

Comments on the Audiolingual Method

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Abstract:

As a teaching method prevailing in the 1950s and 1960s, the Audiolingual Method advocated aural training first then pronunciation training, followed by speaking, reading, and writing. It suggests teachers to teach English with target language, only a little mother tongue is permitted, and sentence pattern practice is focused during the teaching process. This paper mainly analysis the advantages and shortcomings of this method from several aspects. Based on comprehension and analysis, this paper has put forward the suggestions about how to use this teaching method appropriately in current foreign language teaching. The aim of this paper is to help teachers learn deeply about this method and know when and how to use it in their teaching.

Keywords: the Audiolingual Method; advantages; shortcomings; suggestions

1. Introduction

The Audiolingual Method, also widely known as Aural-Oral approach, Structural approach and Pattern Method, advocated aural training first then pronunciation training, followed by speaking, reading, and writing. Its primary objective is to attain oral proficiency. This method derived from the Army Method which focused on aural-oral skills under the program called Army Specialized Training Program (ASTP). During the World War II the Army Method was used to help American military personnel attain conversational proficiency in foreign languages. As America became the major international power, the traditional foreign teaching method was not able to satisfy the needs of Americans. Thus by the mid-fifties, the combination of the Army Method and the “informant method” proposed by Leonard Bloomfield contributed the emergence of the Audiolingual Method.

After that, courses and materials for teaching English were developed by university scholars, including Charles Fries who was trained in the structural linguistics. He advocated that language should be taught systematically and intensive oral drilling of sentence patterns should be a necessity. Perhaps, the saying “practice makes perfect” can well illustrate his proposal. Language was identified with speech, and speech was approached through structure. Affected by linguists such as Charles Fries, Audiolingual theory of language derived from structural linguistics. Language is considered as a system consisting of phonemes, morphemes, words, structures and sentence, and the primary element is oral speech. What’s more, in the 1950s, the behavioral psychology claiming to have tapped the secrets of all human learning enjoyed great popularity. It advocated learning depended on three vital elements: stimulus, response and reinforcement. Language learning occurs when learners master stimulus-response chains, thus a process of habit formation is focused. And drills, involving repetition of sentence patterns, was used as an activity to train learners’ oral ability. Along with dialogues, the two teaching activities form the primary audiolingual classroom practices. At first, Dialogues provide learners with learning material and context, and through learning them, learners can master correct phonetic knowledge. Then some selective grammatical patterns from the dialogue become the focus of later drills. In order to make learners master these patterns, drills and pattern exercises are used, for drills and pattern exercises provide chances for learners to practice their oral speech. Since behavioral psychology laid the learning foundation of the Audiolingual Method, imitation is quite important during the learning process, so teachers should try to teach in target language, only very little use of the mother tongue is permitted. Students are also requested to produce error-free utterance, for successful response is crucial to form habits. Therefore, what we have mentioned above are features, theories and teaching practices of the Audiolingual Method.

2. The Significance of the Audiolingual Method

With the continuous reform in the new curriculum, to some extent, the teaching focus of English has changed from the cultivation of reading ability to integrated English language competence. Especially, the new curriculum emphasizes the training of learners’ oral ability in order to make learners can really use English for communication. Nowadays, English is still the most widely used language in the world. For most international conferences and forums, English is considered to formal language. People increasingly realize that the aim of learning English is to use it for communication, so the communicative function of language is focused. The Audiolingual Method whose primary focus is listening and speaking still enjoys great popularity in the teaching of English. It’s said at present a lot of outstanding junior and senior schools are adopting this teaching method to train their students’ oral ability. Many gifted and motivated teachers in china used the Audiolingual Method with great success. From the aspect of students, the Audiolingual Method can provide them opportunities for practicing English, for this method suggests adopting English in the teaching and learning process so that students can have approach to use English. Besides, the Audiolingual Method emphasizes the importance of sentence patterns. So if necessary,

it will require students repeatedly imitate, read and even rote it. Although we now advocate meaning learning, we can't deny the benefits of recitation, especially for those beginners. At last, as the emphasis on sentence patterns, students can systematically input what they have learned, thus make their output productively. To better know how to appropriately apply the Audiolingual Method to teaching English, the followings are illustrations of its advantages and disadvantages.

3. Advantages of the Audiolingual Method

As a teaching method widely used in teaching foreign and second language, the Audiolingual Method certainly has its own peculiar charm. As far as I'm concerned, there are a great many advantages of it. Firstly, the method is able to train learners' English thought. Since the Audiolingual Method require teachers try to just use English to teach, or use very little Chinese during the teaching process. This practice will lower the interruption from Chinese though patterns, thus gradually cultivating learners to think in English patterns. As we know, most foreign language beginners get used to translating what they have listened into their mother tongue for memorization, and before they need to express them out, these beginners will translate what they store to target language with the help of thinking pattern of their mother tongue. Obviously, the expression transformed in that way is inauthentic, and we Chinese often call them "Chinglish". So if teachers involve English for teaching and learners involve English for learning, interruption from mother tongue will be reduced to certain degree, thus cultivating learners' habit of English thinking.

