Teaching English Language Learners:

Popular ESL Learning Methodologies

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Introduction

There are many teaching methodologies available to ESL teachers. So many, in fact, that the choice can be intimidating. Should teachers choose one learning method? Or should they adopt an eclectic approach and take what they need from different methodologies? In choosing a method, it's best to start by considering three aspects.

- **Your students' needs:** Are your students school-age children or professional adults? What is their reason for learning English? What is their learning style?
- **Their context/environment:** Do you teach in school, or are you a private tutor? Are you in a country where English is the official language or one of the official languages? What challenges do your students face in their environment? Do they have to integrate into a new, English-speaking country?
- **Means of instruction delivery:** Do you teach in person or online?

If you are an ESL teacher, chances are you are already using a method or a mixture of methods, possibly without realizing it, but intuitively reacting to your pupils' needs and your personal inclinations.

We have compiled a list of some of the most popular teaching methodologies for ESL instruction, identifying the history of the method and where it is typically used, explaining the suitability of the method for different student groups, listing advantages and disadvantages of the method, and providing concrete examples of how to use the method in the in-person or online classroom.

Let's get started!

The Direct Method

This method focuses on oral proficiency and full immersion and avoids explicit grammar instruction. Grammar is learned intuitively and inductively by exposing the students to the target language and avoiding using their native language. Teachers who adopt the Direct Method train their students to think in the target language. Mistakes are corrected in class, and correct communication is praised.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

This method has become quite popular in recent years, but it's been around since the early 1900s. It's often used in online classes as many virtual ESL companies require teachers to communicate only in the target language. The Direct Method is especially suited to small classes to develop speaking, listening, comprehension, and pronunciation skills and to explain simple concepts that can be illustrated through images. It makes ample use of visuals and realia.
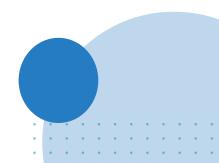
Which students is it suitable for?

The Direct Method works well in small groups where the teacher can attend to students individually. Students' motivation needs to be considered because the method requires high concentration. If students are distracted or disengaged, they won't get the full benefit of the lesson.

What are its advantages?

Highly motivated students will progress quickly with the Direct Method. The method also promotes accuracy and fluency as it focuses on listening and speaking activities. Students can learn plenty of words.

What are its disadvantages?

The Direct Method is unsuitable for explaining abstract concepts, as these cannot be demonstrated with visuals or gestures. When they are, explanations are usually time-consuming. Because of its emphasis on oral language, the method is more suitable for students with an auditory learning style. Also, not enough attention is paid to reading and writing.

Example Activities:

- Introduce new vocabulary using flashcards, gestures, or realia.
- Gestures work well to teach class commands (e.g., "open your books," "pick up your pens," or "listen") or motions like standing up or sitting down.
- Flashcards and realia quickly communicate the meaning of new words.
- Play games like Simon Says.
- Question & answer exercises
- Reading aloud
- Speaking practice
- Listening exercises
- Student self-correction

The Audiolingual Method

This is an oral-based approach that focuses on intonation, pronunciation, and the intense drilling of basic language structures through listening and speaking exercises with no use of the L1. The method considers language as a type of behavior that can be learned through the drilling of correct speech habits.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

In its early incarnation, the Audiolingual Method was used in the U.S. Army during WWII to train personnel in foreign languages and was known as the Army Method. The Audiolingual method was popular in the United States and Canada in the 1960s, but its popularity declined in the late '60s to early '70s.

Which students is it suitable for?

Because the method relies a lot on drilling and memorization of language patterns, it probably works better with students who are used to memory work. It is suitable for large groups as long as students are motivated and not quickly bored.

What are its advantages?

Listening and speaking drills effectively improve students' listening and speaking abilities and get them to use basic grammar structures. The emphasis on pronunciation and intonation promotes accuracy and helps students to distinguish between statements, questions, and commands. Early correction of mistakes also helps to improve accuracy.

What are its disadvantages?

