

# The right methods for adults

## On English acquisition/learning

CHEN JIAMU (\*)

### 1. INTRODUCTION

There are so many teaching methods to choose from, each having its merits and defects, none is perfect. After all, the best method is one where a specific effect is obtained in a specific context. Choices of methods, then, should vary with different purposes, ages groups, and stages of mental development, etc. In terms of the teaching of English to adults, the right methods to adopt should be multipurpose-oriented, mainly concerned with the characteristics of adults. In other words, with a fully developed mental power, the adults' own modes of thinking, memory capacity, imitation ability, strengths and weaknesses, etc., and above all, how to make the best of them are the starting points for decisions about teaching methodology. Specifically, the Natural Method and Total Physical Response are preferably suggested for adult beginners whereas the Communicative Approach and Community Language Learning are advisably to be recommended for those at intermediate level and onwards. The teaching of composition writing had better be a guided one and combined with the training of other language skills, particularly at an early stage.

### 2. THE NATURAL METHOD AND TOTAL PHYSICAL RESPONSE

The Natural Method (also called Direct Method, Oral Method and Reformed Method) represented by Palmer and Blackie, and the Total Physical Response (also known as Comprehensive Approach), with Asher as its representative, are found to be well fit for adult learners at elementary level, but they will not work so well with those at advanced level, not even a «high-intermediate»<sup>1</sup> one. As remarked by Wilkins, Berliz (one of the advocates of the Natural Method) catered for beginners and provided them with a useful grounding in the language.

To start with, as far as the Natural Method is concerned, compared with young children learning English as a foreign language adults have virtually «lost» their golden and critical period for language acquisition, and that they have been, during the long period of development greatly influenced by their mother tongue (negative transfer) such as pronunciation, intonation, word order and structure which can mainly be boiled down to the mode of thinking and ways of expressing, still, they are in a position to pick up a second language in a way similar to a

---

(\*) Chantou Sparetime University, Popular Republic of China.

---

<sup>1</sup> Howatt: *A history of english language teaching*, p. 205.

child who picks up his native language (though not as fast, admittedly). «This does not mean that the literate older learner cannot acquire a second language under informal (orate) conditions»<sup>2</sup>, especially when they are at a primary level.

Theoretically, according to Howatt, «Learning how to speak a new language... is an intuitive process for which human beings have a natural capacity that can be awakened provided only that the proper conditions exist»<sup>3</sup> namely, «someone to talk to, something to talk about, and a desire to understand and make yourself understood».<sup>4</sup> This applies to adult learners too. «Nature» is the very dominant concern. «The more a method approaches to the method employed by Nature the more that method approaches perfection...»<sup>5</sup>. Based on this, adults can also learn a second language... so long as they expose themselves to nature by «plunging themselves into the sea of the language»<sup>6</sup>. Advocates of this method assured it of a high place in the history of language teaching as Locke put it:

«Men learn languages for the ordinary intercourse of society and communication of thoughts in common life without any further design in their use of them. And for this purposes, the Original way of learning by Conversation, not only serves well enough, but is to be prefer'd as the most Expedite, Proper and Natural.»<sup>7</sup>

From which two messages may be drawn, the first being people (including adults) should learn a language by taking part in conversation, the «most expedite, proper and natural», and the second, men just learn languages for the «ordinary intercourse of society and communication of thoughts in common life», that is to say, for nothing special. For ordinary or daily purposes, the use of a language can be obtained or acquired through the Natural Method. This is enough for grown-up beginners learning English as a second

language. This point is made plain all the more when «Locke goes on to explain that, while there are special categories of learners for whom a detailed knowledge of grammar is essential, the “natural” approach is the fundamental one, applicable to all in the early stages»<sup>8</sup>.

This method, perhaps more than any other ones, stresses the importance of imitation, just like the way a child picks up his native tongue, though not quite. Interaction or «conversation as Lambert Sauveur called it»<sup>9</sup> is at the heart of natural language acquisition, requiring a «discourse» mode of «teaching-thought-talking»<sup>10</sup>. This is necessary and feasible and may prove more fruitful.

For one thing, in this case «by means of thinking in a foreign language (here: English) directly without the medium of this mother tongue»<sup>11</sup> one can relate words directly with the concepts they represent, thus enabling the communication to come up to a normal speed of reaction and reducing greatly the extent to which one's mother tongue has the effect on him, in a way, freeing adult students of the ill impact of making inadequate sentences just according to the grammar rules and customary doing of their mother tongue.

