Semiotic Nature of Language Teaching Methods in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

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Abstract

This paper aims to cover the semiotic nature of language teaching methods, and their sample applications in the language classroom. The verbal and the non-verbal aspects of language teaching should not be kept separate since they are closely interrelated and interdependent. The use of signs, symbols and visual aids by the teachers help the enhancement of the learning capacity of the language learner both at cognitive and meta-cognitive levels as they listen and try to learn a foreign language component in the classroom.

Key Words

Semiotics, language teaching methods, cognitive, meta-cognitive, context, sign, symbol

Özet

Bu araştırma, dil öğretim yöntemlerinin ve bu yöntemlerin sınıf içi uygulamalarının göstergebilim açısından değerlendirmesi üzerinedir. Dilin sözlü ve sözlü olmayan yönleri birbirinden ayrı tutulmamalıdır çünkü dilin bu iki yönü hem birbiri üzerine kurulur hemde birbirine bağlıdır. Öğretmenlerin imge, sembol ve görsel materyali derslerde kullanması öğrencilerin öğrenme kapasitesini bilişsel ve biliş ötesi seviyelerde, sınıfta bir yabancı dil materyalini dinleyip öğrenmek için çaba sarfederken geliştirmektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler

Göstergebilim, dil öğretim yöntemleri, bilişsel, biliş-ötesi, bağlam, imge, ikon, sembol.

I. Introduction: The Role of Semiotics In Language Learning and Teaching

The semiotic nature of language teaching is a complicated and an essential concept to study. In the language classroom, the primary role of the language learner is to transfer and exchange correct information with his/her audience. While doing this,

the language learner makes use of the semiotic signs. Most of these signs are used unconsciously by the students and the teachers. Since semiotics is the combination of signs and symbols to communicate the information, the students and the teachers make use of a number of signs, some of which are iconic and some are symbolic. Thus, it can be said that, semiotics is a fundamental issue to be considered in language teaching pedagogy, because it helps the individual to develop his cognitive facilities at all levels of perception. Moreover, semiotics not only offers different models of teaching but also broadens the scope of language teaching by offering tools to consider for visual communication in a given context. To illustrate, non-verbal and visual communication, cultural elements in semiotics and for vocabulary teaching, signs and symbols are used actively in the language classrooms. The language teachers should study many semiotic signs in the teaching process. To illustrate, while teaching a language, the teacher refers to his/her linguistic knowledge. "Linguistics then works in the borderland where the elements of sound and thought combine; their combination produces a form, not a substance." (Hodge and Kress, 1988:24) In the lines above, Hodge and Kress state that linguistics, which is the study of language, has a careful role to perform in humanities related sciences. According to them, linguistics works at the borderland, because linguistics should provide every background and philosophical information to language teachers and learners to help them overcome their problems in learning a foreign language. One of the contributions of linguistics to language teaching is in the field semiotics. According to Jacobson, (1974:32) the role of semiotics in linguistics is to provide "the communication of any messages whatever" or "the exchange of any messages whatever and the system of signs which underlie them." (Sebeok, 1985:I) In this case, Jacobson and Sebeok's concerns include considerations of how messages are successively generated, encoded, transmitted and decoded in certain contexts. About the importance of semiotics in language, French Semiolog (He used the term semiology instead of semiotics) Ferdinand de Saussure (1983:15-6) states that, "A language . . . is a social institution. But it is in various respects distinct from political, judicial and other institutions. Is special nature emerges when we bring into consideration a different order of facts . . . A language is a system of signs expressing ideas, and hence comparable to writing, the deaf-and-dumb alphabet, symbolic rites, forms and politeness, military signals, and so on. It is simply the most important of such systems. . . . It is therefore possible to conceive of a science which studies the role of signs as a part of social life. It would form part of a social psychology, and hence of general psychology. We shall call

it semiology. (from the Greek semeion 'sign.'" In the lines above, Saussure puts forward the importance and the necessity of the existing semiotic signs and symbols in the language system. Thus, in language teaching, the teachers should make use of these semiotic signs (both iconic and symbolic) in the language teaching process to provide a better understanding in the target language, to gain acceleration and perhaps the most important, to avoid cross-cultural failure in the classroom while teaching a foreign language. As Hodge and Kress (1988:26) claim, "Students of cross cultural communication know how often misunderstanding arises because of different assumptions in different cultural groups. Undoubtedly, it creates heavy demands to extend semiotics in this way, to include the description and analysis of the stock of cultural knowledge in a given society." Therefore, it can be said that semiotics not only helps learners to get the right message through semiotic signs to avoid cross-cultural failure, but also encourages the language teachers to play a critical role in the classroom.

