

APPROACHES, METHODS, AND TECHNIQUES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: A CONCEPTUAL AND PEDAGOGICAL ANALYSIS

Luminița Todea^{a6}

*^a Universitatea Tehnică din Cluj- Napoca, Centrul Universitar Nord Baia Mare, Facultatea de
Litere, Romania*

Abstract

This paper examines the conceptual and pedagogical distinctions among approaches, methods, and techniques in English Language Teaching (ELT), with particular attention to their development and application in contemporary educational contexts. Drawing on established theoretical perspectives in language pedagogy, the study explores the relationship between underlying assumptions about language and learning, systematic instructional procedures, and specific classroom practices. Particular consideration is given to the transition from teacher-centred traditional methods towards learner-centred and communicative approaches. The paper also discusses the pedagogical implications of distinguishing among concepts such as Communicative Language Teaching, Task-Based Language Teaching, Project-Based Learning and classroom techniques including role-play, information-gap activities, and collaborative learning. The analysis highlights the importance of terminological precision for both ELT research and effective classroom practice.

Keywords: English Language Teaching; approach; method; procedure; technique.

* Corresponding author:
E-mail address: luminita.todea@fsc.utcluj.ro

Introduction

English Language Teaching (ELT) has evolved in response to developments in linguistic theory and educational research. Traditionally, language teaching was characterised by teacher-centred instruction, explicit grammar teaching, translation, memorisation, and controlled practice, with methods such as the Grammar-Translation Method and the Audio-Lingual Method playing an important role. In contrast, contemporary ELT emphasises learner-centredness, communicative competence, interaction, collaboration, learner autonomy, and the meaningful use of language. Consequently, approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), and Project-Based Learning have shaped English language teaching. However, the distinction between traditional and modern practices should not be understood as a strict opposition, as effective language teaching may integrate elements from different pedagogical traditions according to learners' needs, educational objectives, and classroom contexts. Teachers are responsible for designing and delivering high-quality teaching and learning. To maximise student learning, they should adapt instructional strategies, questioning techniques, feedback, explanations, and classroom activities to learners' needs. "The art of teaching does not lie in accessing a checklist of skills but rather in knowing which approach to adopt with different students, in different curricular circumstances or in different cultural settings" (Klapper, 2001, p. 17). Moreover, language teaching should extend beyond linguistic competence, supporting students' personal development and their ability to participate as responsible individuals.

Theoretical Framework

Richards and Rodgers (2001) conceptualize language teaching through the hierarchical relationship between *approach*, *method*, and *technique*. In this framework, an *approach* refers to the underlying theoretical assumptions about the nature of language and language learning; whereas, a *method* represents an overall plan for organizing language teaching in accordance with those assumptions "an umbrella term for the specification and interrelation of theory and practice" (Richards and Rodgers, 2001, p. 16). The term *method* is also defined by Brown as "a generalized set of classroom specifications for accomplishing linguistic objectives" (Brown, 2000, p.16). Furthermore, a *technique* refers to a specific classroom procedure or activity used to achieve a particular instructional objective; it implies the techniques and practices employed in the classroom as consequences of particular approaches and designs. Teaching methods refer to systematic ways of organising and delivering instruction to support learners' understanding, retention, and application of knowledge and skills. Appropriate teaching strategies can make learning more engaging and meaningful while enabling teachers to respond to learners' academic, social, and emotional needs (Richards and Rodgers, 2001).

For example, within Total Physical Response (TPR), the approach is reflected in the emphasis placed on comprehension, physical action, and the relationship between language and

motor activity; TPR constitutes the method as an organized system of language teaching; and activities such as the teacher giving commands ('Stand up', 'Open the door', or 'Touch your head') and learners responding physically represent techniques used in classroom practice. This hierarchy therefore moves from relatively abstract theoretical principles to an organized teaching system and finally to observable classroom behaviour. The distinction is particularly important in English language teaching because a *method* is not simply an individual classroom activity: it encompasses a broader set of principles concerning objectives, teacher and learner roles, classroom procedures, and the selection and sequencing of activities.

Romanian educational methodology employs a related but conceptually different set of categories, commonly expressed as *metodă*, *procedeu*, and *mijloc didactic*. *Metodă didactică* [teaching method] denotes an organized way of conducting the teacher's and learners' activities in order to achieve instructional objectives, while a *procedeu didactic* [teaching technique] refers to a more specific procedure through which a method is applied in a particular teaching situation. *Mijloc didactic* [teaching aid] is the instructional resource or instrument that supports the teaching-learning process, such as a textbook, picture, flashcard, worksheet, audio recording, or digital presentation. For instance, an English teacher may use *metoda exercițiului* [the exercise method] to practise vocabulary, employ a specific questioning or repetition procedure as a *procedeu*, and use flashcards or a digital presentation as *mijloace didactice*. Thus, although there are functional similarities between the two terminological systems, particularly between ELT *technique* and the Romanian concept of *procedeu*, they should not be regarded as exact equivalents. The principal difference is that Richards and Rodgers place *approach* at the theoretical level and conceptualize *method* as a comprehensive language-teaching system, whereas Romanian methodology places greater emphasis on the practical organization of instruction and explicitly distinguishes the method, its specific procedures, and the resources used to implement it. Consequently, the two frameworks can be productively compared, but their categories should be interpreted within their respective methodological traditions rather than treated as interchangeable terms.

