

The Direct Method and LiveScripts

Seventy hours of private tuition in FLT almost equal three school years of multifunctional classes which suggests the need to recreate a similar teaching environment and focus on listening-speaking drills for a six-months period to obtain intermediate skills.

As a Spanish teacher for Berlitz Language School in Torrance, California, we usually had one or, at most, two students in the classroom and we followed the "Direct Method" which was based upon the "Natural Method". The main principle behind these methods is that all instruction is given in the target language as opposed to more traditional grammar methodologies coming from teaching classical languages. In our training sessions for this position, instructors used to emphasize three points that we should always bear in mind: First, the already mentioned rule of avoiding using the student's native language; second, making sure students' answers are longer than teachers' questions, that is, students should actively speak for more than half of the class session; and third one, asking student to repeat new vocabulary at least three times for the new word or expression to sink in.

Our class involved repetitive spoken drills in the very beginning of the course, turning into real dialogues -or so we tried- as contextualized, communicative and natural as possible without any reading nor writing at all which were left for homework. We teachers rotated in front of our clients who typically included company personnel in managing positions to be transferred to Spanish speaking countries in a short period of time. A basic course would consist of four one-hour sessions per week during six months. After that period of time, the student was likely sent abroad where he was expected to complete the skills needed for a successful foreign language learning process.

What could be the level of these students after a 70 hour course of private classes? Not an easy question to answer -which means it could be a good researching area- but likely they would almost reach an intermediate level in listening and speaking skills and a beginning level of reading and writing. However, customer satisfaction in Berlitz Language Schools must be high judging for their whole century of existence and expansion around the world, which proves that students do have the linguistic resources to adapt to the target-language country.

My next job was at the New School for Social Research, a faculty of New York University in the East Coast, where I taught intermediate courses to credit and non-credit adult students following a modern multifunctional approach to FLT, which supposedly pays equal attention to all four skills. A methodology that it is still in use for FL teaching in secondary education, eoi colleges, private language schools and universities worldwide, often backed up by audiovisual and on-line support.

However, after 20 years of a multifunctional approach, there have been quite a few international voices claiming that this methodology is not giving the results expected from three hours per week, nine months per year, and four to six years of obligatory schooling and the existence in our country of an army of private schools proves it:

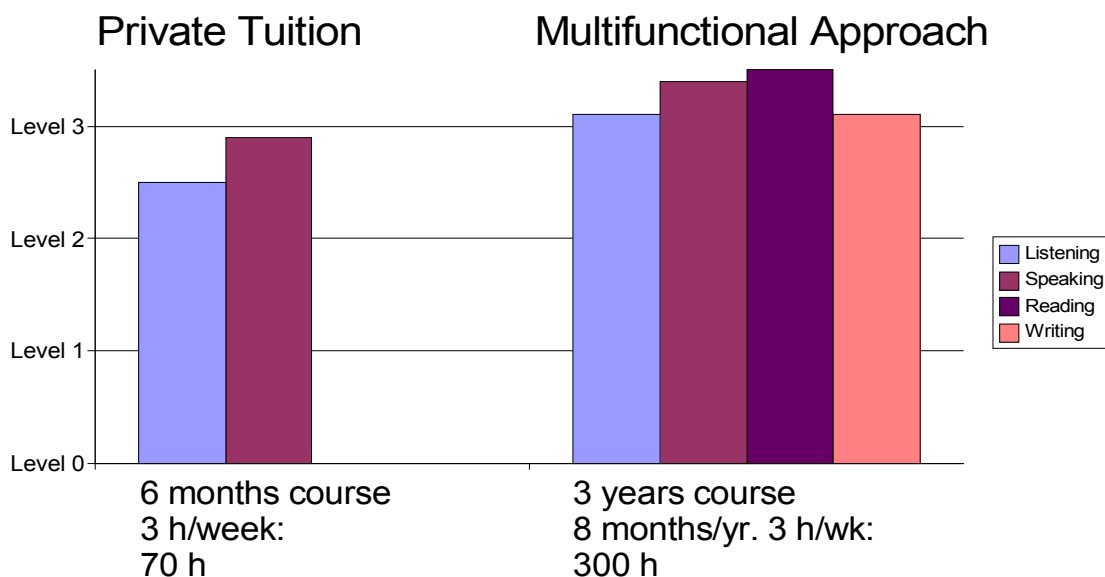
1. The multifunctional approach works at its best in target-language countries but it has serious drawbacks in lower levels of non target-language countries, particularly in secondary education.
2. In this case -of a multifunctional approach of lower levels in non target-language countries- a more systematic and structural methodology of listening-speaking drills is absolutely needed to compensate for the lack of exposure to the target language outside the classroom.

These are the conclusions derived from the Free Linguistics Conference organized by the University of Sydney in the conference proceedings “Questioning Linguistics”, and from my three presentations at the First Conference on Spanish and Portuguese Studies organized by Temple University -Philadelphia, USA-, the 32nd AEDEAN (Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies) conference edition in Universitat de Mallorca and the First Conference on Linguistic and Intercultural Education in Alba Iulia University -Romania- last October and November.