Semiotics is a very influential and essential field of study, because by making use of signs the learners are able to achieve a lot of information on various fields such as; literature, art, architecture, psychology, anthropology, philosophy, etc. In other words, communication is the primary concern of semiotics. In the language classroom, the teachers make use of semiotics symbols to lead to a better understanding of the topic. By doing so, the learners find the opportunity to study the topics of a given course in a more informative and enjoyable way. In order to provide accurate and clear comprehension in the target language, the teachers use a number of methods and techniques in the classroom. Most of these language teaching methods have semiotic elements in their nature. By making use of these semiotic elements the students are provided the opportunity to better understand the lesson.

II.   The Semiotic Nature of Language Teaching Methods.

There can be no doubt that language teaching methods provide the language teacher the opportunity to cope with four skills more easily. People have approached language learning in many ways over the years. The self-directed language learner or the language teacher have always asked the same question: "What approach should I use?" However, the hot debates of the last fifty years showed that there is no ideal language teaching method which would meet all the needs of the language learner. Thus, in order to be successful in target language teaching, the teachers have to make some critical decisions about the course material, activities, content, etc, but these may not be enough.

There are semiotic signs which are actively used by the students and the teachers. Semiotic signs in language teaching help learners in a many respects. They not only present visual feedback for the students but also accelerates the learning process as well. Most of the language learning methods have semiotic elements. These elements are presented through activities in many methods especially in direct method, audiolingual method and in communicative method.

2.1. Situational Language Teaching

Situational language teaching is a term not commonly used today, but it is an approach developed by British applied linguists in the 1930s to the 1960s, which had an impact on language courses which survive in some still being used today. The theory of learning underlying the situational language teaching is behaviourism. It gives more importance to the process rather than the conditions of learning. According to Richards and Rodgers (1990:37) "Situational language teaching employs a situational approach to presenting new sentence patterns and a drill based manner of practising them." For Richards and Rodgers, the situation refers to the manner of presenting and practising the information (the structure of language) in the language classroom. "The situation will be controlled carefully to teach the new language material. . . . in such a way that there can be no doubt in the learner's mind of the meaning of what he hears. . . . almost all of the vocabulary and structures taught in the first four or five years and even later can be placed in situations in which the meaning is quite clear." (Pittman, 1964:155-6) Pittman used the term situation to refer to objects, pictures, and realia, together with gestures to demonstrate the meanings of new language items. These objects and pictures are always used as semiotic signs to provide a better understanding in the target language. The situational language teaching includes the following principles in general.

- Language learning is a habit formation.
- Students should avoid making mistakes. Teacher's immediate guidance is needed if they make mistakes.
- Language skills are better and more effectively learned if they are presented orally first, then in written mode.
- Analogy is better than analysis.
- The meanings of the words can be learned more easily in a linguistic and cultural context.

- Accuracy in pronunciation and grammar is always appreciated.

- Students' ability to respond quickly and accurately in speech situations is always welcome.

- Students and teachers should have the auto-control over the structure of language use.

- A situational presentation of new sentence patterns is a must.

- Procedures move from controlled to freer practice of structures

- Procedures move from oral use of sentence patterns to their automatic use in speech, reading and writing.

2.1.1. Sample Classroom Applications for the Situational Method

a. *New Cambridge English: Student's Book II pp.14-15*

Semiotic Signs:

Dancing picture of an Amazon Indian

The naked Australian Aborigines wearing traditional clothes.

The pictures at the bottom of the page to symbolise the important aspects of their life.

The pictures on page 15 symbolise how they live.

Procedure:

The students first of all learn the correct pronunciation of the vocabulary. With the teacher's immediate guidance the students are encouraged to talk about a typical day of Amazon Indians and Australian Aborigines.

b. *Hotline Elementary, p.51*

The symbols (at the train station) on the timetable present different actions to be taken by the passengers.

Procedure:

The students make dialogues for the situations presented in the activity. While writing their activities, they pay attention to use correct grammar and pronunciation. At the end, the students role play the dialogues.

2.2. The Audio-Lingual / Audio-Visual Method

Mid 1960's - three new technological aids came into general use in the classroom-language laboratory, portable tape-recorder and film-strip projector. All these were greeted with euphoria in all modern language departments. Extensive use of tapes and equipment was revolutionary for language teachers. Instead of buying sets of books

to equip a class, teachers were demanding most expensive boxes of film-strips and sets of tapes to enable audio-visual instruction in the classroom.

