
Mélanges CRAPEL n° 21

**ALTERNATIVE LANGUAGE
LEARNING SYSTEMS : SOME
ANALYTICAL CRITERIA**

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Résumé

Les méthodes non-conventionnelles présentent l'intérêt de soulever un ensemble de problèmes auxquels l'enseignant de langue est quotidiennement confronté. Cet article passe en revue certains de ces problèmes, et apporte ainsi un éclairage contrasté de ces méthodes dont les faiblesses (en particulier en ce qui concerne la compréhension orale) sont soulignées.

Variously called "Humanistic Approaches", "Alternative Methoden", "Approches non-conventionnelles", the language learning/teaching systems surveyed in this paper afford the valuable opportunity of highlighting features of general interest to teachers and researchers alike. The methods and approaches surveyed here are the following :

- Suggestopaedia (S)
- The Silent Way (S.W.)
- The Natural Approach (N.A.)
- Total Physical Response (T.P.R.)
- Community Language Learning (C.L.L.)
- Computer Assisted Language Learning (C.A.L.L.)
- Self-Directed Learning (S.D.L.)

It is outside the scope of this survey to describe these approaches or outline their historical development. Readers should refer to the bibliography for sources of information.

Any language learning/teaching system is based explicitly or not on a set of assumptions or preconceptions about language and communication, teaching, learning, learners and possibly also culture and society at large. Alternative approaches are no exception, and most, in fact, are quite forthcoming about their overall philosophy with regard to such issues.

LANGUAGE/COMMUNICATION

There appears to be a clear divide here between those approaches that focus on **language** as such (N.A., S.W., C.A.L.L. in most of the currently available programs), and those that focus on **language skills** (T.P.R., C.L.L.), or forms of **communicative competence** (C.L.L., S.). The Silent Way is certainly the most radical in this area with its insistence on the crucial importance of phonology and the construction by the learners of the sound-system of the target language. A further distinction can be made between those approaches which tend to develop productive oral skills (C.L.L., S.) and T.P.R. which focusses on the development of a receptive skill (listening comprehension) in its overall strategy. Table 1 charts these differences.

S.D.L. is in the peculiar position of not explicitly promoting any of these possible objectives, as they depend on the learner. Admittedly, in CRAPEL practice at least, S.D.L. is an exercise in expanding the learner's awareness of the variety of criteria/objectives that are available to her. Therefore, should a

learner be concerned only with improving her accuracy (i.e. grammar) and, as is often the case, her fluency (i.e. speaking skills), the counsellor will draw her attention to, among other things, the importance of listening comprehension in oral communication.

| | Language | Language skills | | Communicative Competence |
|----------|----------|-----------------------|------------------|--------------------------|
| | | Productive | Receptive | |
| S. | | X | | X |
| S.W. | X | | | |
| N.A. | X | | X | |
| T.P.R. | | | X | |
| C.L.L. | | X | | |
| C.A.L.L. | X | | X ⁽¹⁾ | |
| S.D.L. | | on request by learner | | |

⁽¹⁾ Reading Comprehension

Table 1

This chart would appear to be an indictment of several alternative approaches in that they pay little if no attention to listening comprehension, which runs contrary to most varieties of the now classic communicative approach.

TEACHING/LEARNING

Several methodologies claim explicitly that they are concerned by **learning**, as against **teaching** (S.W., C.A.L.L., S.D.L.). The Silent Way's battle-cry is "for the subordination of teaching to learning", but S.W. teachers are very much in control as they wield their pointers. C.A.L.L. enthusiasts appear to have no qualms about the obvious misnomer they have adopted to label their programs, and S.D.L. counsellors cannot help teaching now and then.

Suggestopaedia addresses the issue of the teacher quite explicitly, with clear instructions as to his/her demeanour, behaviour, tone of voice and appearance, as those features (are considered to) contribute to the prestige factor inherent in suggestology. The Natural Approach and Total Physical Response take the teacher for granted, whereas Community Language Learning would have the "teacher" become helper, knower or language counsellor, as against the language **learning** counsellor of S.D.L.

THE LEARNER

The divide here is between two sets of approaches. On the one hand some consider that the (adult) language learner is in (C.L.L., N.A.) or **should be** drawn into (S., S.W., T.P.R.) a state of infantile regression. S.D.L. on the other hand attempts to address the (meta) cognitive abilities of the learners, thereby taking into account their real age. C.A.L.L. does not seem to harbour any philosophical stance regarding the assumed age of its users.

MISCELLANEOUS

In this section a variety of features will be considered, all of which raise methodological issues.

Use of mother tongue : Three approaches include the use of the learners' mother tongue, or in the case of multilingual groups, a common lingua franca. Community Language Learning requires the learners, at least at the beginners' stage, to use their mother tongue (M.T.). Suggestopaedia also makes use of the learners' M.T. in a very straightforward fashion, namely the *sotto voce* translation of the foreign language dialogues used in the method. Self Directed Learning usually relies on the M.T. during the technical discussions with the counsellor. The Natural Approach on the other hand bans the use of the M.T., latter-day spin-off as it is of the turn-of-the-century "Direct Method".

Kinesthetics : Suggestopaedia and T.P.R. are committed to getting the learners to use their bodies in order to enhance learning. Suggestopaedia includes group dancing and games. T.P.R. requires those learners who are willing to do so to respond physically to instructions in the foreign language (e.g. "Stand up, go towards the window on the right, stop! turn right, go towards the table and pick up the book on the table... etc. etc.."). These instructions may be given either by the teacher or another learner.

The Right to be Silent : This provocative concept was first developed by James Asher of Total Physical Response. C.A.L.L., C.L.L. and S.D.L. also have this in-built possibility for the learner. As a principle it runs contrary to what appears to be taken for granted by many conventional or alternative methodologies, i.e. a quiet learner will not be as good a learner as a talkative participant (see "The Group" below).

The Group : As its name indicates, C.L.L. is explicitly committed to taking into account the group ("community") engaged in the process of learning a language. This is also the case of Suggestopaedia with its use of role-plays, songs and games. Research into T.P.R. would seem to indicate that those learners who are not actively taking part in the instructions-cum-moving around phase of the lessons, do in fact learn and remember a considerable amount of the language used during the activities. Some form of communal empathy at work, no doubt. This would contribute to the idea that silent learners are not necessarily poor learners, as many experienced teachers already know, and despite various suggestions to the contrary (cf. the attempts to define what a good learner is).

Use of technology : Four approaches rely on technology either by definition (C.A.L.L.) or in the form of a teaching/learning aid. Suggestopaedia classes are conducted to the accompaniment of (usually) European classical music, and make use of songs the learners are expected to sing, which they usually do with much enjoyment. C.L.L. also requires the use of a tape-recorder to record what the learners say during the conversational phase of the sessions. The tape may subsequently be copied and given to the learners, which requires the use of a rapid-copier. S.D.L., depending on learners' needs and objectives, will also rely on tape-recorders or even video-recorders, as an aid to self-training in listening/viewing comprehension, or in speaking skills.

CONCLUSION

This survey would appear to indicate that most alternative methodologies are deficient in specific listening comprehension training and, more importantly, learning training. This latter deficiency is a result of the decidedly teacher-centred approach most of the methodologies adopt with the exception of Self-Directed Learning, and to some extent Community Language Learning. The contribution of alternative methodologies however to the question of group dynamics has been valuable, as has been the development of concepts and principles such as the right to be silent and the use of the learners' mother tongue.

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