the imitation is proper, they are rewarded, which motivates them further for imitation, leading to reinforcement and habit formation. The behaviourists think that learners should be corrected as soon as they make mistakes in order to avoid fossilization.

The cognitivist view of language learning: Cognitivists agree with the behaviourists that learners need exposure to language, but they hold that learning does not take place solely by imitation and repetition. Human beings are born with a built-in device in their brains which helps them in discovering the underlying patterns of the language they hear, forming their own hypotheses about the language and constructing new sentences. For them language-learning is exposure to the language, hypothesis formation, confirmation or re-formulation of the hypotheses. Cognitivists look at errors as part of the learning process.

b) Design

The second aspect of a method is Design. In this component the following are clearly spelt out.

a) objectives of the course;

b) the syllabus model which the method incorporates;

c) teaching and learning activities;

d) roles of teachers and learners.

c) Procedure

The third and last component of a method focuses on what happens in the actual classroom situation. It includes practices and behaviour that operate during the production, practice and feedback phases of teaching.

A technique refers to the design and procedure components of a method. It may be described as a implementational sub-process of a method. It specifies the teaching-learning activities as well as the roles of the teachers and learners in the language activities/tasks.

Techniques that give the learner greater autonomy in language processing are now in vogue in language classrooms. Some of these are: role play, and simulation, information – gap and opinion – gap activities, language games and puzzles. Techniques for developing the various language skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking) will be enunciated in detail in the following blocks.

3.4 A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF MAJOR METHODOLOGICAL TRENDS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

Some methods that have been in vogue through the history of the development of English language teaching are as follows:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Features/Pedagogic principles</th>
<th>Rationale or Language Learning Approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Grammar translation method      | - It is a way of learning a language by studying the rules of its grammar and then applying these rules to the translation of sentences and texts from mother tongue to target language and vice-versa.  
- Vocabulary is taught through bilingual word lists.  
- The method focuses primarily on reading and writing skills with little attention to listening and speaking.  
- The syllabus comprises prose, poetry, grammar and written work.  
- The texts consist of long extracts from the works of the great writers chosen for their intellectual content. The learner is therefore exposed only to literary language. Communication skills are neglected with little attention to pronunciation. | Behaviourist view of language learning. |
| Structural oral situational method | - It was an outcome of the experiments carried out in the army camps during the World War II.  
- It involves systematic presentation and practice of carefully selected and graded grammatical structures of the target language in effective and meaningful situations. For example, objects in the classroom such as a desk, the blackboard, pictures, calendar, windows etc. may be utilised to introduce vocabulary as well as grammatical structures such as This is a(n) ........ These are ....... That is a(n) ....... Those are ....... These structural and vocabulary items are reinforced through oral drills.  
- The approach is based on the assumption that language learning is a matter of habit formation and thus involves a lot of repetition and conscious drilling of language items.  
- Language items are first taught orally. Reading and writing follow oral work. The spoken form is given priority. | Behaviourist approach to language learning. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative language teaching approach: (Cannot be called a method as it incorporates a variety of ways for facilitating the acquisition of language as a means of communication.)</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language items are graded according to their frequency, usefulness and teachability. A fixed number of grammatical structures and words need to be mastered at each level.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The communicative approach is based on a semantic syllabus like the notional-functional syllabus. The concept of a 'notion' is close to that of a 'theme'; e.g. transport, food, entertainment, etc. which are chosen keeping the learners' background and age-group in mind. A 'function' may be defined as a 'specific communicative purpose' e.g. seeking information, giving directions, requesting, describing, recounting etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is no 'one' communicative syllabus only. A communicative approach targets at communicative competence (Littlewood, 1984). Communicative competence may be defined as the ability to autonomously use a language to communicate effectively in authentic (real-life) communicative situations.</td>
<td></td>
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<td>The teaching based on the communicative approach is eclectic i.e. it uses a variety of methods.</td>
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<td>Language is assumed to be learnt through exposure and use by the learners in authentic communicative situations. The teacher is a facilitator who organizes the language tasks in such a manner so that the learner has to process the language content on his/her own, in order to help him/her become an autonomous language user. Support for performing language tasks may be provided covertly through clues in the content. Demonstration by the teacher, peer, support, etc. help the learner. For example, the learners may first be shown the recording of an interview and then asked to work in pairs, assume the role of a famous personality, list down the kind of questions they would like to ask and then to simulate the interview.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cognitivist view of language learning.</td>
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</table>
Development of the humanistic paradigm in psychology has also influenced language learning methodologies. Methods like the silent way, community language learning and suggesto-paedia are based upon the principles of learner initiative and learning in a relaxed and happy environment where the teacher functions as a counsellor and does not approve or disapprove of learners' performance. Learner errors are dealt through self-monitoring and peer correction.

3.5 ROLE OF THE TEACHER VIS-A-VIS VARIOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING METHODS AND TECHNIQUES

Various methods and techniques of language learning are only suggestions to the teacher who should be informed about the rationale behind them and choose or adapt them keeping in mind the level and needs of her learners.

A teacher, teaching English in a vernacular medium school, where exposure to English is limited to the classroom may need to provide great lexical (vocabulary) and linguistic (sentence patterns) support through vernacular examples, pictorial support, demonstration, word lists, etc.

For example, in a beginner level classroom, while asking learners to describe a given picture, lexical support may be offered through an illustrated vocabulary list as given below:

Linguistic support may be provided through a substitution table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>happy</th>
<th>am</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He, She, It</td>
<td>fat</td>
<td>is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We, You, They</td>
<td>thin/sad</td>
<td>are</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Before asking the learners to describe the picture given to them, the teacher may clarify the task by building up the description of another picture on the board, with the help of the given clues.

