

Listening skill in learning English!

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A b s t r a c t

“The Classical Method” has been used for teaching English in Thailand for over one hundred years. It is a separated skill approach, emphasizing grammatical rules, and there is hardly any interaction between the teacher and students. The result is that students lack communicative experiences and self - confidence in using English. This method, therefore, is not suitable for non – English speakers, especially Thai students who live in the non- English speaking society.

A more suitable approach for Thai students may be ***The Eclectic Approach*** that integrates the four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. “ Language ” is inherent for human beings since everybody learns by imitating original sounds and gradually developing language skills from those inherent language abilities.

Teaching English to non – native speakers by the integrated skill approach must start using ***listening, speaking, writing and reading skills*** respectively. Unless a teacher follows this approach, teaching English may not be successful. Human’s sound organs produce “language”, so to imitate the sound, a student should listen to original or native sounds and repeat them so as to be able to use them naturally. The techniques of teaching should be flexible and are dependent on the experiences of the teacher and the background of students. To fulfill the objective of learning English is more important than fixed styles.

Introduction

For almost a century, the Grammar – Translation Method has been applied in teaching English in Thailand. This method at one time was called “ The Classical Method ” since it was first used in teaching classical languages such as Latin, and Greek. The objectives of this method are: firstly to teach students to become more familiar with the grammar of their native language through the study of the grammar of the target language. Secondly, it teaches students to be able to read the literature of the target language comprehensively (Freeman 1986: 4).

The process of the Grammar – Translation method as applied in Thailand is that all four skills of learning a language have been taught separately . For example, listening skills are taught by having students listen to English audio lessons in the English laboratory rooms; speaking skills in the class are accomplished by encouraging students to communicate with the teacher, their friends or both without integration of the listening skills; writing skills are achieved by having students learn English grammar and answer grammatical questions or writing some short compositions, and reading skills are handled by having students read after whatever the teacher reads and do whatever they are assigned to do .

Even though there are quite a lot of integrated skill textbooks which are used compulsorily in many schools, the four skills still are not being integrated because the teachers are comfort to be teaching them speaking and it has already become the classical teaching method used. The result of this process is that Thai students have spent at least 15 years learning English, from kindergarten school up to undergraduate level, and are not able to use English at the end of that time. Only a small percentage of those who have had the opportunity to improve themselves abroad can use English for career progression .

In my opinion, one of the best English teaching approaches for Thai students who are English new comers, is *the Eclectic Approach*. The Eclectic Approach is a flexible language – learning method. Its teaching style is a combination of all techniques used in all approaches. The teacher carefully considers and selects what he or she thinks, is suitable for his or her students. For English new comers, especially Thai students, the teaching techniques should start with the listening skill integrated with the other three skills: speaking, reading and writing skills respectively. It means that the four skills must be taught integrally and not separately. This is one of the important techniques of the Eclectic

Approach. The reason is that “language” is ‘the species – specific’ and ‘specific – uniform’ possession of human. It is human’s inherent faculty that everybody can develop by imitating original sounds (L. Varshney 1977: 1). Psychologists have long observed a child language acquisition begins when babies learn a language by sound remembrance and sound analogy (Uthai Piromruen 2540: 3). Babies begin to learn a language by listening repeatedly to their mother’s sounds and then they imitate the sounds until they can use them naturally. And also for English beginners, English is new. To learn English naturally, they must be taught like babies learning their mother’s language by listening to and repeating the sounds. This is the direct process for non - native speakers to learn any language.

L a n g u a g e – L e a r n i n g M e t h o d s :

Discussed below are some basic techniques and popular approaches that show the different objectives and learning techniques of each approach.

At first, some technical terms about language learning methods should be defined. The word “*Method*” or “*Approach*” is comprised of “*Principles*” and “*Techniques*.” The principles involve five aspects of second – or foreign – language teaching: the teacher, the learner, the teaching process, the target language and the culture. The principles represent the theoretical framework of the method. The techniques are the behavioral manifestation of the principles – in other words, the classroom activities and procedures derived from an application of the principles (Freeman 1986: vii).

There are several well – known language – teaching methods that are in use today. Some of them have been around for a very long time and most of them have been cited before in one place to another where language – teaching methods have been written about. The following are some of the well – known language – teaching methods.

