

TEODOR HREHOVČÍK

THE CALLAN METHOD OR “ENGLISH IN A QUARTER OF THE TIME”

The present contribution aims at providing the professional public with basic information on the method of teaching English that has been commercially exceptionally successful in several countries of the world in recent years. Despite this obvious success, there are very few publications dealing with its characteristics and principles.

1.0 Background

The Callan Method of teaching English was first published in 1960 and its author, Robin Callan, soon became the trademark. He remarks that before the method appeared on the market, it took fifteen years to develop it and put it on paper. Nowadays, the Callan Method Organisation has its main office in Cambridge and its own school in London. The school with its 70 classrooms and 2,200 students is said to be the biggest language school teaching English in Europe. In 1998, there were 35 schools in the world using this method of teaching. One of the countries with the largest network of Callan schools is Poland.

The method has been designed to teach English to any type of student anywhere in the world in a quarter of the time required by other methods. According to promotional materials, ‘average beginner would take 640 hours to reach First Certificate level, while a student studying with the Callan Method needs only 160 hours’ (Callan Method Organisation 1998: 15). This speed is considered to be the maximum speed that a learner is able to cope with. The author claims that an average student is able to meet the requirements of the Cambridge Preliminary Exam within 80 hours.

2.0 Basic principles of the method

2.1 Lesson structure

The Callan Method lesson has a fixed structure. The teacher is required to follow a given pattern: first comes a revision of covered material in the form of ques-

tion-answer work followed by reading and translation. Only then may the teacher proceed with new material.

2.2 High speed

The method is based almost entirely on the teacher asking questions at a very high speed. 'Each question [...] is carefully prepared and is meant to be delivered word for word as it is written' (Callan 1995: 16). The way in which a question is asked is very important and great accuracy should be placed on this aspect when a teacher is trained. The teacher is expected to ask questions at the speed of 200–240 words per minute, which is slightly above the speed of standard conversation (150–180 words per minute). This high speed should keep the student awake and concentrated. It also prevents the student from translating a message into his or her internal speech. The student's own speaking speed corresponds to the speed of normal conversation.

When answering the question, the students must first answer in the negative as often as possible. This requires that the students make long sentences and practice the use of antonyms. Many teachers criticise the banality of prescribed questions, which is explained by the necessity to develop a quick reflex leading to an automatic response. The questions must be like this so that 'any student, no matter his age, nationality, intelligence or cultural background can understand and answer quickly without thinking' (Callan 1995: 277).

2.3 Systematic revision

R. Callan considers boredom and bad memory the biggest enemies of learning. He claims that his method overcomes boredom by high speed, and bad memory by revision. The material is usually revised four or five times, which contributes to its long-term consolidation.

The author stresses that when one learns a language it is not sufficient only to remember the word but to be able to recall it whenever needed, which requires a development of a quick reflex.

3.0 The Callan Method lesson

A standard lesson takes fifty minutes. Classroom walls are decorated with motivational slogans or pieces of advice, such as 'The secret of success in learning a language is to repeat, repeat and repeat'. 'Speak without thinking'. 'Don't worry! You will get there. The result is guaranteed no matter what happens'. Whenever the students have any problems with the work or feel discouraged and think of giving up, they are told to read these pieces of advice. The optimal number of students in a group is between six to twelve. They are seated in a semi-circle, and the teacher is recommended not to sit while teaching. He or she moves freely and frequently makes use of gestures. Surprisingly, the method does not make use of a blackboard. The author remarks that 'a blackboard wastes time, relaxes the student's concentration [...] and allows indiscipline to

creep into the lesson while the teacher's back is turned' (Callan 1995: 32). The only teaching aids used during lessons are demonstration charts.

4.0 Materials

The Callan Method uses the following materials:

- Teacher's Books One to Seven
- Teacher's Demonstration Charts
- Teacher's Handbook
- Teacher's Audio Training Tape
- Teacher's Video Training Tape
- Student's Books One to Seven (available in different languages)
- Student's Audio Tapes
- Student's Vocabulary Booklet (translation of vocabulary used in textbooks)
- Dictation Booklets
- Student's Handbook (detailed information on the method)
- Director's Handbook (information for prospective founders of Callan schools)
- Information Book (general information on the Callan Method)

Complete teaching material is provided in six Student's Books, which together constitute twelve stages of learning. The first six stages prepare the learner for the Cambridge Preliminary and the following six for the Cambridge First Certificate. The seventh book is used for revision. As the teacher can find the entire teaching programme in these materials, the Callan Method does not allow any other book to be used in teaching. As pointed out in the Callan Method publications, one of the reasons why the method teaches so much faster is that everything has been prepared for the teacher to the last detail and he or she does not have to think what would be the optimum way to teach. The six books form one whole and each one complements the other. 'Book one of the Callan Method can be compared to laying the foundations of a house, books two and three to erecting the walls, putting in windows, doors, plumbing etc. and books four and five doing the decorating and putting in the furniture' (Callan 1995: 256).

