

A Historical Summary of Language Learning Theories and Teaching Approaches

Time	Language Theory	Learning Theory	Language Teaching Approaches Used
Into the 20 th century	Based on the traditional grammars of the written versions of classical languages.	Language is learned by memorising structures and applying this knowledge in grammatical exercises. These exercises develop analytical and intellectual language skills. Learning a language is a scholarly activity involving reading, writing and translation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grammar translation
From the early 20 th century	Structural linguistics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A description of the observable forms of sentence-level grammatical categories (Bloomfield and Fries, 1930s). 	Language forms are learned in isolation in a fixed progression. The learner builds knowledge of the language from the smallest components up. At first, phonemes are considered the smallest component. Later, the word is considered the smallest unit for teaching purposes. Correct language habits and accurate forms are achieved through behaviourist approaches (Skinner, 1957), i.e. through repeated stimulus, response and reinforcement. Errors are to be avoided. Teaching follows a progression of 'structures.' Teaching and learning is product-oriented. There is an increased demand for instruction in spoken language.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Audio-lingual/direct methods and language laboratories are used. Language broken down into macroskills Instruction concerned with accuracy and memorisation achieved through drills, substitution exercises, manipulation of isolated structures in a fixed order of difficulty, language laboratories, phonics, graded vocabulary and reading, recognition of isolated words, etc. Course books follow a linear progression of structures, e.g. starting with the present tense.
1950s and 1960s	Transformational generative linguistics <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language is a rule-based system with a finite number of rules. Competence and performance are distinct. Grammar is used to generate the sentences of a language. Language Acquisition Device (LAD) 	<p>When a person knows the rules of a language, i.e. is competent, he/she can produce an infinite number of sentences, i.e. perform. People have an innate capacity to acquire the rules of language.</p> <p>Students use cognitive skills to learn language. They need to test the hypotheses they make about the target language.</p> <p>Interlanguage studies and the study of interface between L1 and L2 undertaken.</p>	<p>Although some teachers began to think more about fluency and how learners could internalise rules and use the second language creatively, language teaching remained largely structural, behavioural and product-oriented. Grammar course books did include more explanations and there was more discussion and problem-solving in classrooms.</p> <p>Audio-visual methods used</p>

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1970s and 1980s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Linguistics concerned with form remains the dominant theory, i.e. transformational generative linguistics (TGL). • Linguistics concerned with socio-cultural meaning/communication in context – challenges formal linguistics. • Speech act theory/pragmatics (Austin, Searle, Levinson). • Sociolinguistics (Hymes/communicative competence, Gumberz, 1982). • Meaning-based functional theories of language (Firth, Halliday). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second Language Acquisition (SLA – influenced by TGL). Learners internalise the rules of the language through deduction and problem-solving. Once the rules have been acquired, learners can experiment with using language creatively, e.g. Krashen (1981/82). Consciously learned language is not available for use. All learners can do is to monitor their performance. Second language acquisition requires interesting, relevant and comprehensible input rough-tuned at a level slightly higher level than learners' current level in a stress-free environment. • Developments in humanistic psychology led to humanist approaches where teachers (e.g. Muscovitz) try to meet the needs of the whole person (after Rogers) and are aware of where learning is placed in the hierarchy of human needs (after Maslow). 'Creativity' is valued above all. • Language as communication – influenced by sociolinguistics – Communicative approaches are concerned with what the learners need to do with language and with learners' ability to use the language for genuine communication. Hymes rejects the distinction between competence and performance and uses the term 'communicative competence.' Language learning involves building sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic and grammatical competence. • Learner-centred approaches – Teachers facilitate learner interaction and opportunities for 'learning by doing.' Some writers highlight the importance of teaching grammar within the paradigm of balancing fluency with accuracy (e.g. Brumfit, 1980/81; Canale and Swain, 1980; Yalden 1983; Richards, 1984; Pienemann & Johnson, 1987; Widdowson, 1989), but this is often ignored in practice. • Principles of adult learning (Knowles, 1990). • TESOL/TEFL is process – and conditions-oriented valuing fluency over accuracy (which often results in 'stabilised' learners). • Formative assessment is valued over summative Learning objectives are written for accountability. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Situational syllabuses (1960s & 1970s) based on structural approaches. • Counselling Learning (based on humanist psychology), also Community Language Learning (Curran, 1972). Learners learn the language they want and need when they want to. • Natural Approach (Terrell, 1977) – based on TGL. • Total Physical Response (Asher, 1977) – based on Krashen. • The Silent Way (Gattegno, 1972/76) – limited input and modelling with lots of gesture and praise. • Suggestopaedia (Lozanov) – listening to baroque music and new identities. • Functional-Notional (Wilkins, 1976) – teaching based on lists of functions (usually the functional stage of a text) and notions (a semantic domain, e.g. time) intuitively chosen according to need but which in practice blurred into a structural approach. • English for Specific Purposes (ESP) – based on a functional account of learner needs • Communicative Language Teaching in which interaction is 'genuine,' e.g. through information gap, problem-solving or jigsaw activities. • Topic-based syllabuses – the most common syllabus type. • Procedural/Task-based syllabuses (Prabhu, 1982; Candlin, 1983; Brumfit, 1984; Nunan, 1988). • The teacher is guide and facilitator. There is less use of course books.