Potential offered to language teaching by tape-recorder was enormous - now possible to bring native speaking voices into classroom. Editing and self-recording facilities on video and tape-recorder helped the students to become more aware of their talents and proficiency to improve their speaking skills in the target language. Tapes could be used with tape recorder in the classroom or in language laboratory. Today, audio-visual courses consisted of taped dialogues, accompanied by film -strips which are designed to act as visual cues to elicit responses in the foreign language.

Most audio-lingual courses consisted of short dialogues and sets of recorded drills. Method was based on a behaviourist approach, which held that language is acquired by habit formation. Based on assumption that foreign language is basically a mechanical process and it is more effective if spoken form precedes written form. The stress was on oral proficiency and carefully-structured drill sequences (mimicry/memorisation) and the idea that quality and permanence of learning are in direct proportion to amount of practice carried out.

The audio-lingual method was widely used in the United States and other countries during the 1950's and 1960's. It is still used in some programs today. To put it brief, the instructional materials play an important role in this method. These materials are primarily teacher oriented. As Richards and Rodgers (1990:57) mention, "Tape recorders and audiovisual equipment often have central roles in an audiolingual course. . . . A language laboratory may also be considered essential. . . . A taped lesson may first present a dialogue for listening practice, allow for the student to repeat the sentences in the dialogue line by line' and provide follow-up fluency drills on grammar or pronunciation." Besides these audio-visual equipment, semiotic symbols are used to provide comprehension and accuracy in target language. These semiotic symbols are presented either in the activities in the books or in handouts. Most of the time, the audio-visual aids themselves are shown as symbols in textbooks and activities (e.g., in the rubric of an activity) to provide visual instruction and to save time. To illustrate, when the students see the sign of a cassette, s(he) understands that now is the time for a speaking activity or when s(he) sees a headphone sign the student understands that it is time to have some laboratory work with a set of listening activities. The audio-lingual approach is also based on some principles. The activities and the semiotic signs are instructed by taking into consideration the following rules.

- There should be accuracy in pronunciation and grammar.

- Students should have the ability to respond quickly and accurately in speech situations.

- Knowledge of sufficient vocabulary to use with grammatical patterns is required.

- Audiolingualism is based on a structural syllabus.

- The use of audio-visual aids is essential for a fast and effective learning.

A sample procedure for applying this method to a teaching situation is:

- Students hear a model dialogue from the tape or they watch the video.

- Students repeat each line of the dialogue. (The teacher checks the pronunciation meanwhile.)

- Certain key words or phrases may be changed in the dialogue. (Teacher's guidance is essential at this stage)

- Key structures from the dialogue serve as the basis for pattern drills of different kinds.

- The students practice substitutions in the pattern drills. (in pairs or in groups)

2.2.1. Sample Classroom Applications for the Audiolingual Method

a. *New Cambridge English: Student's Book II pp.81*

The semiotic signs on the map present different features of American Industry. The symbol of the "tape-recorder" symbolises that it is time to do a listening activity.

Procedure:

The students listen to the questions on the tape recorder and answer them. For the new vocabulary, they repeat the sentences, questions with the teacher's guidance.

2.3. Communicative Method

Communicative language teaching began in Britain in the 1960s as a replacement to the earlier structural method, called Situational Language Teaching. This was partly in response to Chomsky's criticisms of structural theories of language and partly based on the theories of British functional linguists, such as Firth and Halliday, as well as American sociolinguists, such as Hymes, Gumperz and Labov and the writings of Austin and Searle on speech acts. Communicative language teaching is based on the following principles.

- The functional approach (the functional-notional syllabus) is behind the communicative approach.

- Activities should involve real communication to promote learning.

- Activities should not be imaginary but should be based on realistic motives.

- The meaningful use and production of language promotes the language learning process.

- Students use language as a means of expressing values and their concerns.

- Students are demonstrated with the functions of language that best meet their own communicative needs.

- The communicative language teaching makes use of any activity which would help the learners to get engaged in authentic (real) communication.

- The communicative language teaching aims to develop certain language skills and functions by using the target language and communicative activities.

- Favourite activities are; social interaction activities; conversation and discussion sessions, dialogues, pair and group discussions and role plays.

