Journal of Education and Educational Research
ISSN: 2957-9465 | Vol. 12, No. 2, 2025

Formalism vs. Activism in Language Teaching: A Critical Appraisal of Methodological Trajectories and Their Implications

Siyu Wu

China West Normal University, Nanchong, 637000, China

Abstract: This paper critically examines the trajectories of formalism and activism in language teaching methodologies. By analyzing their historical development, key features, and representative teaching methods, it reveals the strengths and limitations of each approach. And it is concluded that in 'Postmethod' era, teachers need to pay more attention to the diversity and openness of language teaching methods.

Keywords: Formalism; Activism; Language Teaching.

1. Introduction

Language teaching has witnessed the ebb and flow of various methodologies over the centuries. Pursuing the 'best method' has become a fixed mindset in foreign language teaching research. However, teachers, as the frontline role in the classroom, need to be confident that there is a hard riverbed beneath the sand like methods[1].

Linguistic Mackey pointed out the 'Pendulum Effect': Contemporary foreign language teaching methods can be found in similar ways throughout history, and the trajectory of the development of foreign language teaching ideas is like the movement of a pendulum[2]. The reason that caused the 'Pendulum Effect' is the contradiction and conflict between the form and meaning of language. However, in language teaching class, it is difficult to balance both. Focusing on form or on meaning? Therefore, language teaching is divided into two major schools: Formalism emphasizes the systematic study of language structure and rules, while activism focuses on language use in real-world, interactive activities.

2. The Trajectory of Formalism in Language Teaching

2.1. Grammar Translation Method (18th century)

The Grammar Translation Method is considered the oldest and most controversial teaching method. Its roots can be traced back to the teaching of classical languages such as Latin and Greek. In this method, the teaching process mainly consists of reading—analysis—translation—explanation—memorization. During the process, grammar is imparted deductively by presenting the rules and then practicing through translation exercises. Besides, student's native language is the medium of instruction. It is used to explain new items and to enable comparisons to be made between the foreign language and the student's native language[3].

The grammar translation method has several advantages: It helps with grammar learning by systematically explaining and analyzing grammar knowledge. At the same time, in the process of translation practice, students are able to come into contact with a large number of classic literary works and standardized language materials that can help improve vocabulary and language expression accuracy, and cultivate reading and writing abilities. However, its limitations are also obvious: It places too much emphasis on memorizing grammar rules and practicing written translation, neglecting the cultivation of communicative skills. Students may be able to accurately analyze and translate sentences in writing, but may have difficulty speaking in actual communication, resulting in the phenomenon of "mute English". In addition, under the influence of classrooms where the mother tongue is used as the teaching language, students overly rely on their mother tongue to explain and understand foreign languages, which can easily lead to the formation of mother tongue thinking patterns.

2.2. Audio - Lingual Method (1940s)

It developed under the influence of behaviorism (emphasizing continuous reinforcement after stimulus-response). In the listening classroom, the teacher teaches in the target language from beginning to end. Teacher first leading the reading of new knowledge points, and then breaking them down into small parts for students to follow. Then use methods such as replacing or exchanging roles to continuously strengthen knowledge points. This process follows the principle of induction rather than direct deduction.

The audio-lingual method prioritizes oral communication. Through extensive listening and speaking practice, students can quickly improve their fluency in oral expression. At the same time, students who listen extensively to authentic language materials can effectively exercise their listening comprehension abilities and better adapt to language communication in real contexts. However, what is also worth mentioned is that this method is also known as the "Army Method" because it originated from special military plans and was aimed at disciplined soldiers. Therefore, the highly mechanical nature of the drills in language teaching can make the learning process monotonous and boring for students.

2.3. Cognitive Approach (1960s)

The Cognitive Approach emerged as a reaction to the limitations of behaviorist-based methods like the audio-lingual method. It emphasizes that language learning is a cognitive process that follows the process: language comprehension——cultivation of language ability ——

language application. The stage of cultivating language ability is generally achieved by teachers guiding students to "discover" knowledge points and summarize them on their own. (This is also the foundation of Bruner's theory of discovery learning: learners are not passive recipients but active participants in the learning process. They are encouraged to explore, question, and experiment [4]).

