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Eclectic Approach for English Language Teaching: Concept and Considerations

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Abstract: The discipline of English Language Teaching has been distinguished by its preoccupation with innovative theories and strategies of teaching English effectively and constructively since its emergence. Over the years, ELT has provided several fascinating approaches, methods and techniques of language learning. Especially the recent history of ELT has been characterized by frequent innovations and developments. These diverse approaches and methods have their unique individual advantages as well as limitations depending on various factors. It leads the scholars and academicians towards the eclectic approach, which is a blend of suitable approaches and methods applied according to the needs of the learners and the social-cultural context. The eclectic approach appears to be utilitarian as well as appealing in a contemporary time. Hence, this paper seeks to explore and examine the concept of eclectic approach for English language teaching along with various aspects of it. It also focuses on evaluating its pedagogical implications.

Key Words: Eclectic approach, English Language Teaching, language learning, pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The language teaching history of English has been characterized by the search for innovative and effective ways of teaching language. Due to the globalization, language learning, especially learning English, has become essential. ELT, as a discipline in contemporary form, emerged chiefly in the early 20th century. Even though a lot has been discussed about various approaches and methods along with their advantages and disadvantages, the teachers and scholars continue to explore new options and instructional strategies for effective language teaching.

Language teaching in the 20th century was characterized by frequent change and innovation along with the development of diverse language teaching ideologies. As Richard and Rodgers (2001) note, “much of the impetus for change in approaches to language teaching came about from changes in teaching methods.” (2001, p. 1) Methods and approaches of teaching the English language are co-relative yet, there is a marked difference between approach and method.



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1.1. What is an Approach and a Method?

The American applied linguist Edward M Anthony (1963) defines approach as “a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language teaching and learning.” (1963, p. 63) It elucidates “the nature of the subject matter to be taught.” (1963, p. 64) Whereas he describes the method as “an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach.” (1963, p. 65) To elaborate further, “an approach is axiomatic, a method is procedural.” (1963, p. 65) Approaches are the materials needed for the purpose, whereas methods are the ways through which materials are being used. Providing more clarity, Manuel states, “an approach is a way of looking at teaching and learning. Underlying any language teaching approach is a theoretical view of what language is, and of how it can be learnt. An approach gives rise to methods, the way of teaching something, which use classroom activities or techniques to help learners learn.” (para. 1) Thus, an approach is about what to teach, and the method is about how to teach.

The history of English language teaching presents a fascinating range of approaches and methods. However, what works with one learner may not work with another. There are different kinds of learners in every classroom. This variety in learning ability tends to invent a variety of methods and approaches to teach English.

All the approaches and methods have their own pros and cons depending on the types of learners, their learning requirements as well as the cultural and social context. This leads the scholars and academicians towards the eclectic approach, which is a blend of suitable approaches and methods applied according to the needs of the learners and the social-cultural context. Hence, it becomes essential to discuss various methods and approaches of English Language Teaching in order to understand the eclectic approach.

2. Various Methods and Approaches

Following are the major methods and approaches that have commonly remained in practice and discussion of English Language Teaching.



2.1. Grammar-Translation Method

The Grammar-Translation Method was the earliest formalized method that was in use chiefly from the 1840s to 1890s. This method focuses on the emphasis on detailed learning and analysis of grammar rules, and the translation of the text into and out of the target language. It focuses on the memorizing the rules and facts in order to take understand and use morphology and the syntax of the target language, English in this context. (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 5-7) The medium of instruction is usually the mother language. Further, the setting is teacher-centric with the lack of interaction with and among the learners. As noted by Krashen (1982), the limitation of the method is that the focus is on form instead of meaning which leads to the failure of the method. (1982, p. 129)

2.2. Direct Method

Proposed and advocated by Charles Berlitz, the Direct method emerged in the early 1990s. The method receives this name as the language is taught directly in the target language with the help of oral communication, demonstrations and visual aids, encouraging the direct and spontaneous usage of language. It also emphasizes on correct pronunciations, vocabulary and grammar. Speech and listening comprehension are given major importance. However, the British applied linguist Henry Sweet has recognized its limitation that it offered innovations at the level of teaching procedures but lacked a thorough methodological basis.

2.3. The Audio-lingual Method

Audio-lingual method emerged in the 1950s chiefly as a result of the need to become orally proficient after the outbreak of World War II. The basic ideas of which this method grows were, that language is a set of habits, and language is speech, not writing. It also believed that the practice of the dialogues would develop oral language proficiency. The starting point is a linguistic syllabus, which contains the key items of phonology, morphology, and syntax of the language arranged according to their order of presentation, practising these patterns by systematic attention to pronunciation and intensive oral drilling. The major limitation of this method was that it was observed learners being not able of transferring skills learnt in class



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to communicate meaningfully outside the classroom.

