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Evaluating the Oral Method in Foreign Language Teaching: Historical Perspectives, Modern Applications, and Pedagogical Insight

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Abstract

This article explores the Oral Method in foreign language teaching, focusing on its historical significance, core principles, and relevance in contemporary education. Originally developed by Harold Palmer and A.S. Hornby, the Oral Method emphasizes verbal repetition, situational learning, and structured grammar acquisition as foundational tools for language proficiency. Through an analysis of its strengths—such as pronunciation accuracy, fluency development, and practical application—and its limitations, including restricted learner autonomy and cognitive engagement, this study highlights the method's enduring value. The article also discusses the potential of integrating the Oral Method with communicative and task-based approaches, leveraging digital tools and personalized techniques to enhance its effectiveness for diverse learners. Ultimately, the Oral Method's adaptable principles make it a valuable component of a comprehensive language teaching framework.

Keywords: Oral Method, situational learning, language fluency, communicative approach, language pedagogy

1. Introduction

The Oral Method, also referred to as the Oral Approach or Situational Language Teaching, emerged in the early 20th century as a prominent language teaching strategy, focusing on oral proficiency and situational language use. Its development, attributed to linguists Harold Palmer and A.S. Hornby, sought to address the need for practical, communicative language skills rather than purely academic knowledge (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). This approach emphasized systematic, inductive grammar teaching and context-based learning, relying heavily on teacher-student interaction and oral repetition to reinforce language structures (Matsuda, 2003). Situational Language Teaching evolved as an alternative to the Direct Method, incorporating structured sentence patterns and contextualized vocabulary to improve learners' language comprehension in real-life situations.

Despite its historical significance and foundational role, the Oral Method's prominence in language education has diminished over time, largely replaced or blended with communicative and task-based approaches. Modern language instruction increasingly values communicative competence, authenticity, and learner autonomy, elements which were less emphasized in the Oral Approach (Ashrafova, 2024). As the



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field of language teaching has moved beyond strictly method-based frameworks to what Kumaravadivelu (2006) calls the "post-method" era, the standalone application of the Oral Method raises questions regarding its relevance and adaptability in diverse, modern classrooms. The approach's traditional structure, which heavily relies on teacher-directed activities and controlled oral practice, can limit learner independence and may not align well with contemporary teaching paradigms that emphasize student-centered and technology-enhanced learning environments (Donato, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to examine the principles, advantages, limitations, and adaptability of the Oral Method in the context of today's language classrooms. This study aims to determine how the Oral Method's core principles—such as situational learning, vocabulary control, and inductive grammar instruction—can be adapted to support diverse learning styles and educational goals. Despite its decline in popularity, the Oral Method remains a relevant pedagogical tool when adapted to contemporary learning environments, emphasizing verbal practice, situational learning, and student self-guidance. By exploring its potential adaptations, this study intends to bridge traditional language teaching techniques with the demands of modern pedagogy, highlighting the enduring value of the Oral Method as part of a dynamic, integrative approach to language instruction.

2. Methods

Overview of the Oral Method

The Oral Method, known for its structured and systematic approach, centers on the principle that language acquisition is primarily achieved through verbal practice, where repeated exposure and active usage reinforce learning. This method emerged as a reaction to more rigid grammar-translation models, promoting situational learning as a means to engage students with real-life language use. Under this method, vocabulary and grammar are first introduced orally. Learners interact with spoken language before encountering written forms, building a strong foundation in pronunciation and sentence structure. By delaying written language exposure, the Oral Method encourages learners to internalize spoken language patterns, which helps to foster more intuitive and fluid language skills (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

The Oral Method is structured around controlled sentence patterns and vocabulary tailored to common communicative scenarios. This approach also includes a graded grammar presentation, in which simple structures are introduced first, progressively moving toward more complex forms. Vocabulary is selectively introduced, with an emphasis on frequently used, practical words to reinforce utility in conversational settings. This gradual, structured exposure to language elements allows learners to develop a scaffolded understanding, promoting automaticity and confidence in everyday interactions (Ashrafova, 2024).

Instructional Techniques

1. **Repetition and Practice** Repetition is fundamental in the Oral Method, as consistent practice aids in mastering both pronunciation and sentence structure. Through repetitive drills, learners familiarize themselves with language sounds, phonemic distinctions, and stress patterns, developing a muscle memory that supports natural language production. Teachers guide students through various repetitive exercises, including choral repetition, individual pronunciation drills, and substitution drills, which embed language patterns more deeply. This repetitive structure ensures that learners achieve not only accuracy but also fluency in verbal communication (Asadova, 2024).



