TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES VS. TEACHING THINKING

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Abstract

The shortcomings of the Communicative Approach to teaching foreign languages triggered the emergence of a host of post-communicative proposals, generically referred to as the Post-Communicative Turn. The Thinking Approach to teaching foreign languages (TA) is one such proposal. Based on the principles of TRIZ (the Russian acronym for the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving, developed by Genrich Altschuller) and of OTSM (the General Theory of Powerful Thinking, principle researcher Nikolai Khomenko), it proposes to develop simultaneously both language skills and thinking skills.

The Communicative Approach to foreign languages, very popular all over Europe in the 1990s, brought about great changes in the field of language teaching and testing. Its focus on meaning and interaction, on task-based activities and on learner independence, etc. made lessons more active and more interesting. Furthermore, concern for the students' immediate and later needs also ensured greater learner participation.

But educators soon realized that the approach also incurred some serious shortcomings and understood that they must again change methods and techniques. As a result, several new approaches were suggested, generically referred to as the Post-Communicative Turn.

An interesting Post-Communicative approach to teaching foreign languages is the Latvian **Thinking Approach** (**TA**). Based on the principles of TRIZ (the Russian acronym for the *Theory of Inventive Problem Solving*, developed by Genrich Altshuller) and of OTSM (the *General Theory of Powerful Thinking*, principle researcher Nikolai Khomenko), it proposes to develop simultaneously both ***language skills*** and ***thinking skills***.

The main promoter of the TA, Alexander Sokol, a young teacher of English in Latvia, is a product of OTSM-TRIZ education. His *Thinking Approach* sets out from the idea that in today's rapidly changing world new knowledge appears at such a fast rate that school can no longer keep up with the changes. That is why, school today must focus on producing a new kind of learner, a learner who is eager to continuously improve his skills and who takes full responsibility of his learning. To help the student cope with the masses of new information and the changing world, he must be taught to master *tools* that he can use to process whatever new information he might need. This goal, according to the promoters of the TA, can be achieved with the help of a TRIZ/OTSM-based pedagogy. By applying the methods and techniques of TRIZ/OTSM-education, the promoters of the TA insist that they can help students to cope with the unexpectedness and endless variety of the world they live in. By focusing simultaneously on the development of the students' thinking and language skills, they can both improve their linguistic and communicative competence and acquire new methods of dealing with the world.

At the moment, there is an international team (including Romanian participants) working on the project, developing on-line material for learning foreign languages (English, French, Danish …, Romanian as a foreign language) based on the TA approach. The

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material, as well as further theoretical information, is available on <www.thinking-approach.org>.

Khomenko and Sokol[1] propose five groups of **TRIZ/OTSM skills** that learners should develop in the process of learning with the TA:

- skills for working with *models* of elements and of situations, e.g. the ability to compose an unlimited number of models of a given *Element* with a degrees of abstraction and from different points of view; etc.
- skills for *describing* the elements of a problem situation, e.g. the ability to describe an *element* by means of lists of parameters (*features*) and their *values*;
- skills for *describing a problem situation*, e.g. the ability to vary the number of elements and their features when describing a situation; to define the function of an element as a change of one value under a specific parameter; to describe immaterial elements by means of lists of parameters and their values;
- skills for *transforming the models* of a problem situation, e.g. the ability to describe a problem situation by means of formulating a specific Ideal Final Result for a specific contradiction; etc.;
- skills for *preparing* and *evaluating the solution*, i.e. the ability to build a solution to a problem and evaluate it, e.g. the capacity to define positive effects of any partial solution appearing in the course of problem solving; to define the balance of positive and negative effects when shaping the final solution; etc.

The development of the OTSM/TRIZ skills is based on what the writers call **dispositions** that must be cultivated, for example:

- the disposition to build a *necessary* number of different models; to build a necessary number of different models from various points of view and with a various degree of reality; etc.
- the disposition to describe elements via parameters and their values; to describe immaterial elements by means of lists of parameters and their values; to describe parameters and their values as elements that have their own parameters and their values; etc.
- the disposition to go from concrete models to abstract ones and vice versa; to make models which go beyond the possible and the known; etc.
- the disposition to transform the description of a problem situation considering the demands of ideality and in view of emerging contradictions; etc.
- the disposition to *build* (rather than find) a solution to a problem; to evaluate a given solution to a problem; to evaluate the process of arriving at a solution to a problem.

Mastering the above skills and dispositions helps students to become better problem solvers and arrive at creative solutions in various fields of their activity.