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1980s, 1990s & 2000s	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Functional, text-based and social language theories, e.g. systemic functional linguistics, discourse analysis (Halliday, Hasan, Martin, Kress, Fairclough, Swales, Hamp-Lyons, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process writing: formalising a process-oriented, learner-centred approach in schools (Graves, Clay). An enriched description of register: the description of register is expanded beyond tenor to include field and mode, and is linked to language through metafunctions. An understanding of differences between spoken and written language is especially useful to TEFL/TESOL, (e.g. Brown and Hood, Hammond, Winsor, Slade & Eggins, Zawadzki). Appropriate and effective language learning rather than fluency and/or accuracy. Challenges to so-called 'natural' pedagogies, (e.g. Widdowson). Language-based theory of learning, i.e. learning languages, learning about language, learning through language (Halliday, Painter). Text-based approaches to course design. Genre-based approaches in which teaching and learning about text occur in cohesive purposeful cycles (Rothery, Christie, Gray, Macken-Horarik, Hammond, Derewianka). A visible pedagogy (Bernstein). Scaffolding and supporting development, i.e. learners move from approximations and dependence to full independent control (Vygotsky & Bruner). Critical literacy Measurable educational outcomes: industry restructuring, training reform, increased unemployment, limited funding and entitlements lead to demands for measurable progress and outcomes. Articulation and outcomes-based assessment become an issue for all sectors. Increased understanding of particular learner profiles (e.g. Ramm, MacPherson) Increased understanding of what constitutes successful language learning strategies (e.g. Willing, Jackson). Process AND product are valued. Achievement is measured against outcomes statements and performance indicators. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Process-oriented models continue, i.e. communicative, topic-based, task-based etc. Cohesive text-based course design – starting from topic or text, incorporating needs analysis, negotiating objective setting, learning outcomes, selecting and sequencing syllabus elements so learners gain increasing control over texts, diagnostic achievement assessment and course evaluation (e.g. Hammond, Green, Cornish, Derewianka). Up to this point, TEFL/TESOL course design had been written in terms of an aggregate of isolated objectives, structures, sentences and activities. Outcomes-based accredited frameworks incorporating learner pathways within which syllabus design remains the responsibility of the teacher and learner. Teacher is both facilitator and teacher. Learner and industry demands for a clear sense of progression and achievement are addressed e.g. ESL scales industry literacy standards. Enriched topic-based syllabuses and EWP and ESP courses. The social contexts and language demands of different disciplines and employment sectors are studied semantically, e.g. Prince, Joyce, ER, Hogarth, ethnomethodology pragmatics. The macroskills are revisited from a text-based perspective, i.e. Brown & Hood, Solomon & Burns, Burns and Joyce, Winsor, Slade. Nonlanguage outcomes are included in course design. Course books re-emerge.