For another, it is feasible for adult beginners since the teaching only involves something simple as in Steps 1-4 of the eighteen-step syllabus for a well-ordered system of linguistical study outlined by Blackie «The teacher should start with objects»<sup>12</sup>. At this level, it is still workable that what they see, hear, and do everyday will provide them with a kind of «incubation»<sup>13</sup> where and when an imperceptible change is taking place rather strongly. At this elementary level, an adult's brain still contains such that a great deal will arrange itself, shape itself and make necessary changes and so on and so forth from time to

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, Epilogue.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 195.

<sup>6</sup> O. Jespersen, «Why a native language is learnt so well», Xu Guozhang *English*, Book 4, p. 165.

<sup>7</sup> As 1, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 192.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, Epilogue.

<sup>11</sup> Yang Lianrui *et al.* (1995), *Pedagogy in english* (second edition), p. 88.

<sup>12</sup> As 1, p. 196.

<sup>13</sup> Hu Wenzhong, *Teachers' manual for college english*, p. 5.

time, though admittedly, not so readily as a little child's.

For still another reason, there is an advantage to grown-up learners. Unlike the way a child picks up his native language which is haphazard and spontaneous, «the natural method is not the process by which children learn their mother tongue. It is, or ought to be a great deal better than that, though based on it. It is natural in its basis; but highly artificial in its development»<sup>14</sup>. In other words, the imitation in its own sense, is well purpose-oriented, and done in a controlled, well-laid out and step by step way. Therefore, the effect will certainly be enhanced somewhat at least, if not enormously.

Then, the Total Physical Response which emphasizes the training of listening comprehension ability and combines speech with actions can reinforce the effect produced by the Natural Method and partly make up for its deficiency.

Psychologically, this approach, based on the assumption that language is a form of behaviour, that learning a language is just like learning a skill or a «mechanical process of habit formation»<sup>15</sup>, points out that people go through a sequence of stimulus-response-reinforcement and suggests that reinforcement «should follow the response as quickly as possible»<sup>16</sup>. The theory holds that «language learning should become coupled with physical response in an attempt to set both the left and right hemispheres of the brain in motion simultaneously»<sup>17</sup>. Or, to put it bluntly, that is to upgrade «an interaction between language and memory mechanism»<sup>18</sup>.

In light of this, the total physical Response is so designed that learners perform different actions accordingly, in order to reinforce what has been learned/acquired. This is deemed fruitful as pointed out by Wilkins,

«The learning mechanism operates

through its capacity to formulate rules about the language once the individual has been exposed to the language, and as long as this exposure continues the learning mechanism will operate. What is needed in language teaching, therefore, is adequate exposure to the target language. The greater the exposure to meaningful language, the more effectively the learner can formulate and revise his hypotheses about the structure of the language.»<sup>19</sup>

This «adequate exposure» as in the case of the Natural Method, along with adequate response to instructions given, is bound to leave learners a deeper impression of what has been learned/acquired, thus adding to the effect achieved.

The Total Physical Response, in a sense, may well be said to have been the further development of the Natural Method from which some essence has been inherited. This can easily be seen in Blackie's eighteen step syllabus shown by Wilkins, «The teacher should start with objects, "baptizing them audibly with their several designations"» (step 1-4) ... «"offering its tangible body as a sort of test to examine the more vague and fleeting element of speech"»<sup>20</sup> (step 5). Here «audibly» and «offering its tangible body...» actually have more or less the same connotation as the «special concern of listening comprehension for the elementary stage» (referring to as the Total Physical Response). In this sense, the Total Physical Response has followed in the step of the Natural Method and further developed it, pushing it onto a more perfect stage. Also, this approach could be referred, so as the further development of Berlitz Schools' role as «a splendid device for keeping body and soul together»<sup>21</sup>. The effect of teaching on the learner is reinforced. Therefore we can say that it is a feasible and more fruitful practice for adult beginners.

What is more, when we say that both the Natural Method and Total Physical Response are suitable for grown-up learners in the early stage, we also take another factor into consideration.

<sup>14</sup> As 1, p. 202.

<sup>15</sup> Wilkins, *Linguistics in language teaching*, Edward Arnold, 1972, London, p. 164. (The title of the fifth chapter in Rivers quoted by Wilkins).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 166.

