

# The Understanding of the Audio-lingual Method Under the Perspective of Higher Education Circumstance

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This paper devotes itself to studying this method and to giving a comprehensive and objective evaluation, from the following aspects: theoretical bases, teaching principles, teaching procedures, and merits and weaknesses. From what has been discussed, it is safe to draw the conclusion that the audio-lingual method is valuable and helpful, but not perfect, that is to say, to achieve satisfactory teaching results, different methods should be employed simultaneously, according to the real conditions and the students' needs.

*Keywords:* the audio-lingual method; teaching; evaluation

## Introduction

The audio-lingual method came into being in the 1940s, which had a great influence and impact on foreign language teaching. During the Second World War, the USA faced the task of training a vast of number of people to equip them with foreign language speaking ability, for the purpose of military needs. In order to achieve this purpose in a short time, the framework of the Army Specialized Training Program appeared, whose principle and procedure are the original of the audio-lingual method. "This method has probably a great impact on second and foreign language teaching than any other hand" (Ren Qingmei, 2006, p. 165). This paper aims to study this method from the following four aspects: the theoretical bases, the teaching principles, the teaching procedures, and the advantages as well as shortcomings.

## Theoretical Bases

Behind the popularity and reputation in foreign language teaching, there is solid and sufficient linguistic and psychological theory. Each method or approach, without solid and sound theory, cannot function effectively and last long.

Teaching is an art as well as a science. If you do not know the theories, method, or techniques of teaching, you might as well as be able to teach a foreign language based on your experience, but you cannot hope to achieve good results, nor can you give your or your colleagues' teaching a rational evaluation or a critical appraisal. (Shu, 2006, p. 1)

The theory foundations of the audio-lingual method mainly contain two aspects: linguistics and psychology.

### Linguistics Theory

In 1940s, American structuralism or descriptive linguistics gained extreme popularity and reputation; the

representative figures are Charles, Fries, and Bloomfield, whose linguistic theory underlines the audio-lingual method. In 1942, Bloomfield wrote a pamphlet *Outline Guide for the Practical Study of Foreign Languages*, and his statement captures an important principle of the audio-lingual method: Language learning is over-learning, anything less is of no use. American structuralism hold the opinion that language is made up of smaller elements or components, “The structural approach to language study is to see it in terms of the bits and pieces by means of which it is put together” (Shu B, 2006, p. 15). That is to say, language has many levels and layers, which have structures.

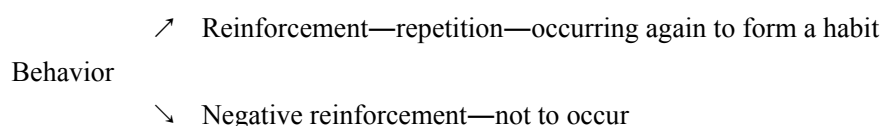
From the structural linguists’ view on language, structure is focused and emphasized much, thus in foreign language teaching, the focus will be explanation of structure. “Structural linguists had provided tools for dissecting language into its smallest parts and for contrasting two languages structurally” (Shu, 2006, p. 342). Structural view holds that language is a system of structurally related elements and the purpose of language learning is to master the elements of language system and structure, namely, phonological units, grammatical units, and lexical items. “A language only can be learnt from a native speaker who acts an informant, and who must be closely observed and imitated” (Stern, 1999, p. 157).

### **Psychological Theory**

Behaviorism, being the theoretical base for the audio-lingual method from the perspective of psychology, advocated that language learning in terms of stimulus and response, operant conditioning, and reinforcement with an emphasis on successful error-free learning. The main figure of behavioral psychology is Skinner, who proposed “verbal behavior” in 1957, which is the extension of his general theory of learning by operant conditioning. Like other behaviors, verbal behavior is controlled by consequences, when consequences, here means stimuli, are rewarding, such behavior is maintained and is increased in strength and frequency, if not, lack of reinforcement will decrease or kill the response or behavior.