Learning with the TA is based on five technologies (with ample material available on the web site): the *Creative Grammar Technology*, dealing with language as the object of study; the *Text and Film Technology*, dealing with communication as a problem solving activity; the *Research Technology*, aimed at creating contexts for systematic applications of the OTSM-TRIZ skills developed in the process of learning; the *Self-Study Technology*, which focuses on educating a "new learner", one who wishes and is ready to accept a full responsibility for his/her learning;

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the *Yes-No Technology*[2], aimed at helping learners to see how OTSM/TRIZ models work in a system. The technologies are not just separate modules; they make a system that aims to help learners to develop both language and thinking skills.

At the level of approach, among the features that are characteristic for the TA and make it different from other approaches to language teaching, we can mention[3]:

- While traditional language teaching focuses on reproducing well-known (conventional) patterns and meanings, rather than making new meanings, with the TA most usage of the language is non-conventional or non-routine: people have to solve non-typical or creative problems for the development of non-routine competencies.
- With the TA, students are expected to learn "to think grammatically" and to strive to become masters in the field of "meaning potential". Learning a language includes learning particular "ways of construing and portraying" the world.
- The TA is based on the idea of a non-linear nature of learning, and thus of a non-linear organization of the teaching/learning process. Instead of a linear curriculum model, the TA offers a modular course based on a number of learning technologies. The technologies serve as bases for the three vectors of the TA:
  - language as the object of study (the Creative Grammar Technology);
  - communication as the object of study, i.e. language used as one of the means for solving problems (interpretation), and using the language as one of the means for solving problems (the Text and the Film Technologies);
  - learning as object of the learning (the Self-Study Technology and the Research Technology).
- The invention method promoted by the TA may be seen as integrating what is generally referred to as a method of discovery and social construction. The promoters of the TA believe that students "discover" models rather than facts. With time, these models are integrated in the students' networks (internalized). However, for this to happen, the models have to be tested and validated in the process of learning (and life), and this is seen as an essentially social process.
- The ultimate aim of the TA is that learners should become their own mediators in the learning process, and thus to be able to scaffold their own learning.

The TA incorporates many ideas from communicative language teaching (e.g. cross-curricula links, learner-independence and emphasis on the learner's individuality, emphasis on skill development and on awareness, non-linear organization of the material, task based activities, etc.), and the activities are basically communicative in character. But a closer look at the tasks suggested will point to some fundamental differences, of which we shall mention here only two: the basically extra-linguistic focus of the TA activities, and their emphasis on the development of powerful and creative thinking.

For example, for a communicative task, the teacher provides:

- a **situation** that is similar to that of the learner's background,

e.g. *Your classmates are planning to go on a trip on the weekend and you would really like to go with them.*

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▪ **roles** for the students participating in the activity,

e.g. *you – your father – your mother*;

▪ a **purpose** for the communication,

e.g. *You must get your parents' permission to join them.* etc.

then asks the students to produce a dialogue and act out the situation.

A **TA** task may involve similar data to start with (e.g. a similar situation, roles, purpose, etc.). Only, the **TA** teacher will not just ask the students to "discuss"; the tasks s/he proposes will involve some problem to be solved. Consequently, before allowing the students to engage in the dialogue, the teacher will ask them to identify some basic contradiction in the situation and define the obstacles that stand in the way of accomplishing the goal. For example

• contradiction: *You really want to go with your friends, but you have done something bad* (let the students decide what it is) *and your parents are angry with you.*

• *obstacle*: *You don't think they'll willingly let you go.*

Then s/he will ask them to solve the problem, e.g. *Find a way to persuade your parents to let you go with your classmates.*

With the TA, change of point of view represents an important source of contradiction and difficulty. The same object or event is never seen in the same way by two different persons; each views and interprets it according to his/her own general and momentary characteristics (age, sex, social and geographical background, education, present state of mind, etc.). That is why, a favorite TA task is to recreate a scene from different from perspectives (e.g. to describe an object/person/event as seen by somebody else) or by using different voices (e.g. a humorous story re-told to sound tragic, a tabloid article re-written for a highbrow publication). The change may result from altering some other parameter of the situation: the same event is placed in a different location (e.g. two girls are invited to imagine they live in a fundamentalist Moslem country, where women have no rights) or time (e.g. two computer addicts are told to imagine they live in a world without electricity); or, the same action is given a different goal (e.g. the student's task is to prevent his/her interlocutor from doing something, instead of helping him/her); etc.