These limitations of the Multifunctional Approach in lower levels taught in non target-language countries consist of the following aspects:

- Multifunctional textbooks monopolize FLT methodology with global long-term goals which disregard students with short-term listening and speaking priorities like tourists, technical students, electricians, nurses, car mechanics, erasmus students, etc...
- General students, not only senior citizens but also young students, often get lost in fancy designs which do not clearly specify what to study -of course, everything has to be studied but, how can you say that to someone who just needs basic listening and speaking skills for travelling or work?
- Contents are very repetitive from one year to the other and students often forget during summer vacation.
- These textbooks do not include an immediate phonetic transcriptions or translation -only sometimes in the back of the book- and discourage self-learning skills particularly from forced absentees, for example, students assigned to foreign countries for most of the course. In fact, partly because of this, and those long-term goals, homework is not done very often.
- Multifunctional books lack oral drills of verb tenses and structures particularly during the first stages of language learning when little communicative work can be achieved.
- There is too much grammar contents which not even native speakers know about.
- All in all, five or six years of FLT seem to be a very long period of time for students to keep up their interest particularly if we are to foster linguistic competence in two foreign languages -and many of the speakers are already bilingual in national languages.
- Multifunctional books are never tailored to the specific linguistic background of European, Japanese, Indian, African students, and other nationalities, taking into account cognate vocabulary and cognate structures to facilitate acquisition.

We have tried to summarize the difference of time frames and linguistic competence between private tuition and regular multifunctional classes on this graphic:



Obviously, we are aware that we can not assign a private teacher for each and every student. However, we do have the technical resources to recreate a private tuition environment with computers, internet and even tape recorders. Our overall suggestion is to focus on listening and oral skills during a school year to produce the grammar contents of the three first courses, beginner through intermediate, at the same time that students follow their regular textbooks.

Assimil books, for instance, are divided into a hundred lessons, every one has only several sentences to read out and memorize and it takes about ten to fifteen minutes to go through them. Teachers could devote fifteen minutes of their classes to do a follow-up of voluntary students who compromise for that kind of an effort -and research- with the promise that they will improve their English language command beyond their imagination in just six to seven months. Those students should prepare the lesson the day before, listening to the audio recording and reading out those few sentences, first, from the book, then, speaking them up without reading. Next day, their teacher will pair up students who will repeat the drill taking turns. It might be very repetitive and monotonous during the first month but dialogues should become more alive and varied afterwards. Then, the teacher would go on with the regular textbook and class materials.

If students stick to their compromise of reading around five Assimil units per week, by the end of one single schoolyear, they should meet that goal beyond their wildest dreams of using another language to communicate effectively. Good listening and speaking habits should stir up their curiosity for other language activities whether on-line chats, games, watching films... and trigger off the improvement of the rest of skills -reading and writing.

Good dialogues represent a key element on this scheme and Assimil books would be a transitory stage until further research produces more natural and diverse question-answer activities. An overall consensus on spoken drills of structures and vocabulary with a listening support -that keeps grammar explanations to a minimum- should yield effective group and pair-work speaking activities as well as self-learning abilities that could be implemented through internet. These resources -together with a more realistic outlook on the writing needs of students to be accomplished by guided and semi-guided compositions- should turn teachers into simple coordinators of a linguistic effort which behooves students of course.

This way, we are not just teaching English, we are teaching to learn a foreign language. So we foster self-learning and multilingual skills leaving room for even another language to be studied in obligatory education. We simply can not think a better and more systematic way to research and likely implement the European Common Framework of Reference for Language Learning.

We are also suggesting schools to combine this structural approach with a more modern on-line technology and audiovisual methodology, like reading scripts for instance -from TV episodes, complete feature movies and documentaries- before watching them on the screen. While textbooks must show a finely-tuned input to encourage language learning, reading scripts in tandem with their projections display a more roughly-tuned input which fosters language acquisition.

Very often, countries which do not dub foreign language movies like Holland, Denmark or Greece do have a higher level of foreign language command than other countries like Italy, France, Spain, etc... dubbing those same movies. Of course, there should be other reasons for that circumstance but we will all agree that having Brad Pitt or Angelina Jolie as speech models are a tough foreign language resource to beat up.

Considering that, we have created LiveScripts, a non-profit organization whose main objective is to provide students with movie transcripts in a paper magazine as a reading guide and foreign-language teaching or self-learning resource previous to watching the film in original version and without distracting subtitles. We rely on the only exceptions to the exclusivity of copyrights ownership, that is, research and education.

On these regards, as of March 26, 2008, the Department of Justice of Generalitat de Catalunya sent us a certified assessment on our mission statement and just pointed out minor details to correct; then, as of last August, 25 our Association was officially registered in that Department. In other words, we can legally edit a paper magazine with the movie script from the next premiers on DVD, or broadcasted on TV, or even edit a pack of magazine and DVD of those movies which now belong to public domain.

Although we are not obliged to, it is our firm commitment to collect a percentage of the sales generated by the publication and offer that amount to the legal screen writer

who authored the published transcripts. By proceeding this way, and far from causing any damage to the movie industry, we benefit all parties involved, students of primary and secondary schools, language schools and colleges, movie distributors, studios, authors and the general audience.

We do believe that exceptions to the exclusivity of copyrights must exist in the legislation of all countries and therefore we are trying to reach formal agreements with the Writers Guild of America and other unions for an International LiveScripts Association, each country having some degree of autonomy but at the same time with global compromises to increase our decision power before third parties.