2.4. Structural Approach

The structural approach is “the presentation and practice of carefully selected and graded grammatical structures of English in effective, meaningful situations, initially through speech and later through reading and writing. Language is viewed as structurally related elements for the encoding of meaning – the elements being phonemes, morphemes, words, structures and sentence types.” (Nagaraj, 2008, p. 22) This approach is established around two principles: language is primarily speech, and a language is a set of habit. The syllabus for this approach is designed upon a word list and structural activities. Grammar teaching involves a situational presentation of new sentence patterns and drills to practise these patterns. The teacher moves from controlled to freer practise of structures and from oral use of sentence patterns to their automatic use in speech, reading and writing.

2.5. Lexical Approach

According to Natinger (1989), a lexical approach in language teaching refers to “the belief that the building blocks of language learning and communication are not grammar, functions, notions, or some other unit of planning and teaching, but lexis, that is, words and word combinations.” (1989, p. 338) The Lexical syllabus is based on computer studies that have previously identified the most commonly used words. This approach in teaching focuses on vocabulary acquisition and teaching lexical chunks in order of their frequency and use. Lexical Approach places a great emphasis on authentic materials and realistic scenarios for more valuable learning. The limitation of this approach is that, while the lexical approach can be a quick way for students to learn commonly used phrases, it doesn't foster much creativity. It can have the negative side effect of limiting learner's responses to safe fixed phrases, not learning the intricacies of language. (Natinger, 1989, p. 343)

2.6. Communicative Approach

Communicative approach refers to a set of principles that reflect a communicative view of language



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teaching and that can be used to support a wide variety of classroom procedures. The Communicative Approach in language teaching emerges from a theory that considers language as communication. Therefore, the aim of language teaching is to develop what Hymes (1972) referred to as “communicative competence”. (1972, p. 269) Various techniques like language games, mind engaging tasks, role play, retrieving text order, group work are used in this approach. Nagaraj (2008) mentions three principles of this approach. First is the communication principle: activities that involve real communication promote learning. Another is the task principle: Activities in which language is used for carrying out meaningful tasks promote learning. Lastly, the meaningfulness principle: Language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process. (2008, p. 44)

2.7. Humanistic Approaches

Influenced by principles of psychology and psychotherapy, humanistic approaches developed in the 70s and 80s mainly in US. Humanistic approaches are those that blend what the student feels, thinks and knows with what he is learning in the target language. It helps “build rapport, cohesiveness, and caring that far transcend what is already there ... help students to be themselves, to accept themselves, and be proud of themselves ... help foster a climate of caring and sharing in the foreign language class.” (Moskowitz, 1978, p. 2) The approach involves methods such as the silent way, total physical response, suggestopedia and community language teaching.

There are a few more minor methods and approaches such as the reading method, the bilingual method, the situation method, cognitive code approach and so on.

3. Eclectic Approach

From the discussion above, it can be observed that each of the individual methods and approaches have advantages and disadvantages, and no single method or approach is perfectly apt to the dynamic classroom context, especially the Indian classroom. Hence, based on the shortcoming of the methods, Brown (2002) argues that eclecticism provides the solution to this challenge as it allows the teacher to choose what works



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within their own dynamic contexts. (2002, p. 17)

The eclectic approach now has become common in teaching English. Rather than teachers following a single specific methodology, the eclectic approach of teaching English refers to the combination of various approaches and methodology of language teaching in the classroom, based on the learning requirements and aims of the lessons and learners. Almost all modern coursebooks use multiple approaches and methodologies, which is an example of the application of the eclectic approach.

3.1. Definition and Concept

In the present academic context, Kumar (2013) states that “the eclectic method is a combination of different methods of teaching and learning approaches”. (2013, p. 1) Larsen-Freeman (2000) has used the term ‘principled eclecticism’ to describe a desirable, coherent, pluralistic approach to language teaching. Further, Gao (2011) describes it “as not a concrete, single method, but a method, which combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing and includes some practice in the classroom.” (2011, p. 1) He further adds that the contemporary preferred teaching methods are an integration of grammar-translation method, structural method and CLT. He also suggests teachers to take advantage of all other methods while avoiding their disadvantages. Similarly, Wali (2009) states.