Secondly, compared with grammar memorization, sentence pattern practice are more easily mastered and applied by learners. Many linguists have proved the effectiveness of pattern teaching. They believe patterns is not only equipped with structural meaning but also vocabulary and sociocultural meaning, and they are modes of syntactic structures which are typical patterns selected from large number of sentences. Each sentence pattern reflects certain linguistic phenomenon. In fact, sentence pattern are the realization of dull grammar. So once learners practice these sentence patterns and become familiar with them, then use them fluently in communication, they acquire grammar and oral ability at the same time. Thirdly, the Audiolingual Method advocates is an effective improvement and supplement for the previous Direct Method. Both of the two teaching methods' primary focus of foreign language teaching is listening and speaking, followed by reading and writing, which is able to exert a prominent effect on cultivating oral proficiency. However, the Direct Method absolutely forbids involving mother tongue in the process of teaching foreign language, thus ignoring the monitor function of the mother tongue. During the teaching process, teachers are not allowed to use mother tongue even a little, which makes it difficult to explain some significant linguistic phenomenon, leading learners can just understand what they hear by means of language sense and guessing. Different from the Direct Methods, the Audiolingual Method advocates using mother tongue appropriately, not forbidding using it. In some circumstances, the mother tongue can be employed as a means for explaining ambiguous sentences and grammar. Besides according to studies, the mother tongue plays an indispensable part in foreign language teaching, and more and more people have gradually realized it so that at

present effective foreign language teaching must involve an appropriate amount of mother tongue. Therefore, undoubtedly, the Audiolingual Method advanced the development of foreign language teaching at that time.

Fourthly, the Audiolingual Method is able to make a positive influence on correct habit formation. It well known that the learning theory of this method is behavioral psychology, emphasizing the significance of practice. It holds the view that foreign language learning is a mechanical habit-formation process, and good habits are formed based on correct response to stimulus. So in the Audiolingual Method, we can see drills and sentence practice are the primary activity. In order to cultivate learners' good language habits, errors are often immediately corrected by teachers. Although later it's proved immediate error correction isn't a good choice for language learning, we can't deny its positive effects. When errors appear, the teachers point out them and demonstrate how to correct these errors, which no doubt will cultivate learners' correct habit of pronunciation and oral speech. Last but not least, contrastive analysis involved in the Audiolingual Method can contribute to identifying teaching difficulties. Structural linguistics view language as a system of structurally related elements, including phonemes, morphemes, words, structures and sentences. Through contrasting structures between the target language and mother tongue, it helps to find out difficulties in learning the target language. At the same time, the Audiolingual Method also emphasize on the contrastive practice of pronunciation, such as long vowels and short vowels so that beginners can distinguish the two different types of vowels. Besides, various verbal tenses are often contrasted in this method. By means of such kind of contrastive analysis, learners can understand the differences between their mother tongue and the target language, thus trying to avoid making unnecessary errors. What's more, in order to vividly present teaching contents, the Audiolingual Method suggests adopting intuitive teaching tools, such as visual and auditory equipment. It believes intuitive teaching tools can make a deep impression on learners with teaching contents, thus improving the teaching efficiency. At the same time, the employment of audio-visual aids, including PowerPoint, tape, movie and language lab can make a strong stimulus to learners, so they can be highly motivated. Especially, language labs can keep a comparatively quiet and independent space for language learners so that they won't be interrupted when they are accepting listening training.

4. Shortcomings of the Audiolingual Method

Perhaps, it's these advantages mentioned above that make the Audiolingual Method widespread use in the 1960s when it was applied to teach both foreign language and second language. Even English 900 and Lado English Series are the products of this method. However, after prevailing for about two decades, lots of criticism came. In summary, there are following several shortcomings of the Audiolingual Method.

First of all, the theoretical foundations the Audiolingual Method were attacked as being unsound both in terms of language theory and learning theory. As for the language theory, the Audiolingual Method is in favor of structural linguistics, while the structural linguist examined

only the overtly observable data with no assumption that human beings have cognitive processes. In the 1960s the generative-transformational school of linguistics emerged through the influence of Noam Chomsky. What Noam Chomsky believes is that language is not simply made up of observable elements. Being able to speak language, one not only needs to master language knowledge but also language competence. Only one masters the deep structure-meaning that one can perform language well. On the other side, for the theory of learning, behavioristic psychology ignores the function of logic thinking in the learning of foreign language teaching and the creativity of language application. It can't explain underlying motivations and deeper structures of human behavior, instead it can just explain observable phenomenon. But language learning is far from such simple observable behaviors. It involves the cognitive processes of human beings, so later cognitive psychology, taking a contrasting theoretical stance, came to its power. It holds the view that meaning, understanding, and knowledge are significant data. Cognitivists try to discover psychological principles of organization and functioning instead of focusing mechanistically on stimulus-response connections. The appearance of cognitive psychology reveals the insufficiency of behavioristic psychology. Therefore, the theoretical foundations of the Audiolingual Method ignored the mental properties of people. It focused on mechanically practice without certain context, which is harmful to cultivate learners' creativity and communicative ability.

