

SOME HISTORICAL ASPECTS OF METHODOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The article overviews a specific period of EFL teaching history – 16th -18th centuries, when the focus gradually started shifting from teaching classical languages to teaching English both to natives and foreigners. During this period were created first EFL textbooks and methodological tractates. It can be asserted that almost all the EFL methods and approaches that today are proclaimed as the most up-to-date and innovative, originated precisely during that historical period. The outstanding scholars, grammarians, educators and pedagogues in their relentless quest for an accomplished method of teaching languages, managed to develop the techniques and approaches (double translation method, grammar-translation method, inductive, communicational, phonics method) that today are still popular with practitioners and theoreticians of the field. By investigating benefits and drawbacks of the indicated methods in terms of their historical evolution, we can gain much better understanding as how to employ them for achieving maximum success in teaching EFL.

Keywords: *method, foreign languages, teaching, pedagogue.*

Introduction

Discussing various scholarly issues in view of their historical development is certainly, of crucial importance for any branch of science. Without thorough knowledge of historical background and origins, it is practically impossible to explore various matters within the realm of our interest. All those questions that are currently remarkable, stem from previous periods and correspondingly possess their own history. Certainly, language teaching and especially foreign language teaching can not be considered as an exception. In general, foreign language teaching, and in particular, teaching English language, as a foreign language (EFL) has rather lengthy, quite substantial and extremely interesting historical past. We believe that any discussion on modern problems and challenges of teaching EFL would be impossible without probing into historical origins of the indicated discipline.

We assume that for thorough investigation of the subject as well as proper formulation of an issue and hence, for provision of adequate solutions, it is crucial to get familiarized with the experience that preceded modern stage of EFL practices. This is beneficial due to the fact that it will enable us to draw parallels between present approaches, methodologies and their historical analogues and precursors. Practically all EFL modern methods and approaches have their origins in the works and activities of prominent educators, pedagogues and scholars of previous centuries. Historical analogues viewed in modern context of EFL methodologies are of paramount importance in determining efficiency of their application in present day reality.

Onset of the EFL teaching methodology and practice

Historical course of EFL development goes back to 16th-18th centuries. This is the period of revival of English language as a national language after several century hegemony of French. In those days the focus gradually started shifting from teaching classical languages to teaching English both to natives and foreigners. In that period were created first EFL textbooks and methodological tractates. It can be claimed without any hesitation that all those EFL methods and approaches that today are proclaimed as the most up-to-date and innovative, originated precisely during that historical period.

It should be underlined that initially, before appearance of first proper EFL textbooks and strictly EFL methodologies, there had been produced extremely interesting works by French native speaker teachers, who fled to England as a result of wave of Huguenot persecution. There were number of interesting features characteristic to refugee teachers' approach to foreign language teaching. For instance, "unlike their twentieth-century counterparts, ... they did not adopt monolingual approach, but continued the traditional bilingual method of the earlier manuals." [Howatt, 2009: 19] These teachers together with teaching French to English also taught French refugees and their family members English. That is how the first EFL textbooks started to appear. Another distinguished French refugee teacher is Claudius Holyband who stands out as a forefather of so called "inductive" approach to teaching grammar, which today is defined on ITTO webpage as "a more modern style of teaching where the new grammatical structures or rules are presented to the students in a real language context. The students learn the use of the structure through practice of the language in context, and later realize the rules from the practical examples." [Goner, Phillips, and Walters 135]. Holyband also advocated "double translation" method, which was farther elaborated by another prominent pedagogue Roger Aschem. A big merit of the mentioned method is that it considers both the foreign language text and the equivalent text in the mother tongue to have equal status. The learner is made equally aware of the structure and resources of both his mother tongue as of the foreign language he is trying to master. Aschem was also an ardent advocate of inductive method in teaching grammar.

However, the so-called "anti-grammar" trends of EFL teaching found extreme radical expression in the works of Joseph Webbe, who decided to completely dispense with grammar. Webbe is considered to be a precursor of "Direct Method" in teaching English. Webbe believed that languages should be taught not by learning grammar rules, but according to their practical application and established tradition ("use and custom"). Webbe was convinced that the most efficient way of learning languages was practice through communicational skills, as a result of which learner would acquire knowledge of grammar rules subconsciously, without any special effort. Webbe makes particular focus on the importance of auditory memory in course of learning a foreign language. It is absolutely natural for Webbe to differentiate between different types of learners (presently known as visual and auditory learners). It is remarkable that EFL methods and approaches, such as "communicational approach" and others, that nowadays enjoy extreme popularity can be traced in Joseph Webbe's works. About five centuries ago Webbe proposed "direct method" of teaching language, in compliance with which focus is shifted on conversation, on teaching stripped off any strenuous memorization of dry grammar rules. Learner gains command of the foreign language through communicational activities such as reading, writing and speaking. He "sought to develop new methods of teaching which almost anticipate the direct method and the communicative approach." [Gerry Knowles, 1997, 101].