The TA also suggests a special kind of brainstorming and clustering to help students build up their own material: it teaches learners to collect and organize their ideas by offering them steps that they have to cover.

For example, after studying Kipling's poem *IF*, the teacher may give the students the following task:

> **Instruction:** A person does not only have qualities, or only flaws. Make the portrait of a person you admire for his/her qualities and despite his/her flaws. Decide whether the phrase "a remarkable person" would be appropriate to refer to him/her. Explain why (not).

To produce a character portrayal, the teacher may give them the following steps.

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Step 1: Make a list of the positive features of the person you have chosen. (min. 8 features)

Step 2: Group the qualities according to no more than three parameters.

Step 3: For each parameter, add at least 2 more features.

Step 4: Think of some negative features the person mentioned also possess. (min. 6 features)

Step 5: Group the flaws according to no more than three parameters.

Step 6: For each parameter, add at least 1 more feature.

Step 7: Compare the lists in steps 3 & 6 along common parameters. If your parameters do not match, go back to Step 6.

Step 8: For each category mentioned, say why the qualities outshadow the flaws.

Step 9: Characterize the person you have chosen to describe.

As can be seen, the TA helps the students to *make lists* of elements, to *add* (elements, features, descriptions, illustrations, etc.) to each element in the list, to *group* the elements in the lists according to *parameters*, to *compare* lists along common parameters, etc. The material thus put together helps the students to plan/outline their oral or written presentation.

"Parameter" – a mighty word within TA – helps the learners to select and categorize elements. In the case of character portrayal, for example, the parameters (i.e. categories of features, e.g. moral, intellectual, physical, etc.) the student distinguishes will then be used as bases for the separate paragraphs. Parameters are also basic for compare-and-contrast works (essays), e.g. when comparing two persons, or two cities, the student must learn to oppose features belonging to the same category (parameter).

For descriptive works, the **ENV model** is very useful. The *element* is the person/object/phenomenon to be described; the *name* is the feature or parameter mentioned; and the *value* is the actual characteristic(s). To describe a person, for example, the element can be *man*, the "*names*" (features) will be *age, height, color of eyes*, etc., and the *values* will be *28, 1.78, brown,* etc. To describe a *classroom* (element), the "names" may be *size, color of the walls, furniture*, etc., and the *values* may be *big, white, new*, etc. It is not difficult, for every student, to provide a list of 5-6 "names"; but 5-6 names will not allow them to produce very comprehensive descriptions. The TA teacher's task is to help the students to expand their horizons and "stretch their paradigm". Therefore, the students are first invited to "make a list" of features and to give one or several "values" for each feature; then they are asked to add at least 3-5 additional features and to give values to each of them. Grouping the features according to larger parameters is the obvious next step. With the help of material collected in this way, the student can produce a text that is much richer in content.

For doing various types of tasks, the TA provides specific advice[4].

For **point of view** tasks, for example, the following indications are given:

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Choose a new narrator. See what makes him different from the original narrator and how this will affect the text. Define the context where the new story will be told and the aims of the new narrator. Decide which features of the text must be retained and which ones will be changes. Write a new version of the text.

For **Problem-based** tasks, we get the following instructions:

Choose a point of view. Decide what needs to be done and what obstacles prevent this person from doing it. Think of a typical solution for a given situation. Formulate contradictions that appear when the typical solution is applied. Define the Ideal Final Result. List resources that can help one come closer to the Ideal Final Result. See which elementary contradiction can lead you to the solution. Evaluate the solution. Write a new text and illustrate how the problems are resolved.

Such tasks, practiced systematically and over a longer period of time, help the students to think more profoundly and more creatively, and thus, to improve their work.

Teaching foreign languages by the TA system cannot be dealt with in a few lines. For the moment, I only wanted to illustrate some tasks. For those who want further information, the website <thinking-approach.org> provides ample material, both theoretical and illustrative, as well as an international group of young (and not so young) teachers and scientists eager for collaboration, exchange of ideas and team work.

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NOTES

[1] after <thinking-approach.org> and after Sokol & Vizental, 2006: 315-324.
[2] originally developed by Nikolai Khomenko for teaching TRIZ.
[3] after Sokol & Vizental (2006). *The Thinking Approach to Teaching Foreign Languages*. In *Proceedings of the International Symposium of "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, Romania. November 16-18, 2006*. Arad: 315-324.
[4] from <thinking-approach.org>

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