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THE HISTORY OF TEACHING LEARNING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE AT THE EARLY AGES

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Abstract. This article offers an overview of historical developments in EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching methodology over the last 250 years. Being based on periods rather than methods, it is intended as an alternative kind of account to the 'method mythologies' which have tended to dominate professional thinking for the last thirty years. Thus, we structure our account according to four periods characterized by main concerns and overall approaches, revealing greater continuity and overlap among teaching theories and practices than in accounts which accept discrete, bounded 'methods' as the primary unit of organization. Also known as the grammatical approach is a traditional method in English learning and one of the first methods one might encounter in studying the language. English courses in this method often focus on translating written literary pieces from English to the learners' native tongue. The English language teaching tradition has been subject to tremendous change, especially throughout the twentieth century. Perhaps more than any other discipline, this tradition has been practiced, in various adaptations, in language classrooms all around the world for centuries. While the teaching of Mathematics or Physics, that is, the methodology of teaching Mathematics or Physics, has, to a greater or lesser extent, remained the same, this is hardly the case with English or language teaching in general. As will become evident in this short paper, there are some milestones in the development of this tradition, which we will briefly touch upon, in an attempt to reveal the importance of research in the selection and implementation of the optimal methods and techniques for language teaching and learning.

Key Words:historical developments, English learning, language teaching, methodology, adaptations, education settings, grammar teaching, grammatical rules.

Introduction. Since the publication of Howatt thirty years ago there has only been a limited amount of original research into the history of English language teaching for speakers of other languages. Some important monographs have been published about English teaching in particular countries, largely in languages other than English. Although these developments have been promising, the research that has been carried out has had relatively little impact on professional discourse, where over-simplified 'procession-of-methods' views of the past have remained common. 'Potted histories' have tended to prevail which reproduce a kind of mythology intended to set off the past from the present, itself viewed as superior.

The limitations of such accounts have recently been indicated and we shall be focusing on three of the major limitations here, namely (1) they tend to over-emphasize the prevalence of breaks or 'paradigm shifts' rather than continuity and tradition (or, at least, they highlight differences between methods rather than similarities); (2) they give equal weight to all the methods selected for consideration rather than indicating relative historical importance; and (3) they presents methods as universal in relevance rather than as locally as well as historicall-y constituted phenomena. We suggest, then, that there is a pressing need for a replacement kind of overall history of mainstream EFL methodology to serve as an antidote to the method mythologies which are so dominant — an account concise and memorable enough to have impact, and yet based on original research rather than a kind of handed-down hearsay, and not misrepresenting the past by means of artificial method boundaries. In this article, we therefore

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propose a synoptic structure within which the history of EFL methodology, from a British and European perspective, might be easy to grasp as a whole, and which can thereby be used as an alternative, or at least complement to, existing method-based accounts, for example in teacher education settings.

In countering the idea of constant paradigm shift and instead demonstrating continuity, a periodization approach is both necessary and problematic. Here, building on but synthesizing and, in the process, revising our previous separate work, Footnote1 we present a new division into four periods of activity over the past 250 years, each of which seems to be sufficiently different from the other three to stand alone. In theory this would simply result in three transitions as one period moved to the next. However, the overview is not as straightforward as that. Up until the end of the second period (around 1920), there is a clear focus on Europe, but with very little consideration of teaching English as a foreign language as distinct from the teaching of other languages. In the 1920s, however, work connected specifically with the developing role of English outside Europe — in Asia, especially — suddenly, and quite unexpectedly, became dominant in the mainstream history of ELT (English Language Teaching for speakers of other languages), as seen from our UK-based perspective. This is not to deny the importance of continuing developments in European school systems, but simply to say that during the years up to around 1970 the mainstream history of TEFL was to be more influenced by the work of English language teaching theorists in countries like Japan, China, and India, brought back to the UK after World War II, than by contemporary work in Europe, or by any particularly new thinking in Britain itself. In both the synoptic overview presented below and in the ensuing commentary, we fill in details about these four periods with reference to two further headings: (1) a short phrase identifying what seems to us to have been the ‘core concern’ of the period in question, and (2) the names of what we perceive to be the ‘main’ teaching methods commonly associated with each period. Although, for reasons already explained above, we favor a primary division by periods rather than by methods, we wish to show how different methods which are commonly discussed can be ‘mapped into’ the periods we have identified, in order to maintain a continuity with existing thinking in the profession.

In the 20th century, in the US, scholars endorsed a method known as The Reading Approach. This method was primarily concerned with developing reading competencies in the target language. This was applied in most schools in the United States, until World War II when the need for the military to speak and understand foreign languages became imminent. Following up on this urgency, the US government, with the help of language and behavioral specialists, invented and implemented The Audiolingual Approach. The Audiolingual Approach prioritized listening and speaking and avoided the use of students' first language in the classroom. It also relied on mechanical repetition and accuracy of speech using repetitive drills (Essberge & Tefl.NET Team, n.d). In another part of the world, Britain developed The Situational Approach to teaching foreign languages. It organized the language into functions used in various situations, then encouraged students to repeat the chunks of language as a group. Although the history of foreign language education has been influenced by many ideas and theories, in general, it can be said that there have always been two approaches to teaching. One is the practical, direct, or inductive approach, and the other is the analytical, descriptive, and utilitarian approach. These variations and combinations have been systematized and described in more detail by many linguists and are still being applied in various educational facilities around the world. In the late 20th and 21st centuries, foreign language teaching terminologies were also established. That is why now we understand that in an approach, we are describing a set of assumptions, principles, or beliefs about language teaching. The method refers to an overall plan comprised of strategies

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and a system for presenting and teaching a language in the classroom. And finally, a technique refers to a specific activity implemented in the classroom.

In the Western world back in the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries, foreign language learning was associated with the learning of Latin and Greek, both supposed to promote their speakers' intellectuality. At the time, it was of vital importance to focus on grammatical rules, syntactic structures, along with rote memorization of vocabulary and translation of literary texts. There was no provision for the oral use of the languages under study; after all, both Latin and Greek were not being taught for oral communication but for the sake of their speakers' becoming "scholarly?" or creating an illusion of "erudition." Late in the nineteenth century, the Classical Method came to be known as the Grammar Translation Method, which offered very little beyond an insight into the grammatical rules attending the process of translating from the second to the native language.

Conclusion. From all the above we can see that the manageable stockpile of research of just a few decades ago has given place to a systematic storehouse of information. Researchers the world over are meeting, talking, comparing notes, and arriving at some explanations that give the lie to past explanations. As Brown (2000: ix) notes, "Our research miscarriages are fewer as we have collectively learned how to conceive the right questions". Nothing is taken as gospel; nothing is thrown out of court without being put to the test. This "test" may always change its mechanics, but the fact remains that the changing winds and shifting sands of time and research are turning the desert into a longed-for oasis. This was the period during which what we now call the Grammar-Translation Method was the standard classroom approach. Although lip-service was paid to the importance of utilitarian objectives, the principal aim of most foreign language teaching in schools was typically literary, if only to deflect some of the criticism coming from the classicists that modern languages were 'soft options. The central role of grammar teaching is familiar enough, but it is not always known that the addition of practice exercises consisting of sentences for translation was prompted by the needs of younger learners. It is therefore rather ironic that it was this feature which attracted the most adverse attention later on, giving rise to a host of 'pen of my aunt' jokes. Exaggeration and excess became the hallmarks of the method by the late nineteenth century, and these, together with the continued failure to treat the spoken language with the respect it deserved, led to a demand for root-and-branch reform that had to be addressed.

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