The basic view of behaviorism is that human beings cannot know anything they have not experienced and people learn language through a chain of “stimulus-response” reinforcement, “Between ‘stimulus’ and ‘response’, there is a living organism, each organism is regarded as a ‘black box’, the goal of behaviorist, therefore, is to discover and create predictable aspects of linguistic behavior, and relationship between stimulus and response” (Wang, 2001, p. 56). The behaviorist approach emphasizes the immediately perceptible aspects of linguistic behavior and relationship between those responses and events in the world surrounding them. “A behaviorist might consider effective language behavior to be the production of correct responses to stimuli” (Wang, 2001, p. 57).

In S-R Chain, imitation and repetition is vital and essential. By repetition and reinforcement, a kind of conditioned response or habit will be formed, whenever there is a stimulus or condition, the corresponding or correct response will occur accordingly. The relation can be shown as :



What have been discussed are the two theoretical foundations of the audio-lingual method: linguistics and psychology, which underline the method. It is natural to get the features summarized by Stern (1999, p. 158).

- (1). Language is speech, not writing;
- (2). Language is what its native speaker says, not what someone thinks they ought to say;
- (3). Languages are different;
- (4). A language is set of habits;
- (5). Teach the language, not about the language.

### **Teaching Principles**

Moulton, in 1961, in his *Linguistics and language teaching in the United States*, stated: (1) a structural analysis of the language, forming the bases for graded material; (2) presentation of the analysis by a trained linguist, (3) several hours of drill per day with the help of a native speaker and in small classes, and (4) emphasis on speaking as the first objective. In Wilga M. Rivers' opinion, structural linguist regarded language as a living, evolving thing, not as a static corpus of forms and expressions from the statement and the theory discussed above, it is easy and natural to summarize the teaching principles of the method:

1. Since "language is speech, not writing", so listening and speaking take the lead and should be given the top priority, language skills are divided into four categories: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Originally, this method is to train interpreters, so listening and speaking ability is emphasized.

2. Practicing repeatedly and forming a habit. That is to say, in teaching, repeated exercises and drilling is necessary, and such kind of repeated actions can pave the way for mastering language ability.

3. Teaching on sentence pattern-centered basis. Influenced by structuralism, language is a system of related elements, that is to say, structure is the framework of language, and language pattern or structure should be the core of teaching. Sentence is the basic unit of effective communication, so sentence pattern is focused.

4. Mother tongue is not used in classroom instruction. In Skinner's view, "One important external factor in the language learning process is the frequency with which a certain utterance is used in the child's environment" (Wang, 2001, p. 57), imitation plays an important role, so if the learning environment is the target language, the learners must imitate from the environment, thus mother tongue should be avoided in order to give learners a pure target language environment for imitation and memorization. "Children imitate the language of their environment to a considerable degree, and imitation is a strong contributing factor in the language learning process (Wang, 2001, p. 58).

5. Contrasting language structures and determining difficult points in teaching. In the view of structuralisms, every language has basic structures forming the framework of it, at the same time, "Language is different", so the comparison between languages is important and indispensable. By comparison, the difference and difficulty can be found and pointed, thus during teaching, the difficult point will be emphasized

6. Correcting errors and cultivating a good language habit. When errors occur, the teacher will give the students a negative reinforcement, then the students will not repeat the mistaken action, the errors can be prevented. According to behaviorism, language learning is a kind of habit-forming. By repeated reinforcement and negative reinforcement, the correct language can be learnt and good language habit can be formed.

7. Making full use of modern teaching means. Since audio-lingual method pays much attention to speaking and listening, repeated and constant drilling of speaking and listening ability, so the tapes, language lab, MP3, and other teaching means should be applied. In 1950s, science and technology provided the developed teaching

means for audio-lingual method. “By the end of the decade, laboratories were sufficiently common in America for Edward. M. Stack to publish his immensely influential manual on the subject, *The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching* (1960)” (Howatt, 2002, p. 219).

### **Teaching Procedures**

Twadell has contributed to the development of the theory and technique of the audio-lingual method, here, what will be discussed is Twadell’s model. Professor Twadell from Brown University made audio-lingual teaching procedure standardized in five stages: cognition, imitation, repetition, variation, and selection.