<sup>17</sup> As 1, p. 115.

<sup>18</sup> Akmajian, et al., *Linguistics* (second edition), Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, p. 502.

<sup>19</sup> As 15, p. 172.

<sup>20</sup> As 1, p. 196.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 205.

With the Natural Method put into practice, the qualification for a teacher is pretty high. Normally a native speaker is demanded if he is put in charge of the students at an advanced level. This may make things difficult for people to get an appropriate one, at least in China for the time being. Yet, for beginners only, both of these two will prove workable since there are many teachers qualified for that.

### 3. THE COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH AND COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LEARNING

From intermediate level onwards, the above two should be discarded and make place for the Communicative Approach and Community Language Learning.

This is deemed preferable, more advisable, desirable and recommendable since in the first place, ideas to be expressed are increasingly becoming complex and difficult. There are fewer notions concerning visible, tangible or concrete things or simple actions. Instead, something abstract or complicated will occur, which is going to tax one's power of comprehension and may demand reasoning by way of a language rather than an object as a medium to support the thinking process. But what a grown-up learner has accumulated or kept «in store» in the early stage by means of the former two is obviously far too limited to «accommodate» or sustain such a task.

Next, as mentioned previously, adults might well be said to have «lost» their golden time and critical period for language acquisition. Having been brought up in a circumstance where his native tongue is spoken, a grown-up learner would feel that the impact of his native language is so tremendous that he finds it very hard to get rid of it, though not completely insurmountable, as remarked by Wilkins,

When he comes to learn a new language his modes of behaviour are already set in the ways that are appropriate to his first language culture. It can hardly be the case that he *has* to change the manner in which he regulates his own behaviour to suit the ways of a second language culture, althou-

gh... the desire to do so may be important factor in motivation.<sup>22</sup>

For having been rooted, how can it be easily «eradicated»? No wonder even «Marcel... considered... the Direct Method itself peters out in a fog somewhere around the intermediate level»<sup>23</sup>. This the negative transfer we ought to try to get over.

In striking contrast to this, the latter two may be more helpful.

To begin with, the Communicative Approach, which attaches equal importance to both language structure and function and «lays more stress on a mastery of communicative skills than to basic structure»<sup>24</sup> produces a context in which learners «do not rest entirely on their native language»<sup>25</sup> for understanding and expressing, «nor reject it completely»<sup>26</sup>. Namely, people may try as hard as possible to communicate in a target language, English for instance. When it comes to something so difficult or abstract that they can not use English as a medium to support the thinking process, either in encoding or decoding something, they may resort to their mother tongue for help. During the course of communication, they may use good English in the natural way, or use Pidgin English or their native tongue (Chinese for example), or a mixture of these three, thus accomplishing the purpose of exchange of ideas, though not satisfactorily enough.

Psychological analyses indicate there exists positive as well as negative transfer in acquiring a second language after one has obtained his first, though the negative is by far more than the positive one if he has «lost» his first years of life... the golden and critical period for language acquisition. «Something he has learned can help him to learn something new»<sup>27</sup>. For a grown-up learner at this stage, since the by-gones are by-gones that can in no way be regained, they ought to

<sup>22</sup> As 15, p. 181.

<sup>23</sup> As 1, p. 198.

<sup>24</sup> Zhang Guoyang & Zhu Xiaoyan, *A brief introduction to main schools in foreign languages teaching methodology*, p. 9.

<sup>25</sup> As 11, p. 98.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> *English readings in education*, p. 39.

make full use of the relatively less potential positive transfer they process by «mobilizing» the positive factors of their mother tongue.

It is the notion and function that should dominate the process of communication. Whether or not the way of expressing sounds is very natural and idiomatic enough, and things of that sort is played down largely so long as the main job of exchange of mind is basically done. Teachers should be tolerant if students make errors or what they say is found to be faulty and inexact here and there. Even Pidgin English (i.e. Chinese or Chinglish in our case) should not be assailed by too much criticism, to say nothing of being «showered» upon.

In time, actually, after countless mistakes that a child acquiring his mother tongue also does, the adult may become adapted to the appropriate way of expressing himself, reducing plenty of errors, Pidgin English and some temporary replacements like technical terms in his native language.

