MODERN INTERNATIONAL APPROACHES TO ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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ABORDĂRI INTERNAȚIONALE MODERNE ALE LIMBII ENGLEZE CA LIMBĂ STRĂINĂ

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Abstract. Modern teaching trends worldwide have literally changed the perspectives on teaching English as a foreign language, at all levels of education, from pre-primary to tertiary education. These new teaching approaches have long been adopted by private teaching institutions, whose main goal is to offer good results in as little time as possible. From there they gradually expand to all teaching institutions. For example, the communicative approach, first embraced by the language schools across the world, has slowly become the norm in teaching foreign languages, particularly English. The new always interferes with the old, and perhaps there is some good in both of them, to be kept and used for the benefit of students. The covid pandemic represented a significant shift towards online teaching, and this has also brought important changes in the didactics of English. After that, technology and electronic devices have flooded the world of teaching and it looks like they are there to stay. In this context, what is the best teaching approach, if any, one may wonder? This presentation will try to shed some light on the matter and perhaps offer some answers to this pertinent question.

Keywords: education, teaching approach, EFL, ESL, modern.

Rezumat. Tendinţele moderne de predare la nivel mondial au schimbat literalmente perspectivele privind predarea limbii engleze ca limbă străină, la toate nivelurile de educaţie, de la învăţământul preşcolar la cel terţiar. Aceste noi abordări didactice au fost adoptate de mult timp de instituţiile de învăţământ private, al căror scop principal este de a oferi rezultate bune în cât mai puţin timp posibil. De acolo se extind treptat la toate instituţiile de învăţământ. De exemplu, abordarea comunicativă, adoptată pentru prima dată de şcolile de limbi străine din întreaga lume, a devenit încet normă în predarea limbilor străine, în special a limbii engleze. Tendinţele noi interferează mereu cu cele mai vechi, şi poate că există ceva bun în ambele, care trebuie păstrat şi folosit în beneficiul studenţilor. Pandemia Covid a reprezentat o schimbare semnificativă în raport cu predarea online, iar acest lucru a dus, de asemenea, la schimbări importante în didactica limbii engleze. Ca rezultat, tehnologia şi dispozitivele electronice au inundat sistemele didactice în lume şi se pare că nu vor disparea curând. În acest context, ne putem întreba care este cea mai bună abordare didactică, şi dacă există o asemenea abordare? Această comunicare va încerca să facă lumină cu privire la aspectul dat şi poate să ofere câteva răspunsuri.

Cuvinte- cheie: educaţie, abordare didactică, EFL, ESL, modern**.**

Regarding language teaching methodology, it is becoming to start by outlining the methods of language teaching, English as a foreign language most of all. If we were to offer a historical timeline of the main language teaching methods. First, language teaching is as old as time, as people have always been interested in acquiring a new language for various reasons. Be it in the form of schools or with the help of a governess, learning a new language has always been an important part of education worldwide. Before the 20th century, the key influence in language

teaching was that of John Amos Comenius, a Czech scholar and teacher who published books on teaching as early as the 17th century, whose innovative speech was among these lines: „Let the main object [of education be] to seek and to find a method of instruction, by which teachers may teach less, but learners learn more." [Comenius, 1887]

As a profession in public schools, language teaching has been established in centuries ago but we will discuss EFL (English as a foreign language) mainly from the 20th century onwards, since linguistics has started scrutinizing the learning of languages as such. Over time, more than a few teaching approaches and methods have been proposed, and each one tried to be more effective and theoretically sound than the previous ones.

Comenius focused on the spiritual development of children, and he claimed that the way they learned was through association to the world around them. Today, Comenius is considered one of the founding fathers of modern education, which is using the simple and wise ideas described in his *Great Didactic*. Comenius was the first to introduce an inductive approach to language teaching, in which the goal was to teach students to use the language rather than teach them rules and analysis of the language. He used imitation instead of rules, claiming that students should repeat after the teacher, so he encouraged drilling, perhaps obsolete today but widely used and helpful across centuries. He also encouraged language to be taught through pictures and the practice of reading and speaking, an idea which is as modern nowadays as it was back in the 17th century. Comenius was quite the revolutionary.