A Comparative Perspective on Communicative Language Teaching, Total Physical Response, and Project-Based Learning

Freeman and Anderson (2011) identify several defining characteristics of the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, reflecting a broader shift from form-focused, teacher-centred instruction towards meaningful communication and learner participation. The primary objective is to develop learners' ability to communicate in the target language, thereby positioning communicative competence, rather than the mastery of grammatical structures, as a central outcome of instruction. Therefore, "the goal is to enable students to communicate in the target language. To do this, students need knowledge of the linguistic forms, meanings, and functions. They need to know that many different forms can be used to perform a function and also that a single form can often serve a variety of functions. They must be able to choose from

among these the most appropriate form, given the social context and the roles of the interlocutors” (Freeman and Martin, 2011, p.161). Communicative goals are successfully achieved by prioritising meaningful language use over knowledge of language forms, promoting fluency alongside accuracy, and incorporating authentic language within meaningful communicative contexts. This orientation also redefines the teacher’s role, positioning the teacher as a facilitator, advisor, and, when appropriate, co-communicator who supports and participates in the learning process. Learners, in turn, are expected to assume a more active role in constructing and negotiating meaning.

From a pedagogical perspective, CLT places particular emphasis on activities involving genuine communicative purposes, especially those incorporating information gaps, role- plays, learner choice, and feedback. Such activities seek to create conditions in which language is used as a means of communication rather than treated solely as an object of study. The approach also recognises that communicative competence extends beyond linguistic knowledge to include an understanding of language functions, sociocultural conventions, and the contextual appropriateness of language use. Consequently, communicative functions and meaningful interaction are generally prioritised over the isolated presentation of linguistic forms, while the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing is integrated from the early stages of instruction.

Another significant feature of CLT is its relative tolerance of learners’ first language and of errors during fluency-oriented activities. Rather than treating every error as an immediate obstacle to learning, CLT distinguishes between fluency and accuracy objectives, allowing corrective feedback to be adapted to the pedagogical purpose of an activity. Assessment similarly seeks to consider both dimensions, with integrative tasks providing opportunities to evaluate learners’ ability to use language for communicative purposes. Nevertheless, in practice, an exclusively communicative orientation may present challenges in contexts where examination requirements, large classes, limited instructional time, or learners’ proficiency levels constrain opportunities for authentic interaction. A critical understanding of the CLT approach suggests that its principles are most effectively implemented flexibly, with communicative activities, explicit attention to language form, corrective feedback, and appropriate teacher support being integrated according to learners’ needs and the specific educational context.

According to Richards (2006), communicative competence encompasses several dimensions of language knowledge. These include the ability to use language for a variety of purposes and communicative functions, as well as to adapt language use to different contexts, settings, and participants, including the appropriate use of formal and informal language and the distinction between spoken and written communication. Communicative competence also involves the ability to produce and comprehend different types of texts, such as narratives, reports, interviews, and conversations. It includes the capacity to maintain communication despite limitations in language knowledge by employing appropriate communication strategies. In Brown’s view, “given that communicative competence is the goal of a language classroom, instruction needs to point toward

all its components: organisational, pragmatic, strategic, and psychomotor” (Brown, 2007, p. 79). Furthermore, effective language instruction should equip learners with the ability to transfer and apply their classroom-based knowledge to new, unrehearsed communicative situations beyond the classroom and in real-world contexts.

Information-gap activities are communicative tasks in which learners possess different pieces of information and must interact in the target language to obtain the missing information and achieve a shared outcome. They are particularly useful for developing speaking and listening skills because they create an authentic need for communication. By requiring learners to exchange information, ask questions, seek clarification, and negotiate meaning, these activities encourage meaningful interaction and provide opportunities to use linguistic resources in context. Typical types of information gap activities include: describe and draw, spot the difference, jigsaw readings and listenings, and split dictations (www.teachingenglish.org.uk).

Scrambled sentences is a communicative classroom activity in which learners are presented with a text or dialogue whose sentences have been deliberately placed in an incorrect order. Their task is to reconstruct the original sequence by identifying the linguistic and semantic relationships between the sentences. This activity develops learners’ awareness of cohesion and coherence, particularly how linguistic devices such as pronouns establish connections across sentences and how semantic relationships contribute to the overall unity of a text. The activity can also be adapted to spoken or visual contexts, for example by asking learners to reconstruct a mixed-up dialogue or arrange a series of pictures in a logical sequence and create an accompanying dialogue or narrative.

