

Liškař, Čestmír

Aim, contents and methods of foreign language teaching : summary

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S u m m a r y

In the present book an attempt has been made to demonstrate the correlation between the aim, content and methods of foreign language teaching at secondary school level. The author attempts a solution to the problem by showing how the three categories determine each other.

Aims, contents and methods of instruction are dependent variables. The social aim is the only independent variable. The school as an institution can, however, accept the needs of society as aims only when they admit of being achieved through instruction and when they suggest activities that are within the capacities of the school population. Hence, from the triad aim – content – method it is the aim that is to be analysed first.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part deals with the basic characteristic of the aims of foreign language teaching. The genetic development of aims is analysed in the light of social needs and pedagogic ideas. In the second part the correlation between the aim and the content is defined. The third part is concerned with the correlation between the aim, content and methods of foreign language teaching.

I

Educational aims are social aims which have been selected by the schools. All educational aims are social, but all social aims are not educational. If the aim cannot be achieved in the school, it is not valid even though it might be a good social aim. The educational aim as a pedagogic category is a mere idea of what schools want to achieve. Among the things they have always wanted are good citizens; but what constitutes a good citizen in one social structure does not necessarily do so in another. That is why the nature of the aim of foreign language instruction is subjective, though its social background is objective.

Since educational aims are social aims, as society changes, the aims must change, be refined, or at least shifted in emphasis. No subject in the school's curriculum has remained static. The field of foreign languages, being an integral part of general education, is no exception. The history of foreign language instruction reveals more than any other object the close connection between the school program and the social and political conditions of the society. Frequently the aims of language teaching are reflected in school laws, for needs of society, expressed as aims, are often the basis of legislation.

In discussions on the value of the teaching of foreign languages, a distinction is generally made between its practical, utilitarian importance and its cultural value. This distinction corresponds with the principle aims of education. Differences in the purpose for which the language is taught influence the relative shifting of emphasis on either the communicative or formative aims. The genetic development of language teaching demonstrates clearly that it is necessary to be acquainted with the conditions of development of society if one wants to analyse and determine the aims of foreign language teaching properly. Given our contemporary needs the communicative aim of language teaching should be regarded as the primary one. This should be integrated with the general cultural aim, understanding of the foreign customs and foreign peoples. Language has always a cultural content.

There is an opinion that the study of foreign languages trains the mind and teaches young people to think. Whether the study of foreign languages can develop the ability to think is one question to ask. That question needs to be followed with a second question – whether the study of foreign languages should seek to develop the ability to solve problems. It is highly probable that the study of foreign languages can aid in the development of the skill of problem solving, but there is no certainty that it will develop this skill any better than the study of any other subject matter.

Furthermore, the pedagogic theory should differentiate the ideal aims from the real ones. In determining the aims and objectives of foreign language teaching, one should take into account the actual conditions under which language teaching is attempted in the given school system, viz. the length of the course, the nature and amount of knowledge, skills and habits to be attained through instruction, the frequency of the lessons, the qualification of the teachers, equipment of the school with technological aids.

For these and other reasons the aims of language teaching should be definitely and functionally stated. Vague generalizations are of little value. Aims cannot be taught as abstractions, they must be broken down into specific outcomes which can be achieved through proper activities in the school.

II

The school curriculum, like the educational aims, is not an objective, ever-lasting category. Curriculum construction is a constant and never-ending task. Each generation must examine the social order in which it lives and make the school fit its needs. Each must establish its own educational aims and select curriculum materials to meet them. Hence the curricular content of the language instruction must be examined from the historical point of view. The curriculum content correlates with the educational aim. Strictly speaking, educational aim is the basis on which the curriculum content is selected.