1. The Grammar – Translation Method
2. The Direct Method
3. The Audio – Lingual Method
4. The Silent Way
5. Suggestopedia
6. Community Language Learning
7. Communicative Approach (Larsen – Freeman 1986: xv)
8. Eclectic Approach (Wheeler 1994: 37)

(1) The Grammar – Translation Method :

- a. The objectives of this method are to teach students to learn grammatical rules of the target language and to teach students to be able to read the literature of the target language.
- b. The characteristic of teaching process is that students are taught to translate from one language to another and to learn the grammar of the target language deductively. And students have to follow the teacher's instruction. (Larsen – Freeman 1996: 4-15)

(2) The Direct Method :

- a. The objectives of the method are to teach students to learn how to use the target language communicatively with people and to think in the target language.
- b. The characteristic of teaching is that students must be able to relate the meaning of the target language directly. The teacher shows the meaning of a new word, or phrase through the use of pictures and other teaching aids. Students speak in the target language as if they were in the real situations. (Larsen – Freeman 1996: 18-28)

(3) The Audio – Lingual Method:

- a. The objective of this method is to teach students to be able to use the target language communicatively.
- b. The technique of teaching is that new vocabularies and dialogues present structures. The dialogues are learned by imitation and repetition. Grammar is taught inductively. Cultural information is in the dialogues presented by the teacher. (Larsen – Freeman 1996: 31 – 48)

(4) The Silent Way:

- a. The objectives of this method are that students should be able to use the target language to express their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions. They have to develop English independently from their teacher and their inner criteria of correctness.
- b. The process of teaching is that students begin to study the target language through its basic building blocks and its sounds.

Later students learn how to spell, read and pronounce the words properly. Grammar is taught with minimal cues. (Larsen – Freeman 1996: 51- 69)

(5) Suggestopia:

- a. The objective of this method is to have students feel comfortable while they are learning the target language.
- b. There is a relaxing environment like easy chair, soft light, and music. Posters and other teaching aids are hung in order to get students' learning peripherally. There are a lot of games, demonstration, songs and so on. (Larsen – Freeman 1996: 72-86)

(6) Community Language Learning:

- a. The objective is to teach students to learn how to use the target language communicatively.
- b. The characteristic of the technique is to have students learn the target language independently. (Larsen – Freeman 1996: 89 – 106)

(7) Communicative Approach:

- a. The objective of the method is to teach students to learn how to communicate in target language naturally. Grammar is not so much emphasized.
- b. The process is that the teacher's role is only a facilitator. (Larsen –Freeman 1996: 123 – 136)

(8) Eclectic Approach:

The objective of this is that the teacher is not limited to only a single method but the teacher can use a selection of appropriate techniques. It is much more flexible than other methods and it can be adapted easily to suit a wide variety of teaching situations (Wheeler 1983:37-38).

Thai students weak at listening skill

One of the big problems for Thai students is that they are weak at listening skills. They might be able to better communicate with foreigners in many aspects if they understood what a foreigner was talking about. So, to help them tackle this problem listening skills should be emphasized as the first learning – technique, which is one of the techniques in *the Eclectic Approach*. In this way, English beginners can come close to reproducing the native language because they can listen to the typical sounds and imitate the sounds until they can understand them naturally. The English learning - techniques through listening skills might vary in many ways, for example;

- a. Listening to English audio lessons facilitated by the teacher.
- b. Listening to what the teacher speaks or reads about in the class.
- c. Listening to native speakers in general conversation.

(A) Listening to English audio lessons:

In many Language institutes, the English audio lessons are provided to students for two or three times and after that students are asked to do the prepared listening tests to check their listening abilities. In my opinion, that is not quite straightforward to the point of developing listening skills. “Skill” is the inherent faculty of human, which must be gradually developed by doing them repeatedly. So, the technique of teaching students listening skills is not only to have them just listen to the English audio lessons, but also to have them repeat and imitate the words, phrases, or the target sentences. Some English sounds are not present in Thai language and become rather difficult for Thai students to pronounce correctly. For example, after having students listen to the video or tape recorder, the teacher should demonstrate them and explain where and how the sounds occur.