2. **Situational Exercises** Situational exercises in the Oral Method aim to contextualize language learning, allowing students to practice language in real-life scenarios. Teachers create situations relevant to daily life or particular topics, encouraging students to apply new vocabulary and sentence structures in context. For example, a situational exercise might involve role-playing a restaurant scenario where learners practice ordering food, asking questions, and responding to social cues. These situational exercises connect language use with practical, interactive settings, fostering a more intuitive understanding of context and appropriate language use (Donato, 2016).
3. **Technology Integration** With advancements in educational technology, interactive tools such as whiteboards, digital flashcards, and online resources now enhance the Oral Method's effectiveness by providing multi-sensory learning experiences. Interactive whiteboards allow teachers to visually and audibly present language patterns, helping students to connect written and spoken forms. Digital resources, such as language learning apps, also provide students with additional repetition opportunities and access to authentic materials, like video and audio clips, that enrich language exposure. By incorporating modern technology, teachers can make language practice more engaging and accessible, aligning traditional oral exercises with students' digital literacy and preferences (Barrett & Liu, 2016).

Student and Teacher Roles

In the Oral Method, the teacher plays a central role as a model, guiding students through situational exercises and providing continuous feedback on pronunciation and grammar. The teacher carefully sets up scenarios and introduces vocabulary and structures that students can apply in contextualized settings. Teachers also use facial expressions, gestures, and other visual cues to help convey meaning, particularly when introducing new vocabulary. This modeling builds a reference for students, who then repeat and interact with language in controlled, guided ways.

Students, meanwhile, are active listeners and imitators in this method. Their primary tasks involve listening attentively to the teacher, participating in repetition exercises, and applying the language in situational practice. They are expected to focus on accuracy and mimicry initially, with the goal of achieving fluency and comfort in spoken language. Over time, students gain confidence in expressing themselves as they progress through increasingly complex structures. By following the teacher's model, students move gradually from imitation to independent language use, cultivating skills that prepare them for real-life communication.

3. Results

Advantages of the Oral Method

1. **Language Habituation** One of the primary benefits of the Oral Method is its effectiveness in establishing language habits through repetition and structured oral practice. By engaging students in continuous repetition, the method enables learners to internalize language structures and patterns, which gradually become automatic and intuitive. This repetition-based learning fosters a sense of familiarity and fluency in the target language, allowing students to develop habits that support spontaneous language production (Ashrafova, 2024). As students repeatedly use language in controlled contexts, they become increasingly confident and comfortable, effectively bridging the gap between structured practice and real-world application.



2. **Pronunciation and Grammar Mastery** The Oral Method places significant emphasis on pronunciation and grammatical accuracy, providing students with opportunities to refine these skills through focused practice. Because students are consistently exposed to correct pronunciation and grammatical forms through teacher modeling and repetition, they can better develop accurate language output. This method's structured approach to grammar, which introduces simple forms before progressing to complex structures, also enables students to build a solid grammatical foundation. Asadova (2024) notes that these focused, foundational practices are particularly beneficial for learners who struggle with pronunciation or grammatical consistency, as the Oral Method reinforces accuracy in a supportive, repetitive environment.
3. **Verbal and Situational Familiarity** Another advantage of the Oral Method is its strong emphasis on situational learning, which allows students to develop comprehension within real-life contexts. By practicing language in situational exercises—such as role-playing everyday interactions—students acquire language in ways that are immediately applicable to real-world scenarios. This situational practice helps students to connect language with specific social and communicative contexts, enhancing their ability to use the language meaningfully and appropriately. Such context-based learning is valuable because it prepares students for practical interactions, equipping them with situational familiarity that encourages active and relevant language use outside the classroom (Donato, 2016).

Challenges and Limitations

1. **Student Control** A key limitation of the Oral Method is its structured and teacher-led nature, which often restricts student autonomy. Since the method relies heavily on teacher direction, students have limited control over the learning process, which can lead to passivity and hinder the development of independent learning skills. This lack of learner autonomy can also restrict students' creative use of language, as they primarily focus on imitation rather than exploring language freely (Matsuda, 2003). For students accustomed to more open-ended learning environments, this structure may feel limiting and could reduce engagement over time.
2. **Cultural and Linguistic Adaptation** Teaching diverse groups with varied linguistic and cultural backgrounds poses additional challenges for the Oral Method. The reliance on situational learning, often rooted in the culture of the language being taught, can create difficulties for students unfamiliar with certain cultural references. Teachers may need to adapt situational exercises to be culturally inclusive, ensuring that the contexts used are meaningful and accessible to all learners. Failure to adapt these exercises could result in a disconnect between the language and the students' own lived experiences, potentially reducing the method's effectiveness for diverse audiences (Barrett & Liu, 2016).
3. **Dependence on Teacher's Skills** The success of the Oral Method is heavily dependent on the teacher's proficiency in language modeling and situational setup. Teachers must have strong language skills to model accurate pronunciation and grammar, as well as the creativity to design engaging and contextually relevant exercises. If a teacher lacks these skills, the effectiveness of the Oral Method may be significantly compromised, leading to gaps in student comprehension and engagement. Additionally, without sufficient training, teachers may struggle to maintain the method's rigor and consistency, which could affect learning outcomes (Reichelt, 2001).