What's more, just as the situational language teaching, the Audiolingual Method is a teacher-dominated method. In the classroom, teachers usually control the teaching process. In other words, the teachers play active and central roles in the teaching process. They instruct students to do lots of practices, and students just do as what their teachers said passively without involving their own ideas. This kind of practice doesn't consider how students think about their learning, such as how student internalize knowledge after accepting the information from teachers. At the same time, teachers don't teach students in accordance of their aptitude. One prominent feature is that students are even not encouraged to initiate to interaction because this may lead to mistakes. Students are just required listen to the teacher carefully and imitate accurately. Once mistakes are found, teachers will correct these mistakes immediately because they believe correct imitation will promote the formation of good habits. However, immediate error correction will do harm to students' confidence, making them feel frustrated in learning foreign language, which may impede them for further language learning. Instead, teachers should create a kind of relaxing atmosphere and encourage students to speak the target language. No matter what students say, the teachers should give positive response, not just focus on mistakes. Mistakes should be considered to be acceptable so that students can dare to express what they think about freely. Through this way, teachers can more easily learn about the students and know how to motivate students to learn, thus gradually cultivating their ability of using language. Therefore, in order not to damage students' confidence, immediate error correction should be controlled.

The Audiolingual Method exceedingly concentrated on the teaching of linguistic elements, such as words and sentence patterns, ignoring the factors of society, culture and communication. The teaching materials pay much attention to grammar and sentence patterns and teaching contents

are mainly organized by teachers. Drills and dialogues are main teaching forms. In a dialogue, pronunciation is focused, after that some selective patterns are transformed into drills and practiced by students again and again. Usually, such kind of teaching procedure is lack of backgrounds and contexts. Students just imitate their teachers to pronounce items and patterns and know little about in which circumstance to use them, for they hardly know the culture of the target language. On structural linguistics, the Audiolingual Method views language as a system of phonemes, grammar and vocabulary, ignoring its communicative function. As a result, students know how to speak certain words but not know when to use them. In order to attain oral proficiency, we need not only master its form and using rules, but also the situation of using it. The Audiolingual Method advocates learning dialogues through imitation and repetition. As a consequence, students can't make sentences by themselves or just make stiff sentences. So it's hard for them to really improve their language proficiency. And they can't flexibly apply what they have learned in class to real-life communication. Moreover, too much attention to the mechanical training of structural forms and ignorance the content and meaning of language will make it difficult to master the grammar system. Perhaps, students will feel frustrated and bored to learning.

Finally, to some extent, the Audiolingual Method has neglected the cultivation of reading and writing. Although the general teaching principle of this method is aural and pronunciation first, followed by reading and writing, its teaching procedures really focus more on cultivating listening and speaking. As we know, listening, speaking, writing and reading are four main skills, which play equal roles in language learning. The Audiolingual Method mainly trains students' listening and speaking competence, and it doesn't focus on the training of reading and writing.

5. Conclusion and Implications

Just as we have mentioned above, some advantages of the Audiolingual Method are worth of learning, while those shortcomings should be carefully treated and avoided. In view of the characteristics of the method, it would be better to apply it to teaching English beginners. From the perspective of psychology, children and students in preschool age do well in imitation and repetition, for they haven't developed the cognitive system completely. Moreover, in the beginning stage of learning English, students are more needed to practice their pronunciation in order to lay a foundation for their oral expression ability. Since the Audiolingual Method marked the beginning of the technological age in language teaching. And it emphasized the need for visual presentation and the possibility of eliciting language from visual cues. As the advance of technology, many multimedia technologies should be applied to foreign language teaching. Human beings are innately sensitive to sound and images. If English teaching can be combined with sound and images, no doubt it will make a much deeper impression on students, thus promoting their learning. By means of resources from the internet, English teachers are able to improve the efficiency of the Audiolingual Method. Considering the shortcomings existing in this method, in the real teaching process, teachers can combine this method with other teaching methods, such as communicative method. For example, when learning words and patterns, teachers can advise students to make

dialogues through the form of group cooperation so as to improve their communicative ability. Also, teachers can create a situation similar to the real one and lead students to solve problems with what they have learned. In a word, if teachers can objectively realize the advantages and shortcomings of the Audiolingual Method, it will better serve for teaching.

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