Then, comparatively, the Communicative Approach adopted at his phase serves as a kind of remedy to compensate for what the Natural Method and/or Total Physical Response lacked previously. It is a student-centered mode than appears much more like-like. By acting as various roles or taking part in different kinds of debates, the learners, with «notions like time, sequence, number, location and frequency and concepts like request, help, complaint and choice, etc.»<sup>28</sup> bearing in mind, just try to express whatever they need or wish to do for a certain purpose, regardless of grammar, mistakes and so on. It is the accomplishment of exchange of ideas that «matters» the most. When in difficulty, they may turn to their classmates, teachers or mother tongue for help. Thus, they may learn faster since with the specific, appropriate and right-to-point utterances their needs are satisfied and fulfilled. This partly or largely solves the problem the Natural Method has to cope with when «it was difficult to know what to do once the objects failed to provide sufficiently complex stimuli for linguistic activities»<sup>29</sup>, as pointed out

by Howatt, «One of the most valuable contributions of modern communicative methodology has been to provide a framework for the development of more advanced linguistic activities, to pick up where the Direct Method leaves off.»<sup>30</sup>

Of course, there can be no proper training of one's communication ability without a better foundation of language skills on the part of the beginner. But the Communicative Approach seems to be found relatively more appropriate for adult learners at intermediate level and beyond since they have gone through the elementary stage where the Direct Method (Natural Method) and Total Physical Response are practised, and have accumulated something essential.

The use of one's native language when at this level does not leave people wondering about what the speaker is getting at, as sometimes happens in cases where the Natural Method is applied. In effect, the practice of total exclusion of one's mother tongue at this stage would not work well with grown-up learners for, on one hand, with the fully developed mental power, they have lost, though not totally, their advantages for language acquisition as talked about previously that young children are in full possession of, and so, when forced entirely to think and speak in English, they may find it quite «a hard nut to crack» to figure out the exact meaning of something very abstract or sophisticated. And on the other, they do not adequately exploit or bring into full play what can be termed as positive transfer (though not much) they are in a position to avail themselves of at the moment. As sometimes happens, with only one or two key words in point given in one's mother tongue, the meaning of a sentence would have become as clear as crystal. However, some teachers would not do that. Instead, they just «beat about the bush», leaving their students guessing and guessing, which plenty of time that ought to have been saved has been tiringly spent on, or rather, wasted.

The Community Language Learning excels the Communicative Approach in that it lays heavy emphasis on humanism, giving full consideration to the students and treating them as

---

<sup>28</sup> As 24, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> As 1, p. 197.

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 198.

whole persons. Specifically, according to Curran, threat must be reduced so as to make students feel secure and relaxed. Theoretical reasoning might still be lacking about this. However, in real life it seems to hold water somewhat and may be found helpful and promising for adult learners. In comparison with children in infancy who are carefree and produced response to stimuli in different situations, grown-ups are, in most cases, cautious about this and that. They «often feel threatened when learning new things... and are afraid that they look stupid»<sup>31</sup>. The practice that teachers stand behind the students rather in front of them will help facilitate the communication because the teachers behave more as a friend than supervisor. Moreover, they provide help when needed.

#### 4. THE TEACHER OF COMPOSITION WRITING

The teaching of composition writing must be conducted in a guided way. By this is meant that «input» should come before «output», i.e. do not ask students to write about the topics they have not yet been given or familiar with in terms of vocabulary, structure and the like, and that is should be combined with the training of other language skills. Above all, in the early stage, it is taboo to «take a book like “Practice and Progress” and use it just for reading or just for conversation»<sup>32</sup>.

It is important to carry the policy «Input should come before output», getting the students to write about something related to what they have just learned. Otherwise, say, doing that in a haphazard random way will result in a time – and energy – consuming state and yet, unfruitful work on either the part of the teacher or the students and even a counter-productive effect on the latter.

On one hand, again the adult student with a mental power fully developed in his native language a relatively blank mind, so to say, about the topic or field to describe in English will inevitably find himself having «little choice»<sup>33</sup> but

to turn to a bilingual dictionary for help, thus producing pure Chinglish by stringing words together just according to the grammar like word order, structure, etc. of his mother tongue. And he may «rapidly become demoralized»<sup>34</sup> too, since no matter what he puts in black and white, «it is going to be wrong»<sup>35</sup>.