Each textbook used in teaching appears to be very monotonous and not stimulating; they do not contain any photos, pictures or drawings. There are no dialogues or any reading comprehension texts. The books are only composed of vocabulary and grammatical structures arranged in a question-answer form that act as exercises to be practised during lessons. Occasionally, a grammatical explanation is added. At the end of each book, there are exercises of the same type.

The Teacher's Book is nearly identical. After about two pages of question-answer work comes the instruction 'Students read lesson...' then another two pages of question-answer work followed by a dictation. The author gives two reasons for this arrangement:

- (1) Such a layout acts as a revision for the learner; a word is heard and used in the question-answer work, later on, the word is seen in its written form when the lesson is read, and then, when the dictation is given, the learner writes it down. This procedure should replicate the situation in first language acquisition.
- (2) This particular layout does not bore the student because there is a change of activity every ten or fifteen minutes. This segmentation of lessons also lets the teachers rest their voice after the high-pressure question-answer work and does not let them get tired.

The text in the book has a specific graphical layout. Page numbers correspond to those in the Teacher's Book, every new lexical unit or new grammatical structure is printed in bold letters. Questions are printed in capitals, answers in small letters. The questions that do not carry answers can be answered according to the context or situation. For example: 'IS IT RAINING OUTSIDE NOW?' In all other cases answers are given.

5.0 Teacher's role

In contrast to other foreign language teaching methods, the Callan Method does not give teachers any opportunity for their individual way of teaching. They are obliged to use prescribed textbooks, they are not allowed to omit, complement or change a single sentence or word presented in the textbook because otherwise, as the author claims, the method would fail. The teachers must explain the basics of the method to their students during the very first lesson. This will ensure the students that the teacher knows what he or she is doing and will show them that whatever is done must be done in order to be successful.

6.0 Learner's role

The learner's role reflects the status of the teacher. The more control the teacher has over the learner, the less control the learner has over the learning process. As seen in the lessons, the student is a passive receptor and has no control over the content of learning. With the Callan Method 'everything is systematically programmed and [the learner] is fed like a computer that does not need to ask questions' (Callan 1995: 22). This appears rather controversial. Why not let the students ask questions about something they do not understand or something they would like to know? The author argues that to answer questions other than those prepared in advance would be a waste of time. If the students do not know something, they should be told that it will become clear in a few lessons, as the work will be revised several times. As regards a language item that has not been covered yet, the students should wait patiently as it will be presented later on during the course. Under no circumstances should the students interrupt the lesson with any questions.

7.0 The teaching-learning process

The Callan Method uses a combination of deductive, inductive and subliminal modes of learning. As mentioned above, the entire system of teaching is almost exclusively based on question-answer work. During this activity the students have their books closed and follow the teacher. By great amount of repetition they try to remember vocabulary and grammatical structures and develop a quick reflex. This lets the teacher speed up the lesson, which, in consequence, makes the entire teaching-learning process faster.

It appears from the core of the method that the student must learn in the course of the lesson. 'Method makes it virtually impossible for the teacher to carry the students forward from Page One to Page Two until everyone in the class has understood and remembered almost everything on Page One' (*Callan Method*, 7).

Grammar is not the main point in teaching; usually a brief explanation is sufficient. The students do not need to know the grammar rule but they must be able to apply it correctly. It is pointed out that the students should not learn about the language but how to use it.

The only written task is a dictation. Dictations, as pointed out by the author, teach the students spelling and careful listening to the pronunciation of each word. To be effective, the dictation is corrected by the students themselves, straight after it has been given, as 'the dictation is still fresh in [the learner's] mind with the teacher's pronunciation still ringing in [the learner's] ears' (Callan 1995: 187).

The fact that there is nearly no homework in the Callan Method may also appear controversial. The only activity the students are advised to practice at home is to listen to their tapes and read their books. Slow students are advised to do exercises from the back of the textbook. Later, as the students approach First Certificate Examination, they are asked to write compositions for their homework.