This approach promotes students' active participation in the learning process and helps them develop their cognitive strategies for language learning. It also emphasizes the importance of meaningful learning and the connection between new knowledge and existing knowledge. However, language is not only a cognitive tool but also a social and cultural construct. It is used in specific social contexts and is influenced by cultural norms and values. This approach ignores social and cultural factors and not give sufficient weight to the social and cultural aspects of language learning, which may result in learners' misunderstanding of how language functions in different social situations and misinterpret language due to a lack of cultural awareness.

3. The Trajectory of Activism in Language Teaching

3.1. Direct Method (1860s)

The Direct Method was a revolutionary approach in its time, aiming to eliminate the interference of the mother tongue in foreign language teaching and directly combine foreign language learning with physical objects, pictures, and actions. For example, when teaching the word "apple", the teacher would show a real apple and repeat the word "apple" until students can associate the word with the object. The purpose is to bring learners' foreign language proficiency close to the level of their native language.

The direct method emphasizes the direct connection between foreign languages and objective things, encourages students to think and express themselves directly in foreign languages, and helps cultivate accurate and natural pronunciation and fluent oral expression abilities. However, this method completely excludes the role of the mother tongue in teaching. Theoretically speaking, foreign-language-only instruction hinders learners' psychology, cognitive growth and learning efficiency [5]. In fact, the mother tongue can have a positive transfer effect on students' foreign language learning to a certain extent. Proper use of the mother tongue can help students better understand some concepts and rules in the foreign language, and the direct method ignores this advantage.

3.2. Total Physical Response (TPR) (1960)

This method was developed based on the split-brain research. It points that the left hemisphere of the brain is responsible for language, memory, time, judgment, logical understanding, arrangement, classification, analysis, writing, reasoning, inhibition, sensory perception, etc., while the right hemisphere is mainly responsible for intuition, emotions, coordination of bodily movements, spatial imagination, art, visual perception, music rhythm, enlightenment, etc.

TPR advocates using physical movements to enhance language learning. In a TPR classroom, the teacher gives instructions in the target language, and students respond with physical actions. For example, when the teacher says "Stand up", "Sit down", "Open the book", students receive information through auditory perception (completed through the left brain), and then express this information through physical movements (completed through the right brain).

TPR method is lively and interesting, which can greatly attract students' attention, especially children and adolescents, allowing them to learn language in a relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere, promoting understanding and memory, reducing the boredom and pressure of learning, thereby stimulating their interest and enthusiasm for language learning. However, the limitation lies in the fact that students' language output mainly focuses on simple instruction responses, so that long-term use may lead to insufficient development of students' fluency, accuracy, and richness in oral expression, making it difficult to meet their diverse language exchange needs in real life.

3.3. Communicative Methods Group (1970s)

The Communicative Methods Group, which includes the communicative approach, task- based teaching method, project-based teaching method, and content-based teaching method. The most significant feature of communicative method is that it uses language as a tool for communication, and designs and organizes teaching based on the function and meaning of language as the main clues. On this basis, the following teaching methods were derived.

Task-based language teaching advocates "learning by doing", linking foreign language learning with students' daily experiential world. For instance, students may be given a task to plan a weekend trip in the target language, where they need to research destinations, book accommodation, and make a schedule. Project-based teaching places students in a scientific -research context, allowing them to improve their thinking skills and enhance their foreign language proficiency through the process of analyzing and solving problems. Content-based teaching promotes the synchronous growth of learners' foreign language abilities and subject knowledge, such as teaching science or history in the target language.

The communicative methods group are highly effective in improving students' communicative competence and ability to use language in real-world situations. They also foster students' critical thinking and problem-solving skills. However, they require teachers to have high-level language proficiency and teaching skills, and the assessment of students' learning outcomes may be more complex.

4. A Critical Appraisal of Formalism and Activism

4.1. Strengths and Weaknesses of Formalism

Formalism provides a solid foundation in language structure and grammar knowledge, which is essential for accurate language production, especially in written communication. For example, in academic writing, a good understanding of grammatical rules helps students express their ideas clearly and precisely. The systematic study of language forms helps students analyze and understand complex language structures, which is beneficial for language learning at an advanced level.