Example 2: To practice adjectives (related to space, size, colour) the child may be asked to collect different kinds of objects (pebbles, marbles, leaves, etc.) in his/her environment and bring them to class. The teacher may put up an illustrated chart exemplifying various kinds of shapes, sizes, colours on the board to provide vocabulary support to the learners.

This activity will engage the interest of the learners as it focuses on the child's natural urge to share his experiences with others and is closely linked to his/her milieu. In the above examples though language tasks are communicative, structural support is also being provided. Thus these examples illustrate the structural-functional approach i.e., practice of a chosen structure (sentence pattern) in the context of a communicative content (here 'Describing').

There are no final answers in pedagogy i.e., no one method/technique can be proclaimed to be the best. Questions arise, even about the most basic issues of teaching, to which solutions will depend on a host of factors such as the learners' language competence, the human and material resources of the classroom, the needs and motivations of the learners to learn the language, etc.

It is the teacher who has to intervene as an informed decision maker and this will become possible only if we as classroom teachers/practitioners familiarise ourselves with not only the wide range of techniques and strategies but also the general language needs of the learners, and their existing level of language competence.
Check Your Progress

Notes: a) Write your answers in the space given below
b) Compare your answers with those given at the end of the unit.

1. Clarify the relationship between approach, method and techniques of language learning using a suitable example?

2. Do you think there is a ‘best’ method for language teaching? Give reasons for your answer.

Activity

1. Do you follow the lecture method of teaching? What according to you, are the advantages and disadvantages of the lecture method? Can a language teacher use this method for teaching language skills?

Discussion

A lecture involves a continuous formal exposition of a discourse on some topic by a single person for the benefit of many (Curzon, 1985). It was the most successful method of teaching when textbooks were in short supply. It is used successfully even today in teaching content-based subjects like sociology and history. It is most economical with regard to the use of time.

However, a language is not a content-based subject. It is a skill-based subject. Skills can be mastered only through practice. For example, if one wants to learn driving, one cannot do so only by watching others drive. One has to drive oneself to learn this skill. Similarly, in order to learn a language one has to use (read, speak, listen, write) it oneself.

When the teacher uses the lecture method, the learners do not get practice in the use of the language. Language skills can be acquired only by active processing of the language by the learners themselves. The lecture method may however be used for developing listening skills but this has to be done in systematic ways through the use of tasks and exercises accompanying the lecture.
3.6 LET US SUM UP

Methods deal with the 'how' of teaching and are based upon one or more approaches to language learning. The behaviourists look upon language learning as a process of imitation and habit formation. The attempt here is to organise the language learning environment in such a way that 'errors' are reduced or avoided. This may be attempted through controlled presentation and practice of language items (structural patterns, vocabulary).

The cognitivists, on the other hand, look upon language learning as a process of hypothesis formation and hypothesis testing by language learners during the course of exposure to the language. Methods following this approach do not emphasise so much on control and 'accuracy' of language production but on autonomous and active processing of language content by the learners. Learner errors are seen as very much a part of the learning process.

Methods and techniques, properly viewed, are suggestions to the teacher. There is no 'best' method. The teacher must be aware of the rationale behind the various techniques and methods so that (s)he can function as an informed decision maker and utilize the various methodologies optimally to facilitate autonomous use of the language by the learners.

3.7 KEY WORDS

- method: a method may be defined as a way of doing things. Methods deal with the 'how' of teaching. The methodology of language teaching indicates the sequence to be followed in a language task/activity and the role of the learners and the teacher in it.
- approach (to language learning and teaching): A theory about the nature of language and the process of language learning suggests methods and techniques which can lead to effective language learning. Such a theory may be termed as an 'approach' to language learning.
- technique: it refers to the design and procedural components of a method. It may be described as an implementational sub-process of a method. It specifies the teaching-learning practices as well as the roles of the teachers and learners.
- grammar translation method: it is a way of learning a language by studying the rules of its grammar and then applying these rules to the translation of sentences and texts from mother tongue to target language and vice-versa.
- structural-oral-situational method: it involves systematic presentation and practice of carefully selected and grade grammatical structures of the target language in effective and meaningful situations. The language items are reinforced through oral practice.
- communicative language teaching approach: the communicative approach is based on a semantic syllabus like the notional — functional syllabus. It attempts to organise the language classroom so that the learners have to 'use' the target language on their own in authentic communicative situations.

3.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1. An approach is a theory of the nature of language and the process of language learning that suggests an effective framework or method of language learning. The implementational sub-processes to be followed in the classroom may be called 'techniques' of language learning.

   For example, the structural-oral-situational (S-O-S) method is based upon the behaviourist view of language learning. The language learning environment is organised in such a way that it reinforces correct the learning of language patterns by exposing learners to carefully graded and selected language structures in meaningful situations. Correct language habits are to be orally drilled.
Oral drills and use of substitution tables are two techniques which form the core for the implementation of the S-O-S method.

2. There is no best or standard method for language teaching. This is so because language learning situations differ widely with respect to the learners' existing language competence; the material and human resources of the classroom (i.e., availability of paper, pictures, blackboard, etc.) and the language learning needs of the learners.

Thus the teacher has to step in as an informed decision maker and selects and adapts methods and techniques that will effectively cater to the language needs of his/her learners.

3.9 SUGGESTED READING