R. Callan claims that at the end of the course learners know about four to five thousand words and the basic principles of grammar. From this point learning becomes more of an academic subject and from now on, the students must put a lot more individual effort into learning. Obviously, the Callan Method has an ambition to be only successful to that level of English language teaching.

8.0 Student-teacher and teacher student interaction

As appears from the above, the interaction in class is teacher-directed. The initiation of interaction comes from the teacher and is based on the three pillars that make up the method: question-answer work, reading and dictation. The only interaction between the students takes place at the beginning and the end of the lesson when they ask each other questions. Occasionally in the course of the lesson, the teacher asks a student to translate something for the others.

9.0 Language skills

Great emphasis in the Callan Method is put on the development of speaking and listening. The author maintains that the student during one lesson speaks and listens four times more than with other methods. The student is still on guard, 'he has to listen for 60 seconds of every minute (i.e. four times as much), because the class is constantly being bombarded with questions from the teacher, and the student does not know when he is going to be asked a question' (*Callan Method*, 6).

In consequence, a lot of attention is paid to pronunciation, which is corrected from the very beginning. Very important is the correct translation of words constituting minimal pairs, such as leave-live. Interestingly enough, the teacher should not sacrifice the speed of the lesson to help the students with pronunciation.

Even though the Callan Method's aim is to teach students to communicate, chatting and free conversation during the lesson are not allowed. The author believes that in conversation the student does not learn anything new but only uses words and structures already known. The question is, however, where students can learn how to begin, maintain and end conversation, how to respond to different speech acts, what type of language to use in certain social situations? Is it possible to gain communicative competence only through question-answer work?

The role of culture in teaching is suppressed. Learning of literature, culture or history can, according to the author, take place only when the actual language has been learned. 'The teacher should teach the language quickly and as painlessly as possible without any cultural frills' (Callan 1995: 264). The students can explore the culture of the country on their own by reading books, magazines, newspapers, watching films, etc. This and similar argumentation explain the design of Callan Method textbooks.

10.0 Native language

New vocabulary and grammatical structures are presented in the native language of the students. Translation, according to the author, even though not necessary, 'simplifies the teaching process and speeds it up' (Callan 1995: 195).

11.0 Evaluation of students

Although the teacher can monitor the students' progress through the speed and accuracy of speaking and listening, dictations perform the function of regular evaluation of students. Another form of evaluation is the stage exams. They, just as the dictations, are corrected by students themselves. Grading uses the following scale: Exceptional—100 per cent; Fast—90 per cent; Average—80 per cent; Fair—70 per cent; Slow—60 per cent. The score of 60 per cent is considered poor and the student should perform a complete revision of the stage. The treat-

ment of errors can be illustrated by the following advice: 'The teacher should not allow the student to get away with the tiniest mistake' (Callan 1995: 21).

12.0 Conclusions

In a comparison of the characteristic features of the described method with other EFL methods and approaches traditionally mentioned in connection with the development of foreign language teaching, the following conclusions may be outlined:

- (1) The Callan Method, likewise the Audiolingual Method, is based on mechanical drilling of language material and on habit formation without any significant cognitive component.
- (2) From the point of view of the role of the teacher and the role of the learner, the Callan Method belongs to teacher-centred methods, such as the Audiolingual Method, Suggestopedia, the Natural Approach, and the Total Physical Response.
- (3) Like Suggestopedia, this method significantly supports self-confidence in learners.
- (4) Even though the author claims that 'a language is best learned through the ear, then through the mouth, then through the eye and finally through the hand' (Callan 1995: 169), all major activities focus on the development of speaking, as in the Audiolingual Method, Suggestopedia, and the Natural Approach.
- (5) The treatment of errors resembles the Grammar-Translation Method and the Situational Language Teaching.
- (6) The rigorous observation of prescribed algorithm and the use of specially designed teaching materials reminds of Suggestopedia.

As appears from the above, the Callan Method does not bring to the practice of foreign language teaching anything that can be understood as new or innovative, but in a rather unique way combines strategies and techniques tested by long-term practice. The method is not based on any new linguistic, psychological or pedagogical theory, or experimental research. On the contrary, monotonous, unattractive and uninspiring materials and activities based on brainwashing may indicate that the method is a step backwards. However, if the information on the success of the method and statistics published by its author are true, one must admit that All's fair in love and war.

Works Cited

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