Language games are a frequently used technique in Communicative Language Teaching to provide learners with engaging opportunities for meaningful interaction. When appropriately designed, they encourage communicative competence by incorporating three key features: an information gap, learner choice, and feedback. These activities can enhance fluency, motivation, confidence, and spontaneous language use (Littlewood, 1981). However, their effectiveness depends on purposeful design; games should involve genuine communication rather than focus primarily on competition or mechanical language practice. Therefore, language games are most effective when aligned with specific communicative objectives and require learners to exchange information, make meaningful choices, and negotiate meaning.

A picture strip story is a communicative technique that encourages learners to make predictions, exchange information, and negotiate meaning. In a typical activity, learners examine a sequence of pictures, predict what happens next, and explain their ideas to peers. The task promotes problem-solving, collaboration, and meaningful language use, while allowing learners to focus on communicating ideas rather than producing predetermined forms. Its efficiency, however, depends on careful task design and appropriate scaffolding to ensure that visual prompts generate genuine interaction rather than simple description.

Role-plays also constitute a relevant CLT technique, providing learners with opportunities to develop communicative competence in a variety of social situations and roles. They can be

highly structured, with the teacher providing specific roles and lines, or more flexible, with students deciding what to say based on the given situation and topic. Less-structured role-plays promote learner choice, create information gaps, and encourage spontaneous interaction and negotiation of meaning. By providing opportunities for authentic language use and immediate communicative feedback, role-plays can contribute to the development of both fluency and pragmatic competence.

Brainstorming is a classroom technique that involves the rapid generation of ideas around a particular topic without initially evaluating or organising them. The ideas generated can subsequently serve as a basis for activities such as writing or discussion (www.teachingenglish.org.uk). It can activate learners' prior knowledge, encourage creative thinking, and promote learning through the exchange of ideas. The teacher facilitates the activity and provides language support when necessary, while allowing learners sufficient freedom to contribute. As a pre-writing or pre-task activity, brainstorming helps learners generate and organise ideas before engaging in more structured communicative or written tasks.

Although brainstorming, word webs, and star bursting are related techniques, they differ in their primary function. Brainstorming encourages the free generation of ideas, word webs establish visual connections between related words and concepts, making associations and categorising words, being useful for introducing a topic and preparing learners for subsequent language production; whereas, starbursting focuses on generating questions to explore a topic from different perspectives. On the one hand, a word web is a visual brainstorming technique to develop vocabulary and organise ideas around a central topic; a technique that can activate learners' prior knowledge, expand their vocabulary, and help them organise ideas before speaking or writing activities. Learners begin with a key word or concept and add related words, expressions, or ideas, establishing connections between them. On the other hand, starbursting is a questioning-based brainstorming technique in which a central topic is surrounded by questions such as *who*, *what*, *when*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. Learners generate further questions from these prompts, exploring the topic from different perspectives and developing critical thinking, vocabulary, and communication skills (www.mindtools.com).

Total Physical Response (TPR) was developed by James Asher, a professor of psychology, and is based on the coordination of language and physical movement (Asher, 1969). Its primary aim is to provide an enjoyable and low-anxiety learning experience in which learners can experience a sense of success while minimising the stress commonly associated with foreign-language learning. TPR is suitable for beginners and young learners because grammatical structures and vocabulary are introduced through imperative forms, with meaning conveyed through physical actions rather than lengthy verbal explanations. A central principle of TPR is that comprehension should precede language production and that spoken language should generally be introduced before the written form. Learners demonstrate their understanding by physically responding to commands given by the teacher, who can introduce novel and often humorous variations to maintain engagement and motivation. The teacher initially assumes the role of

prompter, while learners respond through non-verbal actions. The teacher gives commands in the target language and performs the actions with the students. Therefore, teachers should “vary the sequence of the commands so that students do not simply memorize the action sequence without ever connecting the actions with the language” (Freeman and Martin, 2011, p.147). Meaning is conveyed through actions, which also activate memory through learner responses. The target language should be taught in meaningful chunks rather than word by word. As learners develop confidence and readiness to speak, they gradually assume a more active role by giving commands to their classmates. Students should learn to interpret new combinations of language chunks instead of relying only on sentences they have practiced. Exposure to new items of language can increase motivation and make learning more enjoyable. Vocabulary and grammar receive greater emphasis than other language areas and are introduced through imperatives that are used partly because they are common in speech addressed to young children learning their mother tongue. Learners should first develop an understanding of spoken language before being expected to produce it themselves.