(1) A / TH / sound is comprised of two sounds:

- a. as “Voiced” : the sound symbol of / TH / is / ð / such as a word
“ then ” encodes / ðen / , “ brother ” /brʌðð / , “mother”
/mʌðð / and so on.
- b. as “Voiceless” : / θ / such as a word encodes “Fifth” / fi fθ / ,
“ t h i n g ” / θ i ŋ κ / a n d s o o n .

This sound is phonetically called a dental sound occurring between upper teeth and lower teeth slightly touching the tip of tongue.

- (2) To pronounce the suffix “ ED “ in final sound of verbs has got three ways:
- It is pronounced as / id / when it follows / T / and / D / : wanted = / wɒntɪd/ and added = / ədɪd/.
 - as / T / when it follows / p, k, f, ss, sh, ch / such as a word “ stopped ” is pronounced / stɒpt/.
 - as / D / when it follows / b, d, g, v, m, n, l, y, w, / and every vowel such as a word “ called ” encodes / cɔld/ and so on. (Varakney 1977 : 124)

And there are a lot of phonological rules the teacher should emphasize to students and let them repeat the sounds at least two or three times until students can pronounce them correctly.

(B) Listening to and practicing what the teacher teaches in the class

In the class the teacher can select several technique to teach students emphasizing listening skill. That means the teacher opens the audio lessons or reads the passage, dialogue, words, phrases, or sentences to students and tells them to repeat the difficult ones until they become familiar with the sounds and meanings. Through this technique students can learn vocabulary, word sounds, structures, and some rules of grammar. The following are the examples of one of language – learning technique.

Fragment A:

(Students listen to the tape twice about Mr. White shopping at a supermarket and the teacher shows students Mr. White’s picture with a cart full of things.)

Teacher: Right ! Now, Mr. White in the supermarket. He’s shopping. He’s got a cart. What’s in it? Lots of things. Listen to the tape again!

*“He’s got some butter. He hasn’t got any sugar.
He’s got some butter, He hasn’t got any sugar”.*

How do you use these words? Now listen to me!

***“He’s got some butter. He hasn’t got any sugar.
He’s got some butter. He hasn’t got any sugar.”***

Let’s see if you can do it. Somsak! Butter!

- Somsak : He’s got ***some*** butter.
 Teacher: Good! Naree! Tea
 Naree : He’s got ***some*** tea.
 Teacher: Um.....Is that right ? Viyada!
 Viuada : No! he hasn’t got ***any*** tea.
 Teacher: G o o d ! V i y a d a . A g a i n , N a r e e !
 Naree : H e h a s n ’ t g o t ***a n y*** t e a .
 Teacher: Good! Now, when do we use ***some*** and when do we use ***any***? Well, Let’s look at it like this.

(The teacher writes sentences on the blackboard.)

some	Any
He has got <i>some</i> bread He has got <i>some</i> beer.	He has not got <i>any</i> read. He has not got <i>any</i> beer.

- Teacher: Do you understand this?
 Students: Yes!
 Teacher: Good! Well, Let’s try it with another words. Look at the picture.
 What’s in the cart? Linda, coffee?
 Linda: He hasn’t got ***any*** coffee.
 Teacher: Good! Ladda, ice – cream.
 Ladda : He’s got ***some*** ice – cream.
 Teacher: Very good, Ladda! Do you understand now?
 I think you do.
 Let’s try something else. Ask Lawan a question, Boonlert.
 Wine.
 Boonlert : Has he got ***any*** wine ?
 Lawan : No, he hasn’t got ***any*** wine.
 Teacher: Good! Now you write your own sentences using ***some*** and ***any***.

In this lesson, the objective is to teach students grammatical rules: how to use ***some*** and ***any*** in English by integration of listening, speaking, w r i t i n g a n d r e a d i n g s k i l l s .

Fragment B:

(The students have in front of them a large picture of Mr. White in the supermarket. They are familiar with his character now.)

Teacher: (Point) Now, who's this ?

Linda: Mr. White.

Teacher: Where is he ?

Ladda : He is in the supermarket.

Teacher: Good. What is he doing?

Lawan : He's shopping.

Teacher: Yes, he's shopping. Look at his cart. What's in it?

(point)

Somsak : Bread.

Teacher: Y e s , a n d (p o i n t)

Kitti : Butter.

Teacher: That's right. He's got *some* butter. Repeat. Everybody!

Students: He's got *some* butter.