The emphasis on repetition and memorization of basic structures and standard phrases can dull the audiolingual lesson and demotivate some learners. The method is very teacher-centered and does not encourage meaningful communication. Finally, the method focuses a lot on sentence patterns but not enough on vocabulary.

Example Activities:

Even though the method fell from grace a long time ago, many effective activities are still derived from it in today's classrooms. Here are a few:

- **Restoration:** The student uses words derived from a text to create a sentence. (Three men/listening/radio: Three men are listening to the radio.)
- **Transformation:** The student is given a statement and is asked to transform it into a question, a negative statement, or to modify the tense.
- **Integration:** Given two sentences, the student combines them into one. (Frank is late. It is just like him. It is just like Frank to be late.)

The Functional Approach

This approach focuses on teaching communicative competence (i.e., authentic language used by real people) and away from grammar rules taught in isolation. As its name makes clear, the Functional Approach emphasizes the communicative functions during an interaction, such as making a request, persuading, expressing agreement, etc. The method is also concerned with the context in which people communicate, for example, its participants, purpose, and communication channel (i.e., in writing, by phone, in person, etc.).

Where did it come from, and where is it used?
The Functional Approach arose in Europe in the 1970s at roughly the same time as the Communicative Approach and is closely related to it.

Which students is it suitable for?
The approach works well with students who need to acquire general communication competencies, but it may not be appropriate for the needs of learners in specific fields (e.g., academia, business, technology, etc.).

What are its advantages?
It fosters communicative competence over grammar and helps learners to communicate in different contexts. The approach also promotes cultural awareness because it considers the cultural context of the communication. It uses authentic materials that are meaningful to the learner.

What are its disadvantages?

It may not emphasize enough writing skills because it focuses on oral language. For learners who need a structured approach to grammar, the Functional Approach may not be ideal because it focuses more on successful communication than on grammar accuracy.

Example Activities:

- Role play is very compatible with the Functional Approach because it can prepare students for real-life situations and teach them authentic language.

> For example, a role play on the theme of visiting friends can teach students essential vocabulary and phrases people use in this kind of social interaction.

- In general, any activity that presents students with specific situations and language functions with a preliminary scaffolding of the language needed can be used with the Functional Approach.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

The TPR method is based on the idea that a second language can be acquired similarly to how children acquire their first language. When children learn to speak, they observe the people around them, hear words spoken to them in a particular context, often accompanied by gestures, and eventually associate a sound with meaning and reproduce words. TPR tries to reenact this process in the language classroom. The teacher prompts students to combine actions (acting out the meaning of a word) with verbal responses. This is believed to induce students to work out meaning through different portions of the brain, matching intellectual and physical analysis.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

TPR was created in the United States by James Asher, a professor of psychology, in the 1960s. Asher was investigating how the brain internalizes new information. He discovered that he could quickly internalize Japanese words by physically reacting to commands such as stand up or walk. He applied his research findings to L2 learning. He subsequently refined his technique and called it Total Physical Response. The technique spread widely throughout the United States, Canada, and Europe.

Which students is it suitable for?

TPR suits all students and all class sizes but is particularly effective with beginners. TPR is of limited use for more advanced students because abstract or complex concepts cannot be demonstrated through it.

What are its advantages?

TPR makes for a very dynamic lesson and is especially liked by young students who enjoy moving around and imitating the gestures. It works very well with kinesthetic learners. It involves both sides of the brain. TPR is great for teaching basic words (e.g., body parts) and actions and for delivering class commands.

What are its disadvantages?

Complex ideas cannot be taught using TPR. Therefore, this method is only suitable for beginners. TPR can become repetitive when used a lot, and students may lose attention. Also, at least in Asher's classical version, speaking is delayed for several months or until students have wholly internalized the vocabulary. This pace may feel too slow for some learners.

Example Activities:

TPR's activities are led by the teacher. Here is the process:

1. The teacher will begin by saying a word (stand up) and demonstrating it with an action.

2. The teacher will then repeat the word and have all the students perform the action.

3. After a few repetitions, the teacher may ask the students to repeat the word as they perform the corresponding action.