In communicative language teaching, the instructional materials play an important role. "A wide variety of materials have been used to support communicative approaches to language teaching. Unlike some contemporary methodologies such as Community Language Teaching view materials as a way of influencing the quality of classroom interaction and language use. Materials thus have a primary role of promoting communicative language use." (Richards and Rodgers, 1990:79). The materials in communicative language teaching can be studied in three groups. They are text-based, task-based and realia. In the text based materials, depending on the context of study, to start the conversation, dialogues, drills, sentence patterns, visual cues, taped cues, and pictures are used actively. In the task-based activities, a variety of interactional patterns like, pair work, group work, games, role plays. In this respect, the cue-cards, pictures and the activity cards are actively used as the semiotic elements of the course. In terms of realia, as is clear, the communicative language teaching requires the use of authentic and from life materials in the classroom. These materials can be in the form of; language-based realia, such as signs, magazines, advertisements and their symbols, graphics and statistics. (i.e. maps, pictures, charts, symbols)

2.3.1. Sample Classroom Applications for the Communicative Method

a. *Hotline Elementary, p.67*

The picture is full of semiotic symbols such as, kg., p., the pictures of fruit and the shopping boy

Procedure:

By making use of semiotic signs and symbols, the students compare and contrast the two pictures.

b. *Hotline Elementary, p.71*

The semiotic symbols in the picture is, pound, the size of shoes, etc.

Procedure:

The students make new dialogues for the items presented in the picture. Now, they use their own local items. At the end, a pair work activity follows the procedure. Role-play is another interactional activity which can be used to serve to meet the communicative needs o the foreign language learners.

2.4. Direct Method

The Reform Movement, which arose after the grammar translation method, broke new ground and paved the way for the emergence of several natural methods, the most prominent of which was the Direct Method. The method was developed by Sauveur in the USA and brought to the attention of world by Charles Berlitz. The target language was used as the medium of teaching in very small classes. Lessons were made up of carefully-graded exercises consisting of question and answer responses. The basic idea behind Direct Method was that language learning should be made to be as similar as possible to first language learning with an emphasis on oral interaction where possible and no translation between the L1 and L2. The method's over-simplification of the similarities between first and second language and the difficulties in its adoption to large classrooms are frequently cited criticisms. In direct method the guidance and the instruction of the foreign teacher plays an important role. Its main features are:

- Classroom instruction should be conducted in the target language only.
- The learner should be actively involved in using the language in realistic everyday situations.
- Students are encouraged to think and act in the target language. (The oral communication should be carefully designed by the native speakers of the target language in terms of question-answer exchanges between teachers and students in small and organised classes."
- Priority is given to teaching speaking, then reading and writing has to be considered.

- Vocabulary is taught through demonstration by making use of objects, and pictures.
- Correct pronunciation and grammar is emphasised in the direct method.

The role and the prominence of the use of semiotic signs and symbols are seen in teaching the vocabulary to learners in Direct Method. The native speaker (since he does not know the learners' mother tongue) has to use objects and pictures, even some symbols and body language to teach the correct meaning of concrete and abstract vocabulary. Also the students practice and role-play the activities in the course of a conversation, and several semiotic symbols like; body language and context specific visual material are also exercised.

2.4.1. Sample Classroom Applications for the Direct Method

a. *Hotline Elementary, p.38.*

b. The semiotic signs and symbols of this activity are; the London Clock tower, the British flag, the name of the British Clothing company, the picture of their famous cinema symbolise the British Culture.

Procedure:

By making use of the above semiotic symbols, the students speak in English to discuss the different aspects of British culture and the way of life. The students with the teacher's guidance pay attention to communicate in foreign language only. Native speakers of target language is preferred for the direct method. However, the native speakers of the target language, themselves, also become the symbols of the direct method.

b. *Hotline Elementary, p.94.*

The pictures which show how to cook are presented as semiotic signs in the unit. The American flag is a symbol to state that "hamburger" is a special American food.

Procedure:

The students listen to the ingredients for the recipe. They complete the dialogue by making use of the pictures which appear as semiotic signs in the activity. These pictures also help and guide the students to better understand the purpose of the activity.

2.5. The Other Language Teaching Methods and Their Semiotic Nature

Besides the other language teaching methods as described above, there are others where semiotic symbols are actively used in lessons and activities. These methods are; the silent way, suggestopedia and the total physical response (TPR) method.