However, by the beginning of the 19th century, the systematic study of the grammar of Classical Latin and classical texts had once again taken over in schools and universities in Europe. The 19th century was characterized by the so-called Grammar Translation approach, which explicitly focused on studying grammar and translating texts to learn to read literature. This particular approach is a rather traditional one, originating from 18th century Prussia where it was used in teaching classical languages through grammar rules and exercises, learning words, writing and translating. The focus was not at all on communication, because at the time people but in order to gain reading and writing proficiency. However, a more modern, modified form of the Grammar-Translation method is still in use in some parts of the world, regardless of its limitations. Nevertheless, perhaps the good aspects of this approach should be still maintained in language schools. As Alessandro Benati put it: 'The popularity of the grammar-translation method began to decline in the 19th century because of the importance of and demand for developing oral communication. Nevertheless, traces of this method can be found in some practices today, especially in courses where reading and translation are key skills to develop in order to take a proficiency test.' [Benati, 2018]

A further step in language education was an attempt to make language learning more naturalistic, more similar to the ways children acquire their first languages. The direct method was introduced in the late 19th century, teaching exclusively in the foreign language and focusing on speaking and listening, a precursor of the communicative teaching method of modern days. Thus, Saveur discussed in the 1860s this Natural Method, based on how children acquire their mother tongue; another name for this approach is Direct or Berlitz Method, still in use nowadays in some language schools. The theory is that when children learn words for the first time, they don't associate meaning to form, yet they still manage to learn their mother language through direct experience. Also, they learn in chunks, which basically means 'the units of speech should be the sentence, not the word' [Saveur, 1874]. The Direct or Natural method teaches a foreign language much in the same way, for instance exemplifying the word through an image, or action, without translating it. As Franke puts it, the direct method involves relating the meaning of words of a foreign language with the words themselves, whereas 'a concept (meaning) and foreign word are intimately brought into contact without the intervention of the native word.' [Franke, 1884]. It was a significant turn from learning a language for and through

books to learning it through demonstration, association and speaking, in other words a complete change of focus on skills.

There were voices disagreeing with this teaching approach and it was finally forgotten, due for instance to its impracticalities: there was literally not enough time to pursue it, nor enough teachers and space in the curricula to follow this method in public schools. Trying to establish a common teaching approach in the schools of the United States, for instance, a two-years long research study was undergone in America under the name of 'The Coleman Report'. This report recommended, based on its findings, a reading-based/reading comprehension teaching approach, with an accent on vocabulary teaching in American schools and colleges [Coleman, 1966].

In an attempt to give a more scientific foundation to language teaching other methods, such as situational language teaching, were created. However, the real change emerged with the audio lingual method in the 1950s; the audio-lingual method or audio-lingualism was based on psychological theories of behaviourism. According to behaviourism, people's behaviour depends on a pattern of stimulus-response and feedback and learning a language implies using the language communicatively so as to acquire new habits replacing the old habits from the mother tongue. In a nutshell, audio-lingualism is a teaching approach that emphasizes the grammatical and phonological structure, especially for speaking and listening. Audio-lingualism evolved in the context of large-scale language teaching programmes in the 1950s and 60s. Lessons in audio-lingualism focus on drills and mechanical repetitions, with students repeating the same target language items over and over again. This was in line with behaviourism because it involves a stimulus provided by the teacher or a recording and a response provided by the learner. The feedback is again provided entirely by the teacher.

Later on, in the 1970s and 80s, the Communicative Language Teaching emerged as teaching approach. It derived from linguists like Hymes and Halliday, who had an anthropological persective on language as a system for human communication. It was also related to the the emergence of cognitive psychology, which claimed that language learning involves active mental processes and conscious learning, not just getting rid of old language habits, as audio-lingualism previously claimed. Communicative Language Teaching remains an influential teaching method to this day. Starting as a reaction to grammar oriented approaches, focusing on accuracy, it maintained that the goal of language teaching is communication, only achieved through actual communication in the target language in class. This communicative approach is perhaps the most widely used in language schools nowadays and is supported by TEFL certifications around the world, which basically train teachers of today into the communicative technique. As researchers describe it, this approach 'emphasizes on the improvement of … the ability of applying the language principle in order to produce grammatical sentences and understand 'when, where, and to whom' the sentences used' [Richard, 1997].

Another interesting teaching approach originating in the 1970s was called Total physical response or TPR. In TPR, widely used with young learners, the teacher gives commands to the students using body movements, and the students respond by imitating these movements. It was created by the American psychologist James Asher based, just like the Natural method, on the experience of how infants acquire their mother tongue: parents using their body to teach their children language. Through physical involvement, demonstration and example, the student learns a new language. A simple acquisition process, based on listening and understanding. Just as babies acquire, rather than learn, their mother tongue, through a process of creating neural links between speech and action.