Problems of teaching communicative skills in the 16th-17th century educationalists and grammarians' works

If English was to acquire a form of standardised, coherent language in which would be created original literary and scientific works, if it was to be used in various educational institutions while teaching and if it was to become attractive for foreigners to learn, there had to be addressed a number of problems. Extremely chaotic orthography required fundamental adjustment. For aforementioned purpose, there had to be created a comprehensive English grammar as well as national dictionary.

However, the absolute majority of leading grammarians and reformers reckoned the issue of erratic spelling/orthography to be the major problem, which hindered the spread of English language literacy both among the English nationals and overseas learners of the language. The Roman alphabet, inherited from Latin language, did not correspond to English sound system. In order to achieve the desirable correspondence, numerous special symbols, such as vowel and consonant digraphs, silent letters, etc had to be applied. Practically, there did not exist common standard which would regulate spelling/orthography issues.

Precisely, in that direction was oriented the attention of outstanding linguists, who simultaneously were accomplished phoneticians and adept grammarians. Their ardent desire was to facilitate teaching English both to native and non native speakers. They attached distinct priority to spelling reform. Among the scholars working in that period particularly stand out John Hart and Richard Mulcuster, who represented two completely different approaches to orthographic reform in the late 16th century. Hart was an innovator, striving to substitute existing system with specially developed alternative one (he even devised a few new letter-shapes). Mulcuster, as the representative of the conservative wing, wished to introduce more order into already existing system while avoiding any radical modifications.

Hart's main complaint was that one letter- one sound principle, fundamental to all systemized alphabetic writing systems, was ignored in English orthography. Thus, he explicitly rejected traditionally established custom of naming letters according to their alphabetic names while teaching reading and developed meticulously organized, graded system which today is known as "Phonic reading". In contrast to his contemporary grammarians, while teaching literacy, Hart rejected an established custom of listing words in alphabetical order or arranging them in groups according to number of syllables they contained. Instead Hart taught pupils new letters by means of clearly structured tables of progressively increasing complexity. For instance, at an initial stage of learning, in relatively simple table he introduced two rows of five basic vowels (*a, e, i, o, u*) and five relatively simple consonants (*l, m, n, r, h*). Each letter was accompanied by a corresponding picture, portraiture, as Hart himself indicated. According to his instruction, "you may not name the *l, m, n*, nor *r*, as you have been taught, calling them *el, em, en, er*: but give them the same sounds you do find in their portraitures, without sounding of any vowel before them, as may be thus: *L-yon; M-oul; N-idl; R-ing*" [Danielsson, 1955, 240].

Nowadays Hart's method is referred to as "Phonic Reading". Today, in the 21st century, one of the sites of teaching reading to young learners with Phonics method applies the approach that precisely imitates Hart's method of teaching letter-sound relationships while introducing alphabet letters not by their alphabetic names but as they are actually pronounced in words. As letters appear on screen, the voice pronounces both their alphabetic names and actually their corresponding sounds in the words. E.g.

while letter *C* appears, the voice says both /si/ and /k/. The sounds are accompanied by corresponding words and pictures (in case of *C*, it is a word *cat* and *the picture of a cat*, and the word is sounded out). The same approach is used in six level course called English World, produced by Macmillan, which has been introduced as compulsory course in all schools throughout Georgia.

Comenius as the major contributor to development of EFL teaching practices

The great Czech educator and pedagogue, acknowledged father of pedagogical sciences, Jan Amos Comenius holds absolutely distinguished position in the history of Language Teaching. Comenius is the author of numerous pedagogical treatises, among which are monumental work "Great Didactic", aiming to provide outline for a universal system of education, the prime goal of which is to "to seek and find a method of instruction by which teachers may teach less, but learners learn more; by which schools may be the scene of less noise, aversion and useless labour, but of more leisure, enjoyment and solid progress; and through which the Christian community may have less darkness, perplexity and dissension, but on the other hand, more light, orderliness, peace and rest". [Keatinge, 1907; 4].