“one of the premises of eclecticism is that teaching should serve learners not methods. Thus, teachers should feel free in choosing techniques and procedures inside the classroom. There is no ideal approach in language learning. Each one has its merits and demerits. There is no royalty to certain methods. Teachers should know that they have the right to choose the best methods and techniques in any method according to learners’ needs and learning situation. Teachers can adopt a flexible method and technique so as to achieve their goals. They may choose whatever works best at a particular time in a particular situation.” (2009, p. 40)

As implied by scholars, the eclectic approach does not confine the teacher to the prescriptions of a particular method or approach, but is free to draw from a vast range of methods and resources to teach a



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specific topic according to the requirement and compatibility of the learners. Moreover, the learners are different and have different ways of learning. Therefore, it is helpful to use the eclectic approach as it strives to respond to the diversities that usually exist in the classroom. Thus, the eclectic approach promotes flexibility for effective teaching.

3.2. Characteristics of Eclectic Approach

The eclectic approach is not rigid, thus, its characteristics may not be limited to the ones discussed here. Ali (1981, p. 7) lists the following principles of eclecticism:

- Teachers are given a chance to choose different kinds of teaching techniques in each class period to reach the aims of the lesson.
- There is flexibility in choosing any aspect or method that teachers think suitable for teaching inside the classroom.
- Learners can see different kinds of teaching techniques, using different kinds of teaching aids, that help to make lessons much more stimulating and ensures better understanding of the material on the other hand.
- Solving difficulties that may emerge from the presentation of the textbook materials.
- Finally, it saves both time and effort in the presentation of language activities.

Further, Errors are considered to be part of the learning process. It also involved both inductive and deductive approach in teaching grammar. It also views language as a whole and advocates learner-centric classrooms. Lastly, Mwanza notes that, “the eclectic approach is situational or context-specific.” and therefore, “the understanding and application of the eclectic approach should be localized or contextualized to teaching and learning contexts,” (2017, p. 58) He further adds, “This is the reason why ... teachers need to be well informed about the method if they are to apply it successfully. ... and teachers, with the knowledge of what factors surround their class, will decide how to contextualize the method so that it serves



the learning needs of the learners. (2017, p. 58)

3.3. Benefits of Eclectic Approach

Studies show that there are several benefits of using the eclectic approach, which provides the language teacher with a range of alternatives and embraces all the four language skills of speaking, reading, writing and listening. Kumar (2013) states the following benefits of the eclectic approach (as cited in Mwanza, 2017, p. 61):

- It is easier for learners to understand the language of the text in its cultural context.
- It blends listening, speaking, reading and writing.
- It helps teacher to teach effectively by drawing on the strength of various methods and avoiding their weaknesses.
- Learning is easy due to the use of realistic situations in the classroom

Kumar (2013) further notes that it is learner-centered, context-sensitive, live, motivating, participatory, a variety of classroom activities and tasks. Learners know what is expected of them. It is flexible and accommodative to the exigencies of the classroom during the lesson. In addition, it is also objective correlative and produces fast results since it responds to the needs of learners of diverse characteristics. (Kumar, 2013, p.3)

3.4. Limitations of Eclectic Approach

Even though the eclectic approach is idealized as the best approach in English Language Teaching, it also has few disadvantages. Mwanza (2017, p. 61-62) states the following disadvantages of this approach provided by Weidemann's study:

- It cuts teachers off from a reconsideration of their professional practices. In a word, it discourages them to reflect upon their teaching. They have made up their minds; they will use anything that works which can obtain results and is safe from ideological excesses.

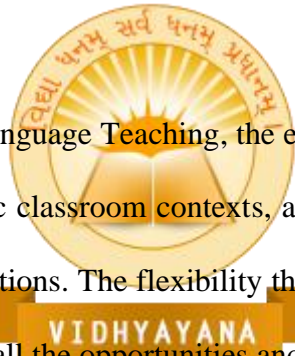


- Adopting the eclectic approach can be unsafe as a teacher may fall victim of the methodological baggage that comes with it.
- Mixing all manner of methods and approaches may result in gathering in one's teaching arsenal; but using such a mixed bag can lead to all kinds of conflicts.
- When introduced to new methods and techniques, teachers, in their haste to integrate these into their traditional styles of teaching forget about the rationale for the techniques altogether.
- If an innovative technique is used only occasionally, and mixed in with other (potentially contradictory ones), the effect of the new is diluted.

However, the given limitations could be justified only due to the inadequacy of the teacher. Hence, the role of the teacher remains vital.

4. Conclusion

Out of all the approaches of English Language Teaching, the eclectic approach is observed to be the most suitable approach for diverse and dynamic classroom contexts, as it absorbs the strengths of other methods and approaches and eliminates their limitations. The flexibility that it offers in teaching is one of the biggest advantages of this approach. Considering all the opportunities and freedom that it offers, the application of it proves beneficial to both the teachers and learners on multiple levels.





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