- **Storytelling:** TPR is also helpful during storytelling as it assists students in understanding the story even if they don't understand every word.

- **Mimicking games:** A classic TPR activity is the game Simon Says.

You can learn about TPR and other teaching techniques in ***Bridge´s Teaching English to Young Learners Specialized Certificate Course***.

Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling (TPRS)

TPRS (Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling) is a second language acquisition method. The method uses storytelling as a teaching tool. In the TPRS class, the teacher and students co-create stories in the target language to facilitate language acquisition.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

TPRS was developed in the United States by Blaine Ray, a Spanish language teacher, in the late 1980s. It is a language acquisition strategy based on one fundamental concept, comprehensible input (CI), and built upon the basic techniques of Total Physical Response. (The method was initially called Total Physical Response Storytelling.) TPRS is still a relatively unknown method but is increasing in popularity worldwide.

Which students is it suitable for?

TPRS is a very versatile technique that can be used with all students and even applied to teaching English for Special Purposes. It is especially suitable for learners at the beginning through intermediate levels. For students who have reached a certain proficiency and a level of autonomy, TPRS may not be the most appropriate language acquisition method.

What are its advantages?

The greatest advantage of TPRS is that it improves students' fluency quickly and dramatically. Students can formulate simple sentences in the target language from the very first class. TPRS is a very flexible method. Over the years, it has incorporated elements from several other methodologies. Any practice that promotes fluency in reading and speaking can be used in TPRS. The method is also very efficient in lowering students' performance anxiety because the learners are engrossed in the process of creating stories, and the class feels more like a conversation than a language lesson. In addition, TPRS teachers never explicitly correct students' errors but rather model language by recasting wrong statements correctly.

What are its disadvantages?

Once students have reached a certain level of proficiency, TPRS is no longer a helpful technique. Adult learners may feel that learning a language through stories is inappropriate for their age and may resist the process.

Example Activities:

The quintessential activity in TPRS is ACT, ACT, Describe, also familiarly referred to as the recipe.

- In the storytelling process, the teacher makes a statement.
- The teacher and the students then **add** a character, a detail, or a sentence to the story (the A in ACT).
- The teacher asks the students simple yes/no or either/or questions or uses question words.
- The students respond chorally using one-word answers (yes, no, etc.). This phase is known as **circling** (the C in ACT).
- In the subsequent phase, the teacher zeroes in on single students and asks them questions. When addressed individually, the students must respond with complete sentences. This is known as **triangling** (the T in ACT). The ACT procedure is repeated twice.
- In the final phase, the teacher asks the students to **describe** the situation, in other words, to restate that has happened thus far in the story.

Find out more about popular TPRS activities.

Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)

Simply put, CLIL is the teaching of academic subject matter in a second or foreign language. More than simply an approach to language learning, CLIL (aka Content-Based Instruction) is an approach to education that aims to integrate language learning with content acquisition and the development of intercultural and transcultural skills. Cognitive skills such as critical thinking and problem-solving are also emphasized in this approach, and the learners' active involvement is essential for its successful implementation.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

This approach originates partly from Canadian bilingualism and immersion programs in North America, but it was fully developed in Europe during the 1990s. It was initially created to respond to the needs of students from diverse geographical locations and cultural contexts. Today, it is especially popular in ESL programs.

Which students is it suitable for?

CLIL was specifically designed for students who need to acquire a second language, integrate into a new culture, and master academic subjects taught in a foreign language. However, any student who wants to acquire bilingual abilities and a multicultural perspective can benefit from this approach. CLIL programs exist in several countries, where students can study one or more academic subjects in a foreign language.

What are its advantages?

In CLIL, L2 skills are developed and applied in a meaningful context. Content learning can stimulate the students' interest in the L2 and increases their exposure to it. CLIL also fosters academic vocabulary learning and develops extralinguistic skills like collaboration, communication, and critical thinking. Students who can draw on preexisting knowledge of the content can also progress more rapidly in English.

What are its disadvantages?