In this work, Comenius dedicates a whole chapter (chapter 21), named "The Method of Languages", to issues relating to language education. Comenius firmly believes that languages should be taught "not as forming in themselves a part of erudition or wisdom, but as being the means by which we may acquire knowledge and may impart it to others." [Keatinge, 1907; 203]. The educator passionately advocates the approach according to which, "The study of languages, especially in youth, should be joined to that of objects, that our acquaintance with the objective world and with language, that is to say, our knowledge of facts and our power to express them, may progress side by side. For it is men that we are forming and not parrots... From this it follows, firstly, that words should not be learned apart from the objects to which they refer; since the objects do not exist separately and cannot be apprehended without words, but both exist and perform their functions together." [Keatinge, 1907; 204].

For each level of studying language, Comenius envisaged a set consisting of two books – a textbook for pupils and the so called teacher's handbook. Without making any special effort, we can clearly observe parallels between Comenius sets and presently widespread sets of textbooks, containing pupil's books, workbooks and accompanying teacher's books. In one of his textbooks, namely "Vestibulum", Comenius makes special focus on introducing material in a graded manner, according to the complexity, starting from elementary structures and progressing gradually towards more complex structures and texts.

Comenius's understanding of teacher's role in classroom is also of particular significance as it fundamentally differed from then established attitude and predated modern style teaching. He believed that traditional approach according to which a teacher had primarily role of a supervisor rather than an educator seriously decreased the efficiency of both teaching and learning processes. Traditional teacher – supervisor's role was to merely hand out learning materials for independent study mostly by heart and later to have the pupils deliver their homework. Comenius believed that pupils should be gathered round their teacher and absorb knowledge that way. During his lessons both the teacher and pupils were actively engaged in learning process at the lesson. For Comenius it was crucial that his pupils understood teaching material and only after that started learning new structures and language units.

However, in terms of language teaching his “*Orbis Pictus*”(The World of the Senses in Pictures) is of particular significance. Each lesson starts with a picture where numbered objects refer to corresponding words in an accompanying text. The pictures are not mere illustrations of the meaning of the words but their main purpose is to encourage students to imagine the real world, the world of senses from which according to Comenius originates all knowledge. In an introduction to the book, the author clarifies that a teacher should start the lesson with a talk about the picture and if possible he/she should bring real objects in the classroom to help the pupils visualize meanings of the words to be learned. Children should be encouraged to talk about their feelings and ideas, they should be allowed some time to think thoroughly about the objects represented in the pictures before moving on to the actual text. In the educator’s opinion, it would have been very helpful if pupils’ tried themselves to draw corresponding objects, or at least colour them in the book. Comenius reflects that only when the experience is thoroughly absorbed should it be associated with the language.

It is amazing that in 21st century instruction guides on teaching share Comenius’s approach. For instance, in Macmillan “*English World*” teacher’s book in instructions for teachers how to prepare warm up for reading passage called “*Heat in the Earth*” we read: “show the class an apple or another round fruit. Tell them to think of it as the Earth. Explain that the outside of the Earth, the skin, is cool. Cut the fruit in half. Explain *the Earth we live on has a skin like the apple. Under the skin the earth is hot.* Point to the centre. Explain *The centre of the earth is very, very hot. This heat keeps the Earth under its skin hot all the time.* Tell the class they are going to find out more about the heat inside the earth. “ [Macmillan English teacher’s book 6, 2010]

Introductory course presented by Comenius at the beginning of “*Orbis Pictus*”, can be undoubtedly proclaimed as direct predecessor of nowadays extremely popular and widespread method of teaching English both to foreigners and native speakers called Phonics. While teaching the alphabet, Comenius associated the sounds of the letters with the noises produced by animals.

Interest towards learning English language was quite intense outside England as well. In overseas countries both in close vicinity to England and far away from it were developed and actively applied a great variety of textbooks for teaching English. The textbook “The Tutor” by John Miller, published in India stands out among them as one of the most efficient textbooks teaching English in the third world. The book quite predictably starts with introduction of the alphabet, where some sound combinations were presented by special digraphs. While teaching pronunciation Miller applies Phonics approach, by providing long lists of phonetically contrastive sets such as e.g. *sip, rip, lip*...there are presented also “nonsense syllables” for further practice.

Conclusion

In the present article we focused on a specific period of EFL teaching history, as it was the period when there emerged intense interest towards orthography issues (Hurt - Mulcaster). Orthographic impediments, discrepancies between pronunciation and spelling substantially obstructed the process of learning English, particularly at an initial stage of learning. Precisely, for solving the mentioned problems the distinguished scholars, grammarians, educators and pedagogues were striving to develop the methods, which would simplify the process of acquiring reading and writing skills for learners of English. In their relentless quest for an accomplished method of teaching languages they managed to develop those techniques and approaches (double translation method, grammar-translation method,

inductive, communicational, phonics method) that today are still popular with practitioners and theoreticians of the field.

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