#### **Cognition**

Cognition is the first step of the method, which means understanding. The students learn the material by listening to and repeating after the teacher or tape, and the teacher ought to make full use of the model structures, introduce new items and language points by the way of reviewing the learnt material, then the students may try their best to associate the new items to the learnt items, thus cognition or understanding will be achieved. What is more, the content, situation, and comparison are also recommended.

#### **Imitation**

Imitation is a very important concept in behaviorism, by imitation to the native pronunciation and intonation; the students may be closer to the native speaker. Students should imitate those learned patterns which the teacher reads out in the target language. Since imitation means practicing and memorizing, listening is the major concern in this stage.

#### **Repetition**

Repetition is the key step for habit forming. By repetition, the memory can be strengthened and with a reinforcement given by teacher, the response or the habit will be formed accordingly. Students learn to command sentence patterns by repeating the imitated and memorized items. In this section, dialogues are used for repetition and memorization, correct pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation are also emphasized.

#### **Variation**

The audio-lingual method stresses the sentence pattern drilling or practice, also the language structure is always the core of the method, thus the variation, in other words, sentences patterns or structures are important for the learners to master the target language. According to the structuralisms’ views, language is a system of related elements, in the paradigmatic and syntagmatic structures, the corresponding or equivalent element can be changed or substituted. “Significant linguistic structures and patterns are segmented into smaller elements, which are assumed to be the basic building elements of the language concerned” (Dai, 2006, p. 166). In order to master more sentences patterns and structures, variation can be divided into three stages.

**Substitution.** Substitution means one or several learned words or phrases are replaced by new ones belonging to the same syntactical function (Zhang, 1999, p. 96). By this kind of exercise, the students can enlarge their vocabulary and enrich their expressions. The development of patterns and substitution drills represent a combination of structural linguistic analysis and behaviorist habit-formation.

For example

The	{	orange apple pear	is	{	in the box on the desk beside the book
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The purpose is to present the structure “NP+ “be” + preposition + NP” through a process of drilling. The basis for the selection of structures comes from structural linguistics, while the psycholinguistics for the ways comes from behaviorist psychology.

**Conversion.** Conversion means changing the sentence structure or functional word in order to master more sentence patterns, mainly containing conversion between affirmative sentence and interrogative one, and between direct speech and indirect speech. For example,

1. Professor Luan taught us English Teaching well.

→ Did professor Luan teach us English Teaching well?

→ Who taught us/you English Teaching well?

2. She said, “I have finished my term paper.”

→ She said she had finished her term paper.

By this kind of drilling, the students can master more sentence patterns and grammar.

**Expansion.** Expansion means to enlarge a sentence by adding some modifiers, thus, the extended sentence could express richer meaning and information, and in addition, it can help students know the functions of every part in the sentence. For example,

This is a coat. → This is a beautiful coat bought in the supermarket near our university by my friend as my birthday present.

### Selection

In this section, students are trained to select from the learned materials, those items suitable for a specific situation. For this aim, the techniques include: “question and answer expanding exercises, retelling, and creative talk, talking about something on a guided topic, learning to talk with the help of picture, talking and discussing a specific theme, or writing various kind of narrative passages” (Zhang, 1999, p. 396). This section involves both speaking and writing, in other words, the basic skills are cultivated and strengthened.

In sum, the audio-lingual method is a language teaching method which focuses on structures. It is a linguistic or structure-based approach to language teaching. The elements of language: phonology, morphology, and syntax of the language are arranged according to their order of presentation or teaching. The four basic language skills are taught in order of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Moreover, recognition and discrimination are followed by imitation, repetition, and memorization.

The dialogues used for drilling sentence patterns also provided the means of contextualizing key structures and illustrated situations in which structures might be used as well as some cultural aspects of the target language.

### General View of Strong Points and Weak Points

It cannot be denied that this method have created a linguistic awareness which, as we have seen, had previously been absent. This method pays special and extreme attention to imitation, repetition, memorization, and pattern drills. “Formal structural analysis provided language teaching with an entirely new, simple, and

down-to-earth way of handling the complexities of a language system” (Stern, 1999, p. 167).