Consequently, greater emphasis should be placed on spoken communication, allowing students to begin speaking naturally when they feel ready. Thus, activities can be extended to include games and other language-learning tasks, thereby increasing learner participation and interaction. The teacher may work with individual learners as well as with the whole group, providing opportunities for gradual progression from comprehension to spoken production. Assessment can be conducted primarily through observation of learners’ physical responses (Freeman and Martin, 2011). The teacher can evaluate comprehension by asking individual learners to perform a sequence of actions in response to verbal commands. Errors are considered a natural part of the transition to spoken production, and teachers generally focus on correcting significant errors while avoiding excessive interruption of communication. Overall, this approach emphasises comprehension, physical involvement, learner participation, and a supportive classroom environment, making it particularly valuable during the early stages of language learning.

Grounded in meaning, relevance, and student agency, Project-Based Learning (PBL) represents a transformative educational approach. Project-Based Learning (PBL) broadens the purpose of learning by encouraging students to move beyond simply receiving information towards understanding learning as an active process of inquiry and discovery. Therefore, learners are invited to make predictions, solve problems, ask questions, and actively seek answers to issues that are meaningful to them. Creativity is not simply an added component of learning; instead, it constitutes an integral dimension of how learning occurs. A key feature of this approach is giving learners opportunities to make choices about what they investigate. Rather than working exclusively with topics predetermined by the curriculum, students can explore authentic issues and situations that connect with their experiences and interests. This movement from passive participation to active creation can strengthen students’ sense of ownership and transform engagement from an obligation into a genuine desire to learn. Krauss and Boss introduce this

principle in “Thinking Through Project-Based Learning” (2013), arguing that students develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions by exploring open-ended questions, constructing meaning, and communicating their understanding in purposeful ways. From this perspective, PBL is not simply about increasing student engagement, but it provides a context in which learners can develop critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and authentic communication; it “prioritizes experiences where students construct knowledge by pursuing authentic problems and communicating insights in impactful ways” (Krauss and Boss, 2013, p.5).

When students work with open-ended problems, they are encouraged to formulate meaningful questions, integrate information from different sources, collaborate with others, and communicate findings that have a clear purpose. Adopting PBL therefore requires teachers to take on the role of facilitators who guide students through processes of prediction, inquiry, problem-solving, and creation rather than functioning primarily as transmitters of information. Choosing this approach represents a shift away from rigid standardization toward a more learner-centered model of education. It requires teachers to trust students as active participants in the learning process and to recognize that meaningful understanding develops through exploration, experimentation, and engagement as well as highlighting its capacity to foster curiosity, creativity, independence, and meaningful learning. PBL’s collaborative nature strengthens communication, interpersonal skills, and critical thinking through peer interaction and shared problem-solving. It also shifts the teacher’s role from instructor to facilitator and mentor, requiring flexibility, professional judgement, and a balance between guidance and learner independence. However, facilitating projects can be challenging and requires skills in differentiation, conflict resolution, and formative assessment. It often demands more classroom time than traditional lessons, which can make the pace at which the curriculum is delivered and standardized test preparation more difficult.

Conclusions

In conclusion, teaching English as a foreign language reflects a shift towards learner-centred, communicative, and meaningful language learning. Approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), Total Physical Response (TPR), or Project-Based Learning (PBL), together with techniques including role-plays, language games, problem-solving tasks, and collaborative activities, emphasise interaction, communicative competence, and relevant language use. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of these approaches may vary considerably across different educational contexts as communicative practices may be constrained by large classes, limited time, varying proficiency levels, curriculum and assessment demands, and limited resources. Consequently, teaching English as a foreign language should not be viewed as a complete shift away from traditional methods, but as a flexible process of adapting and combining different pedagogical practices to better fit a particular teaching context. Successful teaching depends on teachers’ ability to critically adapt approaches, methods, and techniques to learners’ needs and

specific educational contexts, while balancing teacher's guidance, learners' autonomy and linguistic knowledge with meaningful communication.

Bibliography

- Asher, J. J. (1969). The total physical response approach to second language learning. *The Modern Language Journal*, 53(1), 3-17.
- Brown, H. D. (2000). *Teaching by Principles: An Interactive Approach to Language Pedagogy*. New York: Longman.
- Brown, H. D. (2007). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. USA: Pearson Longman Press, Inc.
- Freeman, D. L., and Martin, A. (2011). *Technique & Principles in Language Teaching*. 3rd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Littlewood, W. (1981). *Communicative Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Klapper, J. (ed). (2001). *Teaching Languages in Higher Education*. London: CILT.
- Krauss, J., and Boss, S. (2013). *Thinking Through Project-Based Learning: Guiding Deeper Inquiry*. Corwin.
- MindTools Content Team. (2024). *Starbursting: A brainstorming technique*. MindTools. MindTools – Starbursting; www.mindtools.com.
- Richards, J. C. (2006). *Communicative Language Teaching Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., and T. Rodgers. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- www.teachingenglish.org.uk