(The teacher now does some choral and individual repetition of this model of a sentence)

Teacher: Good! What about bread?

Sontaya : He's got *some* bread?

Teacher: F i n e ! S o a p ?

Anna : He's got *some* soap.

Teacher: Very good! What about sugar.

Linda: No.

Teacher: No. He hasn't got *any* sugar. Repeat. Everybody!

Students: He hasn't got *any* sugar.

(More choral and individual repetition. The teacher then begins drilling by pointing at the picture or giving word cues.)

Teacher: (P o i n t)

Lawan : He's got *some* bread.

Teacher: Good! Coffee.

Somsak : He hasn't got *any* coffee. (etc., etc.)

(In the next stage, the teacher makes Ladda empty her bag on to his desk. All students look at the objects on the desk.)

Teacher: Ladda's got *some* books.

Students: Y e s .

Teacher: What about sandwiches?

Sakda : No, she hasn't got *any* sandwiches.

Teacher: That's right. Tell me more everybody.

Linda: She's got *some* pencils.
 Teacher: V e r y g o o d , T h o n g , A n y t h i n g e l s e ?
 Thong : She hasn't got *any* cows.
 (*Laughter*)

(C) General conversations with foreigners:

As we have known, the real objective of speaking is to communicate with people. It doesn't matter much about the correctness of a sentence. In daily English a lot of sounds, phrases and idioms are uttered differently from the written English. In Thai society, English beginners rarely have an opportunity to practice English with a native speaker. They are familiar with their Thai teacher's accents that are Thai – English without syllable stress, intonation and so on.

With a little chance to speak with native speakers, Thai students don't have the self – confidence to speak with foreigners, and also feel very stressed. As seen often in many schools or colleges, students refuse to speak when they are asked for the help from foreigners. It doesn't mean they don't have a helping spirit but only that English is the main p r o b l e m .

The best way for English beginners to improve their English by having conversations with native speakers, which can help them be able to listen to native accents, words, phrases, idioms, intonation and other aspects of the language. The most important benefit is that they will feel confident in speaking English. What the teacher can do to help is design projects together. The project may be called "Foreigner tracking." Students are divided into groups of five – six, and the different objectives of the interview are set for each group. Students will go to different places to fulfill their assigned objectives. Before letting them go out, a conversation for the specific purposes must be practiced in class, or students may not be able to communicate with foreigners successfully.

The important thing to remember about this technique is that the date and time must be fixed and listening to the record tapes allows the evaluation. After the tape of each group is played, the teacher must question students about the people, places, and things of interest.

For example:

Teacher: Now, Linda! What's the name of that guy?
 Linda: He's David Minors, sir.
 Teacher: Where's he from, Ladda?
 Ladda : He's from England, sir.
 Teacher: Good! And why does he come to Thailand?
 Thong : To just visit, sir.

- Teacher: How long will he be in Thailand?
 Kanog : For about three weeks.
 Teacher: Where will he go to visit ?
 Nualprang: He will go to visit Chiangmai and other tourist places
 in the North.
 Teacher: Will he visit the South?
 Mongkol: Sorry, we forgot to ask him, sir.
 (Laughter)

C o n c l u s i o n

Thai Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinnavat when he presided over the workshop for the Thai education reformation on the 2nd of June, 2001 at Santi Maitree Building in the government house in Bangkok, said that a new generation who wants to live successfully in a world of global literacy must be able to speak English professionally, use the Internet and know about international cultures. English, therefore, is essential for Thai students not only for success of their life but also for developing the country.

The English – learning methods we have been using for almost a century, should be reformed. The English ability of Thai students already indicates the success or failure of the methods. We need to consider how our children learn a language. They learn a language by natural method, repeating and imitating their mother’s sounds and eventually they can use the language naturally.

In my opinion, learning a second – or foreign language must begin with listening, speaking, writing and reading integrally. The techniques in teaching are dependent on several factors: the students’ background, the textbook, the teacher, and teaching aids. The teacher should not fix himself in only one technique. He or she should choose the technique he or she thinks it is the best for the students.

I think this new Thai generation, if they are taught well, with appropriate English teaching techniques would be able to use English professionally, use the Internet for their world - wide views and develop themselves to live in the boundless world more intelligently. This is one of many important ways by which Thailand would be able to be developed substantially.

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