And on the other, the teacher too «feels dejected»<sup>36</sup> since for all the effort he has paid in setting and correcting the compositions, «the students don't seem to be getting any better»<sup>37</sup>. In practice, this is a normal dilemma or «mire» many Chinese teachers of English composition writing fall into and find no way out.

The reason lies in footnote 22 and the most effective measure to take so as to get rid of the ill effect of one's mother tongue could be giving the student the «input» by combining the training of writing with that of listening comprehension, speaking and reading. A normal formula can be: (1) Listen and write (or: speak...); (2) Read and write (or: speak...); (3) Speak and write (or:...).

A model example for reference might be as follows:

- a) Give the student an account of something, repeating it three or four times until most of the key points have been driven home, thus starting what Chomsky termed as «language acquisition device»<sup>38</sup> and bringing into full play «an interaction between language and memory mechanisms»<sup>39</sup>.
- b) By asking relevant questions strengthen or reinforce immediately what he has just got, like idiomatic expression, key structures and even something like fleeting vocabulary.
- c) Get the student to write a composition by assigning him a topic in relation to it and preferably giving some hints as well.

Hopefully, in this way a better composition in terms of ways of expressing, use of words and appropriateness, etc. can be expected from the student for he, having been «plunged»<sup>40</sup> into

<sup>34</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35

<sup>35</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 35.

<sup>38</sup> As 15, p. 169.

<sup>39</sup> As 18, p. 502.

<sup>40</sup> As 6, p. 43.

<sup>31</sup> As 24, p. 19.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander, *Lectures on a variety of topics connected with EFL*, p. 16.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 34.

part of the sea of the English Language, with the right use of words, right structure, right word order, and right way of expressing being kept «drumming» into his ears, has just got «ashore», still «wet» all over. So there is a greater possibility that what he has just listened to will be reflected somehow in his immediate writing following that and will enable him to come closer to becoming adapted to the right way of thinking and mode of speaking, and writing as well. In a sense, this is the context where a kind of the Total Physical Response is applied. It works well when speech combines actions. Maybe it will also work well when listening and writing are united into one.

## 5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, the major concern is aiming at how to achieve the best result or a relatively better one in a given context. Adoptions of teaching methods involve such factors as purposes, age groups and stages of mental development. The Natural Method and Total Physical Response are comparatively found suitable for adult beginners while the Communicative Approach and Community Language Learning are advisable suggest for those at intermediate and advanced level. Guided composition should be practised, combining two or three, even four skills together.

## ABSTRACT

Each teaching method has its own strengths and weaknesses. Factors such as purposes, age groups and stages of mental development are to be taken into account in terms of the adoption of a teaching method.

Adult learners of English have their own advantages and disadvantages, too. Normally, the latter

outweigh the former. How to obtain the best result out of them? Why take a certain method rather than another in a given context? These are the questions this paper attempts to account for.

Since none of the methods in the history of language teaching so far can fulfill the desired goals all in one go, the author holds that for adult beginners, both the Natural Method and Total Physical Response are preferred while the Communicative Approach and Community Language Learning are to find favour with those at intermediate and advanced levels, and that the teaching of composition writing should be guided and integrated with the training of other language skills, particularly at an elementary level.

*Key words:* Teaching methods, context, transfer, elementary (primary, beginning), acquisition/learning, mechanism, medium.

## RESUMO

Cada método de ensino de uma língua estrangeira tem os seus méritos e fraquezas. Factores como os objectivos, a classe etária dos alunos e os seus estádios de desenvolvimento mental devem ser tidos em conta na escolha do método de ensino.

Como alunos de inglês, os adultos têm vantagens e desvantagens, e normalmente as desvantagens são mais importantes que as vantagens. Como obter os melhores resultados com aquele tipo de alunos? Porquê escolher um determinado método num dado contexto e não noutra? São estas as questões que este artigo aborda.

Como nenhum dos métodos na história do ensino de línguas consegue atingir todos os objectivos de uma vez só, o autor defende que para os adultos principiantes devem ser preferidos os Método Natural e o da Resposta Física Total, enquanto a Abordagem Comunicativa e a Aprendizagem da Língua em Comunidade são mais adequadas para os alunos em estádios intermédios e avançados. O ensino da composição escrita devem ser guiado e integrado com o ensino de outras competências linguísticas, sobretudo nos estádios elementares.

*Palavras-chave:* Métodos de ensino, contexto, transferência, estádios elementares, aquisição/aprendizagem, mecanismos, meios.