The main weakness of formalism is the ignorance of real-life language use and communicative competence. Students may be able to recite grammar rules but struggle to communicate effectively in real life situations. But this have also been continuously optimized with the progress of the times. For example, grammar translation method emphasizes mechanical learning of grammar rules, audio-lingual method

emphasizes a certain degree of "speaking" as output, and cognitive approach also stresses that teachers should provide situational practice opportunities to enable students to acquire language proficiency.

4.2. Strengths and Weaknesses of Activism

Activism focuses on real-life language use and communication, which is the ultimate goal of language learning. By engaging in communicative activities, students can develop their oral and written communication skills in a more natural and practical way. Activism also emphases learner-centeredness and interaction, which promotes students' motivation and autonomy in language learning.

However, activist methods may neglect the systematic learning of language knowledge. In the pursuit of communication, some aspects of grammar and vocabulary knowledge may be overlooked, leading to inaccuracy in students' language use. Moreover, learners may be influenced by external evaluations and rewards. For example, they may focus more on getting praise and recognition from others rather than on their own learning progress and ability improvement.

5. Summary

5.1. Conclusion

Formalism and activism in language teaching represent two different but complementary paradigms. The emergence of each new method of the two major schools is improving based on continuous development and innovation from the past, representing the further understanding of the rules of foreign language teaching.

Take activism as an example: Initially, the direct method only appeared as the opposite of grammar translation method, emphasizing the direct teaching of foreign languages and using the foreign language itself for conversation. Then, communicative methods group inherited the basic teaching principles of direct method, while absorbing rich content from sociolinguistics and functional linguistics; In the 1990s, task-based language teaching not only absorbed the advantages of communicative approach, but also overcame its shortcomings of focusing too much on the meaning of language and neglecting the cultivation of students' language accuracy. It focused on students' mastery of language form under the premise of prioritizing meaning.

By analyzing and comparing the English teaching methods, we can conclude that both schools are constantly absorbing reasonable elements from each other's ideas and theories, and constantly improving themselves. The distance between the two schools is also getting smaller and smaller. In today's “Postmethod” era (Advocate for the diversity, openness, and integration of teaching methods, and reflect respect for individual teaching objects [6]), teachers need to pay more attention to the diversity and openness of methods. It should be understood that the ultimate goal of any teaching method is to help students really learn and use a language. [7]

5.2. Implications for Language Teaching and Learning

Nowadays, in language teaching practice, teachers should not adhere strictly to either formalism or activism should be flexible and adaptable, choosing and integrating teaching methods based on the specific needs of their students, the teaching context, and the learning goals. For example, in the beginner's classroom, a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary learning can help laying a foundation. As students becoming more familiar with the language, more communicative and activity-based approaches can be introduced to enhance their communicative skills.

Students under the post method teaching approach should also be aware of position at the center of the teaching process. With full respect for language proficiency and identity background, they should actively engage in language learning and provide feedback and suggestions to teachers, and participate in the improvement and design of the teaching process [8]. This way, language teaching can be more effective in helping students achieve their objectives and develop their overall language proficiency.

References

[1] Rivers, W. M. 1992. Ten principles of interactive language learning and teaching [A]. In W.M. Rivers (Ed.). Teaching Language in College: Curriculum and Content [C]. Lincolnwood, Illinois: National Textbook Company.

[2] Mackey, W.F. 1967. Language Teaching Analysis [M]. London: Longman.

[3] Ren Ruiqi. The Effects of Grammar-Translation Method and Communicative Ap-proach on Oral English Teaching[J]. Overseas English, 2016(5):89-90..

[4] Bruner, J. S. (1961). The act of discovery. Harvard Educational Review, 31(1), 21 - 32.

[5] Hu Xiaoou. The Application of Positive and Negative Transfer of Mother Tongue in English Teaching [D]. Jilin University, 2007.

[6] KUMARAVADIVELU B. The Postmethod Condition: (E) merging Strategies for Second/Foreign Language Teaching [J]. TESOL Quarterly, 1994(3).

[7] Cheng Xiaotang. Foreign Language Teaching Methods and Schools[M]. FLTRP, 2008.

[8] Wei Yuxuan. A Comparative Study of Traditional English Teaching Method and Post Method Teaching Method [D]. Changchun Normal Uiversity,2015.