Again in the prolific 1970s, a new orientation to language teaching emerged: the humanistic language teaching. It was based on the idea that the whole social and emotional human being, not just the mind should be involved in learning a language. Three key methods between

the 1970s and 80s were associated with humanism: the Silent Way, suggestepedia and community language learning. The Silent Way, as the name suggests, is a method based on the idea that the teacher should be silent as much as possible, and the learners should be encouraged to speak. Suggestepedia was based on the idea that learning is fostered by reaching an optimal state of alert relaxation, in which learning is meant to happen accidentally and naturally. The third humanistic method community language learning assumes that students are people with feelings, and that learning happens when they feel in a safe environment. The teacher becomes a counselor and gradually encourages students to become more independent and collaborative. As Celce-Murcia described it, this teaching approach emphasizes respect for each individual and for his/her feelings, pair work and group work is encouraged, as well as a pleasant class atmosphere- including pair-work and group-work with a lot peer support and interaction, with the accent being on meaningful communication, whereas the teacher is more of a facilitator. [Celce-Murcia, 2001]

Two of the more modern teaching approaches, which have become more and more popular in recent decades are: Task-based language teaching or TBL and Language Integrated Learning. TBL, strongly connected to major theories of second language acquisition follows the idea that students learn a new language by doing tasks in that particular language. Students are assessed in terms of being able to complete the task itself, rather than the language they use to accomplish that task. Nunan describes it as 'an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language, the introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation, the provision of opportunities for learners to focus not only on language but also on the learning process itself, an enhancement of the learner's own personal experiences as important contributing elements to classroom learning and the linking of classroom language learning with language use outside the classroom.' [Nunan, 2004]

Language Integrated Learning, yet another innovative teaching approach, supports a teaching methodology not based on manuals or books, but attentive to the conversational language emerging from conversation and focusing on the content itself and its practicality. It is known as CLIL and it represents a teaching method correlating the subject to a target language. For example, Economy taught in English during an MBA, or Geography taught together with English as a foreign language. CLIL is beneficial because students learn a language without realizing they are learning it, due to the helpful context. As Wiseman states, CLIL represents 'a more natural way to learn a language; when a subject is taught in that language there is a concrete reason to learn both at the same time. And as students have a real context to learn the language in, they are often more motivated to do so, as they can only get the most of the content if they understand the language around it. CLIL also promotes a deeper level of assimilation – as students are repeatedly exposed to similar language and language functions.' [Wiseman, 2018]

Nowadays, foreign language acquisition has been going, just like the entire society we live in, through a comprehensive digital transformation. This has affected both processes of teaching and learning and the covid pandemic speeded this development significantly, as education moved online for shorter or longer periods of time, depending on the situation. Many educational centers and increasingly more teachers turn to technology to help students improve their learning. Schools and universities – private and public alike are enriching the long-used, traditional methods of teaching with the newer tendencies in instruction know-how. Technology-enabled learning, computers and their more mobile counterparts, from laptops to intelligent telephones or tablets, online platforms providing education-, smart boards etc. have been gradually substituting the traditional manuals, paper, whiteboards plus markers, etc. The past few years have witnessed a dramatic change in the learning model worldwide. The way students are being taught today is very different from the teaching methods that were adopted a few decades back, highlighted above. Technology has brought about various changes in the way education

is delivered and received. Technology has put its mark on education and it continues to do so at a faster pace than we imagine.

Some of the most innovative and challenging technological advancements changing the face of education today are described below.

As everyone owns a smartphone or tablet or something similar, mobile devices literally encouraged the process of learning beyond the walls of a traditional classroom. Using the technology readily available, students have started enjoying the self-paced, own-regulated learning process. There is obviously something good and something bad about that – for instance the span of attention has diminished and traditional lessons may seem boring to a certain extent. This technology imprint will surely go on, due to its convenience and use-fulness. It is the teachers' job now, among others, to design a more flexible, on-the-go and responsive learning content. This will enable students to go through courses at their own con-venience- essentially anytime and anywhere. Internet connection is no longer an issue with offline applications; also the internet is more and more available across the globe. Electronic manuals may be embedded in any course, there are a lot of teaching apps available. Further-more, the availability of features which help and augment the learning process is growing, too. Students can now take online or offline notes, there are numerous dictionaries online, a plethora of resources, they all contribute to the flexibility of the teaching/learning process. Many educational institutes and language schools of today have implemented mobile lear-ning, much to the benefit of both students and teachers.