### **The Strong Points**

“The audio-lingual method is the first methodological system to take systematic linguistics and psychological theory as its basis. It plays a great role in spreading the concept of giving priority to listening and speaking” (Lu, 2004, p. 226). This method had great popularity and reputation in language teaching, which has many merits and advantages.

**Sufficient theory basis.** Two aspects: linguistics and behaviorism underlie the method, which make the method reliable and systematic, so the practical teaching under the theory guidance can reach satisfactory results.

**Listening and speaking are given the top priority.** This feature has a great significance and is important compared to grammar translation method. Good listening and speaking ability is the base for accurate and fluent expression and communication. In China, many students who learnt English for years cannot understand the talk of native speakers and cannot speak standard English, thus to change this phenomenon, the audio-lingual method should be applied to improve Chinese students’ listening and speaking ability. In the guideline of English teaching, the four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing are emphasized, so the audio-lingual method is very helpful and useful in English major teaching during the first two years.

The rapid development of the society puts forward new requirements for the students, in terms of the comprehensive language use ability, most students are eager for the exercise and reinforcement in spoken English and listening for the purpose of strengthening the ability of communication in language and culture. (Zhang, 2009, p. 90)

**Grammar can be learnt by structures.** The function of grammar should not be neglected and denied, especially in foreign language learning. However, grammar learning is boring and dull if by reciting the rules, just like grammar-translation method. In audio-lingual method, the grammar can be learnt during structure drilling.

**Contrastive method.** Contrastive method can pinpoint the differences between foreign language and mother tongue, also within target language, the different points can be found for the students to understand language better.

**Practical and systematic.** The method is practical and systematic in teaching, which has systematic pattern and procedure for the teachers to follow, the principles advocated by the method can be applied in real foreign language teaching more easily, comparatively speaking.

**Helpful and meaningful to good habit-forming.** Since the psychological basis is behaviorism, in the stimulus-response chain, by reinforcement, the students would be encouraged and the actions will be strengthened if the actions or responses are correct or appropriate. However, if the actions or response are incorrect or improper, they will get a negative reinforcement, and will not repeat the wrong actions, in this way, the good learning habits will be formed gradually.

### **Weak Points**

Every method has its strong points and weak ones; there is no perfect method, so the audio-lingual method is not exceptional. It is of significance to mention the weak points as well, for the purpose of studying the method comprehensively. The weak points can be shown as the following.

**Over-emphasized structure.** The structuralism emphasized structure of language so much that live language is boiled down to dull structure, as a matter of fact, just as TG grammar claims, language is not merely

a simple linear structure, but have two levels of structures: deep structure and surface structure (Hu Zhaunglin, 2002, p. 621). Audio-lingual method only concerns about surface structure, but neglects deep structure.

**The psychological base.** The psychological base is behaviorism, which is based on animal experiments, thus in audio-lingual method, learners are compared to animals. Human beings have complicated and subtle cognitive mechanism, pure behaviorism cannot account for the complex learning activities, which is attacked by cognitive approach.

**The textbook English.** The English is sentence pattern and drilling oriented, thus, it is a little far from the use of English reality, in addition, the repetitive and intensive drilling may be dull and make student feel boring.

### Conclusion

Objectively speaking, the audio-lingual method has both merits and demerits. In fact, every teaching method has two sides; there is no universal method in teaching, because foreign language teaching contains many aspects. It is impossible for a single method to cover every aspect. "Evaluation of a particular method depends on many factors; one factor that is easily ignored is that of context. A method that can be considered beneficial may not be so in another" (Wang, 2001, p. 356).

What we should do is to select the method according to the practical situation and real need of teaching, and make full use of the merits and avoid the shortcomings. "All in all, in English teaching, the principles should be insisted, the approaches should be applied flexibly. Learn and borrow the advantages of every method in order to get the best teaching results" (Li, 2006, p. 326). Anyway, what should we do is use this method properly according to the practical situation, combine other methods, if necessary, to achieve satisfactory teaching results.

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