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The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching

Introduction

Situational language teaching is a term not commonly used today, but it is an approach developed by British applied linguists in the 1930s to the 1960s, and which had an impact on language courses which survive in some still being used today (Richards & Rogers, 1986). This approach shares with the Direct Method the fact that they are both oral approaches except that the Situational Method is more systematic in terms of the principles and procedures that could be applied and the selection of the content of a language course. The focus of this approach was mainly on vocabulary and grammar control, and there was a tendency in the 1920s towards developing systematic principles of selection, gradation and presentation of materials to language learners. In the sixties, there was an emphasis on the principle of introducing and practicing new language points situationally, and 'it was then that the term situational was used increasingly to refer to the Oral Approach' (Richards & Rogers, 1986: 34).

Approach, design and objectives

The Structural view of language is the view behind the Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching. Speech was viewed as the basis of language and structure as being at the heart of speaking ability. This was a view similar to American structuralists, such as Fries, but the notion of the British applied linguists, such as Firth and Halliday, that structures must be presented in situations in which they could be used, gave its distinctiveness to Situational language teaching.

The theory of learning underlying Situational Language Teaching is behaviorism, addressing more the processes, than the conditions of learning. It includes the following principles:

- language learning is habit-formation.
- mistakes are bad and should be avoided, as they make bad habits.
- language skills are learned more effectively if they are presented orally first, then in written form.
• analogy is a better foundation for language learning than analysis.
• the meanings of words can be learned only in a linguistic and cultural context.

Objectives of Situational Language Teaching include the following:
• a practical command of the four basic skills of a language, through structure.
• accuracy in both pronunciation and grammar.
• ability to respond quickly and accurately in speech situations.
• automatic control of basic structures and sentence patterns.

A typical procedure in Situational Language Teaching is as follows:
• Procedures move from controlled to freer practice of structures.
• Procedures move from oral use of sentence patterns to their automatic use in speech, reading and writing.

Points of Criticism

1) Focus is primarily given to speech which was regarded as the basis of language and structure was viewed as being the heart of speaking ability. This led to less importance to other abilities such as writing.

2) This method has been criticized for being time-consuming. Its insistence on giving the meaning of words and structures through dramatization, demonstration and association without resorting to the mother tongue has led to the using of roundabout techniques which are time wasting (Al-Mutawa & Kailani, 1989).

3) The learner is expected to deduce the meaning of a particular structure or vocabulary item from the situation in which it is presented which might lead to confusion on the part of the learner and misunderstanding.

4) The learner is expected to apply the language learned in the classroom to situations outside the classroom. The problem here is that it is not guaranteed that learners would apply what they have learned, and even if they are willing to do so it is not guaranteed that they would be able to do it especially in countries where the language learned is not used frequently.
5) Errors are not tolerated. This could cause stress which may hinder the learning process.

6) Accuracy in both pronunciation and grammar are regarded as crucial.

7) There is no mention to communicative ability and appropriacy in this method.

**Situational Language Teaching in the Saudi Context**

Situational Language Teaching requires long hours of teaching which is not present in the Saudi context. And even if there is enough time for language teaching, the large numbers of students in a class would certainly affect the time that is supposed to be allocated to each student to achieve full mastery of a particular structure. Besides, Situational Language Teaching expects learners to practice the structures they have been taught in their situations outside the class. Unfortunately, this could not be applicable in a country where English is not a language normally practiced.

On the other hand, this approach is demanding on the part of teachers. It requires competent, enthusiastic and patient teachers. It also requires teachers to be creative making use of different teaching aids such as pictures, realia, objects and so forth. This creativity and use of teaching aids aspect is normally rare due to different reasons such as teachers' laziness or unwillingness, or an ignorance of the role of such materials, on the one hand, or because teaching institutions do not provide such materials for sufficient language teaching. Enthusiastic teachers, who are very few, would end up paying for these materials from their own pockets!

**Conclusion**

Taking into consideration both the advantages and the disadvantages of this approach to language teaching, a competent teacher could make use of the earlier and avoid the later. It should be understood that, in language teaching, there is no one perfect approach or method. What could be successful is an approach that blends different approaches to yield the pros of each. Thus, this approach could be adopted, for example, in teaching pronunciation or vocabulary with beginners and avoided when it comes to teaching language for communicative purposes.
References