Today, students are what we may call digital natives; technology is an intrinsic part of their daily lives. Using technology has become a basic skill of this century and involving it in the teaching process has become the norm. Technology in the class of today represents not only about the presence of digital devices, but also how they are used to facilitate the relationship between teacher and student.

Gamification is one of the most innovative trends in educational technology and has beco-me an increasingly essential part of education in the last decades. It represents a change of face of education in its attempt to keep up with the modern times, in all possible way. It brings with it new activities and tasks, a different approach, much in the line of the very popular computer games played by the youth. There are a lot of game elements included and even a system of bonuses, feedback and rewards, similar to the world of gaming. Students, especially the new generations, are more engaged in this manner and feel challenged to study. Thee gamification features, embedded in the language courses of today, be them online or face to face, represent a fusion between the culture of gaming and course-design. It helps the students become active and motivated learners, as games represent the realm of the youth today. All students play ga-mes of various types and they generally manifest interest towards games at a very young age. Therefore, learners will tend to favour educational games for learning various academic skills and the feedback system is familiar to them and encourage the completion of assigned tasks. The game-based teaching approach creates fun and interesting content. Earning points, in a manner perceived as fun, is also coming from popular video games and represents a language students know and understand. Apparently, it also makes learners pay more attention to what has been taught to them, more than a teacher drawing their attention towards various tasks.

The collaborative learning technology is yet another modern tool for education today. It is similar to some extent to the communication method, as it encourages students working closely together, communicating in the target language and perform tasks together, in smaller or larger groups. Everyone is connected: teachers with students and students between themselves. This encourages the team spirit and teaches students to collaborate and work in teams, a skill extre-mely useful for their future in the work-place. In the old-style teaching model, a teacher entered the class, delivered a lecture for approximately 50 minutes and then left for a short break, only

to return immediately afterwards and start over. Today, technology has bridged the gap between teachers and students. It is not uncommon these days to encounter teacher-student direct inter-action much more often. Teachers are far more accessible now and are perceived as mentors, whereas the collaborative learning approach encourages student interact action and personal development, as well. The advent of augmented reality and virtual reality and their entrance into education, the classroom learning experience has changed considerably. Learning has be-come more immersive compared to the traditional methods. Old posters, pictures, textbooks and even lab-experiments are being slowly but surely replaced by virtual reality and computers. The augmented and virtual reality trends in education technology, extensively used for instance in CLIL, creates a captivating learning experience. Both virtual and augmented reality have taken digital learning to new levels, making complex concepts easier to explain and use, whe-reas students can now immerse in the learning process. Students can explore and learn so much more today, and in a form that appeals to them and this is definitely developing- soon students everywhere will become familiar to an immersive learning via virtual reality. And students will benefit from this, taking the opportunity to turn theoretical information into actual experience.

Virtual Learning offers convenience and flexibility to both students and educators, offe-ring live interaction in the case of online courses and more flexibility to the face-to-face ones. Also, it combines online-learning and in-person instruction in a dynamic manner, as online lessons are now blended with live interaction, offering both self-paced learning tools online and live interaction. This represents a valuable lesson we learned during the pandemic, and it is something worth keeping for the innovative dimension offered to education. A professor can now lecture with much ease, with the help of online platforms, to hundreds of students across the globe, in real time. A student doesn't absolutely need to be in a precise location to benefit from good-quality teaching input. In fact, this teaching approach may provide learners with a more comprehensive understanding of course content, become more operative and flexible. It is also learner-centered and beneficial for students on the long term, considering the demands of the workplaces today. The virtual learning approach encourages creativity and innovation for teachers alike, as they align to the tendencies and demands of a changing educational world. Virtual Learning is at the same time cost-effective and prominent voices claim that it is here to stay, whether we like it or not.

Therefore, the task of teachers today has increased: they are now required to navigate through a plethora of teaching approaches available and to choose the ones that best suit the needs of their students. Occasionally it is the language school, or the university that requires a certain teaching method. More often than not, though, teachers have the freedom of choice. Everyone may have a favourite teaching method or consider that a method is better than the other, based on the needs of the class and/or the general conditions available. Of course, the pandemic showed us that sometimes have to adapt and perhaps flexibility is a must in choosing an approach of the next one. All in all, there are good parts to several teaching methods and maybe selecting what is useful from more than one method and applying it flexibly might prove a successful endeavour[1] .

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