Current Relevance



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Despite its limitations, the Oral Method retains elements that align well with modern language teaching approaches, particularly communicative and learner-centered techniques. The method's focus on verbal practice and situational learning resonates with the goals of communicative language teaching, which emphasizes real-world language use and meaningful interaction. Moreover, when adapted with elements of learner autonomy and technology integration, the Oral Method can serve as a foundation for blended, interactive language instruction (Ashrafova, 2024). As classrooms increasingly incorporate digital tools and diverse instructional methods, the principles of the Oral Method—such as repetition, contextualization, and structured practice—remain relevant, offering valuable strategies for foundational language acquisition.

4. Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

The findings highlight that the Oral Method offers substantial benefits for language fluency and comprehension by using situational practice and repetition to build a strong foundation in spoken language. This method's structured approach to repetitive verbal practice fosters automaticity, making it effective for learners aiming to achieve a degree of fluency in real-life situations (Ashrafova, 2024). Compared to more recent methodologies, such as communicative language teaching (CLT) and task-based language teaching (TBLT), the Oral Method is more rigid and teacher-centered. However, its focus on consistent oral repetition and pronunciation drills gives it an advantage in achieving pronunciation accuracy and a natural flow in speaking. While CLT and TBLT prioritize spontaneous communication and language flexibility, the Oral Method's systematic approach may provide a necessary foundation for beginners before they transition to more communicative approaches (Matsuda, 2003).

Implications for Modern Language Teaching

1. **Blending with New Methods** To maximize its effectiveness, the Oral Method can be integrated with communicative and task-based approaches. By blending its structured verbal practice with the spontaneous, context-based interactions promoted in CLT and TBLT, educators can create a balanced pedagogy that combines fluency with communicative competence. For example, students might first practice sentence structures and pronunciation through the Oral Method's drills, then apply these skills in role-plays or tasks where they interact more freely. Such integration supports a gradual shift from accuracy-focused practice to meaningful language use, allowing learners to build confidence and apply language in realistic scenarios (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).
2. **Role of Technology** The Oral Method can benefit greatly from digital tools that enhance its focus on pronunciation, vocabulary acquisition, and interactive learning. Interactive platforms like language apps, digital flashcards, and online pronunciation tools allow learners to practice repetitive exercises independently, outside of the classroom. These tools also provide immediate feedback, aiding in self-correction and reinforcing accurate language patterns. Additionally, using interactive whiteboards and online audio-visual resources, teachers can make situational language learning more dynamic and visually engaging. Such technological enhancements make the Oral Method more accessible to modern students, who often prefer and benefit from digital learning experiences (Barrett & Liu, 2016).
3. **Personalization for Diverse Learning Styles** The traditional Oral Method can be rigid and uniform, often not accommodating different learning styles. However, adapting it to meet visual, verbal, and kinesthetic preferences can significantly increase its effectiveness. For example, visual



learners benefit from digital visual aids, such as interactive boards or illustrated vocabulary cards, while kinesthetic learners engage through role-playing activities. Auditory learners can take advantage of recorded audio materials and listening exercises. By incorporating elements that appeal to varied learning styles, teachers can ensure the Oral Method is more inclusive and responsive to individual learner needs, enhancing overall engagement and retention (Donato, 2016).

Limitations and Recommendations

While the Oral Method excels in establishing foundational fluency and pronunciation, it has limitations in fostering higher-order language skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, and independent learning. Its emphasis on repetition and controlled language use restricts opportunities for learners to develop cognitive skills necessary for advanced language use. For instance, students in more dynamic, modern learning environments often require opportunities to analyze, create, and interact with language more flexibly, rather than simply reproducing set phrases.

To address these gaps, the Oral Method should be complemented with approaches that promote critical thinking and autonomous learning. One recommendation is to incorporate problem-solving tasks and open-ended questions into situational exercises, encouraging students to use language more freely and creatively. Additionally, adding collaborative activities and group discussions can help balance the method's teacher-centered focus, empowering students to take a more active role in their learning (Reichelt, 2001). Finally, incorporating reflective activities, such as self-assessments and peer feedback, can support the development of self-guided learning, providing students with a more holistic language learning experience that prepares them for both academic and real-world language use.

Conclusion

The Oral Method, with its emphasis on repetition, pronunciation accuracy, and situational language learning, remains a valuable tool in language education, especially for foundational skill-building. By focusing on habit formation and verbal practice, this method provides learners with a structured pathway to acquire basic fluency and confidence in the target language. However, as language teaching has evolved to embrace communicative competence and learner autonomy, the Oral Method's limitations—particularly in fostering higher-order cognitive skills and creativity—have become apparent.

In modern classrooms, where diverse learning needs and technological advancements demand more adaptive approaches, the Oral Method benefits from integration with communicative and task-based techniques. Blending its structured drills and situational practices with interactive, learner-centered strategies can create a balanced pedagogy that supports both fluency and meaningful language use. Additionally, by incorporating digital tools and personalized learning techniques, the Oral Method can be made more accessible and relevant to contemporary students.

In summary, while the Oral Method may no longer stand alone as a comprehensive approach, its core principles—when adapted and supplemented—continue to offer significant advantages for language learners. As language education progresses, this traditional method can serve as a solid foundation within a dynamic, multifaceted framework, supporting learners in building confidence, accuracy, and readiness for real-world communication.



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