2.5.1. The Silent Way

The theoretical basis of Gattegno's Silent Way is the idea that teaching must be subordinated to learning and students should develop their own inner criteria for correctness. All four skills - reading, writing, speaking, and listening - are taught from the beginning. Students' errors are expected as a normal part of learning, the teacher's silence helps foster self-reliance and student initiative. The teacher is active in setting up situations, while the students do most of the talking and interacting. While setting up situations and the activities for the language learners the teacher uses a lot of thought provoking symbols. To illustrate, the teacher may show a number of traffic signs and may ask students to write or talk about the suggested behaviour of a driver on the roads taking into consideration the traffic signs. Here by providing minimum input to the students the learners are encouraged to practise and participate more the classroom activities.

2.5.2. Suggestopedia

Lozanov's method seeks to help learners eliminate psychological barriers to learning. The learning environment is relaxed and subdued, with low lighting and soft music in the background. Students choose a name and character in the target language and culture, and imagine being that person. Dialogues are presented to the accompaniment of music. Students just relax and listen to them being read and later playfully practice the language during an "activation" phase. In suggestopedia, the dim lights, the posters on the walls, the background music, context specific cards, etc. themselves are used as symbols to provide motivation for the learners and better learning in the target language.

2.5.2. Total Physical Response Method

Asher's approach begins by placing primary importance on listening comprehension, emulating the early stages of mother tongue acquisition, and then moving to speaking, reading, and writing. First of all the teacher gives a command and the students

demonstrate their comprehension by acting out commands issued by the teacher; teacher provides novel and often humorous variations of the commands quite quickly. In this method, the teacher directs the students other than the volunteers. Activities are designed to be fun and to allow students to assume active learning roles. Activities eventually include games and skits. In total physical response, the teacher and the students are the active participants of a dynamic course. In order to let students response physically, semiotic signs, symbols are frequently used in the activities. This method is not only used in language teaching but also in other training courses as well, such as courses for drivers, courses for pilots, courses for sportsmen, etc. To illustrate, at a course offered for drivers, the teacher (in the car) can ask the trainee to act accordingly taken into consideration the traffic signs. Here, the signs function as physical stimuli which gives way to the driver's behaviour. In a language teaching classroom, the teacher can show students the traffic signs and can ask students to write commands about each sign. Later, the students can write a response essay as a follow-up activity about the ideal driver's responsibility in the traffic.

III. Conclusion

In language teaching, the teachers use different methods depending on the goals and objectives of the course. Taking into consideration the students' needs, a variety of materials are used for different purposes in the language classroom. Besides their linguistic and pedagogic value, most of these materials have semiotic value. As discussed in the previous sections: the British flag and London clock tower symbolise the British Society in general. The double-decker buses practised in dialogues in several methods help the language learner to get to know more about the social and cultural cues in the target language. Such symbols also fasten the cultural acquisition of the foreign language learner. For a better understanding in the target language, students and teachers should not only undergo training in language, but also a socialising experience. By doing so, the students find the opportunity to develop their sociolinguistic competence which both broadens the students' education by presenting more cultural input, and exercises semiotic signs and symbols in a variety of activities. According to Hymes (1971) the sociolinguistic competence, which is concerned with the social rules of language use, is equally as important as grammatical competence-the linguistic rules of a language. "The acquisition of linguistic and socio-cultural knowledge is integral to one another." Poole (1992:593) concludes. Therefore, an ideal EFL program should seek

both linguistic and sociolinguistic acquisition which complete each other and form a cultural value system. Moreover, According to Robinett (1978:113), "each word used in the EFL classroom is conditioned on the part of 'both speaker and the hearer' by each person's own particular, personal experiences and those experiences that are common to the culture of which he or she is a part." Thus, the language teaching classroom will be pervasively influenced by the target culture since "classroom discourse features encode cultural norms and beliefs." To illustrate, the pictures are used as semiotic signs and symbols to present the particular social aspects of the Western culture like; boyfriend/girlfriend, dating, double-decker buses and flags, etc. Moreover, the books, also comprise a set of symbols which tell the teacher and the students to take further action in the upcoming sessions. For example, the cassette signs indicate the time of a listening activity, a smiling face indicates the success in the activity, the tick and the cross signs refer to a true/false activity and different colours in a textbook might represent different sections of language study like; speaking, reading, listening, etc. To sum up, the students learn the linguistic and sociological aspects of language through methods. In this respect, the language teacher should pay attention to use these semiotic symbols as a part of his/her language course. It should be borne in mind that the more the teachers activate the use of these symbolic signs and symbols through activities in methods, the better the students achieve the social and linguistic aspects of the target language and are able to melt them in the same spot.

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Regulatory Signs for Traffic : <<http://members.aol.com/rcmoeur/regsign.html>>

Biography

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