In the past, language teaching was influenced by the doctrine of formal discipline and the faculty theory. These doctrines led educators to believe that if a subject were to have value it must train the mind so as to tax the intellect to its greatest capacity. Emphasis was placed on the theoretical rather than the practical. No doubt the study of a language has value as a mental discipline. In the light of the momentous changes which have taken place in the world over the last decades, the importance of languages for communication becomes, however, more apparent. The new shift of emphasis in objectives has focused attention on certain new premises upon which to base the selection of the content of foreign language teaching. All school subjects may be broadly classified as either knowledge or skills. Allied with the traditional objectives, language was regarded as a knowledge subject. Because it was a subject which called for an intellectual approach it was traditionally presented by analogy to Latin grammar. Efforts were concentrated on giving the pupils language material as large as possible. It is difficult even now to qualify the general character of foreign language. Strictly speaking, foreign language involved in the school curriculum is neither a pure knowledge subject nor a subject that can be thought of exclusively as a skill. In view of the fact that the function of language is to communicate ideas, the content of foreign language teaching should, in any case, comprise not only language material, but also all the activities leading to the possession of language skills and to the inculcation of correct language habits. Moreover, the selection of the subject matter in foreign language teaching is conditioned by many factors involved in the teaching process. That is why the basis on which subject matter in foreign language teaching should be selected is of both a linguistic and pedagogic character.

In the literature on the subject of foreign language teaching, much attention has been given to the selection of language material (vocabulary, grammar, phonetics, orthography). On the other hand, there is still a dearth of suggestions as to a scientific approach to the formulation and selection of language skills and habits to be attained by the pupil at a given stage of language learning. In most cases, the bases for selecting language skills and habits are sought empirically.

The content of foreign language teaching does not depend on the aims and purposes only. On the contrary, the content itself may effect the formulation of the aim of language instruction. The content may be analysed from this point of view if it is conceived as a structure. The structural conception of the curriculum content enables the breaking down of the complex of aims into primary and secondary aims. The former are what is expected as the basis for achieving further, more specific aims. Among others, this approach makes possible to all those who formulate aims and contents of foreign language teaching, to shed fresh light on the practical implication of the linguistic research in the sphere of language analysis concerning the spoken and the written norms of a language.

III

Aim and content of foreign language teaching determine, to a great extent, the methods of attaining them. In the author's opinion there is, however, no reason to identify the method of language teaching with a mere deduction of the aim and content structures. Between the aim, content and methods of foreign language teaching there is a definite correlation. Furthermore, it seems a worthwhile endeavour to attempt to limit the sense of the term method. In the literature on the subject of foreign language teaching, the term method is generally used in two different meanings. In its broadest sense, method is identical with an approach – a set of correlative assumptions dealing with the nature of language and the nature of language teaching and learning. It states a point of view, implicating both linguistic and pedagogic aspects. In a limited sense, method is an overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material, no part of which contradicts, and all of which is based upon, the selected approach, i. e. the method in its broadest sense. Hence, an approach is axiomatic, a teaching method is procedural. A method in its limited sense should be consistent with a method in its broadest sense. If the arrangement were not hierarchical, the methodology of language teaching would not be a theoretical discipline, but a mere set of stratagems used to accomplish an immediate objective, depending on the individual artistry of the teacher.

Thus, a method in its broadest sense is consistent much more with the aim and content of foreign language teaching than the teaching methods in their narrow didactic sense. There can be many teaching methods by means of which the language material may be mastered. All of them must be in harmony with an approach. On the other hand there is no universal approach to foreign language teaching - method in its broadest sense - by means of which one could attain whatever kind of content realizing any kind of aims. All methods advocated in the past and at present (grammar-translation, direct, audiolingual, audiovisual total and structural methods) correlate closely with a definite aim and content of language teaching. On the other hand, a method using, e. g., effective technical devices as an integral part of its system, makes possible to meet the demand for more language material, because technical devices have created the conditions for mastering it. The effectiveness of a particular technique must be, of course, taken in relation to a method. A particular technique might at one time in the progress of a course be used quite wrongly because it is out of the order required by the method.

In the conclusion, the author calls for a sound pedagogic training of foreign language teachers. No reform of foreign language teaching can be realized unless the teachers are familiar with the complex character of the subject, wherein aim, content and method are curiously involved.