Students may have difficulties understanding the content if the language is not scaffolded enough. Studying an academic subject in a foreign language presents another challenge for students. From the teacher's perspective, striking a balance between content and language instruction can sometimes be challenging. Preparation for CLIL lessons also tends to be time-consuming, and teachers must be proficient in both L2 and content instruction.

Example Activities:

Flexibility is one feature of this approach. Any method/activity can be integrated into it. Teachers can decide what language functions and vocabulary they want to focus on. For example:

- A science lesson on density could focus on sequencing words (first, next, then); vocabulary (nouns: oil, water, food coloring; verbs: put, add, sink, float, rise, fall; adjectives: heavy, light, dense); grammar (comparatives: heavier/lighter/denser than).

1. Start with a demonstration of density (dropping various objects and substances in a tank of water and showing which ones will sink or float).
2. Students make predictions on which objects are denser.
3. Students observe the process.
4. Finally, students report on what they have seen.

Here are several engaging sample CLIL lesson plans for the ESL/EFL classroom.

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Task/Project-Based Language Learning

[Task/Project-Based Language Learning](#) is based on the idea that students learn best when involved in meaningful, real-world, and purposeful activities. The TBL/PBL classroom is student-centered and leverages students' interests. The teacher acts more like a guide or a moderator than an authority figure, and students learn the L2 while engaged in hands-on tasks or projects.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

Task/Project-Based Language Learning became popular as part of Communicative Language Teaching, but its origins go back to the educational philosophy of John Dewey and even Maria Montessori. Today, this method is practiced worldwide not only to develop language competency but also to learn independence and communicative and cooperative skills.

Which students is it suitable for?

TBL/PBL is suitable for all students in the context of a CLT approach. In school systems that are exam-oriented and form-/grammar-centered, or where teachers are unwilling to give their students some control over learning activities, TBL/PBL may not be the most suitable approach.

What are its advantages?

It is student-centered. It engages students in meaningful activities and encourages purposeful communication. TBL/PBL also encourages teamwork, collaboration, and conversation among students.

What are its disadvantages?

Critics of Task/Project-Based Language Learning point out that the method emphasizes language fluency at the expense of accuracy. Some teachers also feel the method is not appropriate for beginner students who lack the vocabulary to carry out communicative activities. In countries where language syllabi are predetermined, teachers may not have the freedom to select materials to design TBL/PBL activities.

Example Activities:

Task-Based Learning:

- Producing a video
- Writing a newsletter
- Creating a PowerPoint presentation
- Writing a script or short story
- Enacting a debate

Project-Based Learning:

- Select a theme for investigation
- Choose a task(s) from above for projects

The Flipped Classroom

> In a Flipped Classroom, students are given study materials ahead of time and are expected to come to class having already familiarized themselves with the topic of instruction. This frees time for class activities and student-teacher interaction.

Where did it come from, and where is it used?

The Flipped Classroom approach is not exclusive to language teaching (it has been used for a while, especially at the university level) but has become more widespread in recent years with the development of technology and the popularity of online classes.

Which students is it suitable for?

The Flipped Classroom is especially suited for students with time restrictions, like working students, professionals, and businesspeople, but can be adopted in any setting. Students who are used to a more passive kind of learning can also benefit from it by gradually becoming more independent.

What are its advantages?

The Flipped Classroom encourages students' independence and fosters higher-order thinking skills like analytical, problem-solving, and critical thinking. The approach requires the students' active participation. It shifts some of the responsibility of the learning process from the teacher to the learner. Students can work on the material at their own pace based on their level of competency, which may be beneficial for slower learners, and use class time for Q&A sessions, discussions, and other interactive activities.

What are its disadvantages?

Because the Flipped Classroom relies heavily on technology, it may not be suitable for students who don't have easy access to computers or the internet. It also requires teachers to be proficient in the use of technology, which can be a problem for some. The approach relies on trust. If students don't prepare adequately, the lesson will fail. Finally, some students have a hard time getting used to doing independent work.

Example Activities:

Have students prepare for the following activities by first studying relevant vocabulary, doing internet searches, or watching a video. In class, they practice what they have studied.

- Debates
- Role play
- Brainstorming
- Problem-solving

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