

# Teaching by Principles – Automaticity, Self-regulation and Interaction

Yiyi Zhang

Wuhan Business University Wuhan City, Hubei Province 430064

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**Abstract:** Language teaching has a long history, linguists and educators are always looking forward a more suitable and effective teaching method. From Grammar-Translation method to Communicative Language Teaching, each method and approach has its own advantages and limitations. There is no single method or approach can suit all situations. Therefore, all methods should be adapted to the specific teaching realities and also should be principled. By analyzing the college students' needs and reflecting on teaching practices, Automaticity, Self-regulation and Interaction are believed to be the three most important principles that need to be applied when developing an appropriate methodology. Automaticity is the key of fluency. Self-regulation is the ability to regulate or control what they are going to learn. Interaction gives learners chances to practice and let them be aware of their correctness and incorrectness. By focusing on these three principles and combining with appropriate methods and approaches, teachers can have a more ideal result of teaching.

**Keywords:** Language Teaching; Methods; Principles; College English

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## 1. Introduction

According to Howatt and Smith (2014), language teaching methods can generally be divided into four stages: the classic period, the reform period, the scientific period and the communicative period. The Classic Method, which later was known as Grammar-Translation method, had been in a dominant position in European countries for centuries (Richards & Rogers, 2014). The Natural Method and the Direct Method emerged and this period was labelled as the Reformed Period (Howatt & Smith, 2014). Then, there was a Scientific Period, which was characterized by the Oral Method, the Situational Approach and the Audiolingual Method. Around 1970s, Communicative Language Teaching and Task-based Language Teaching were raised and here came the Communicative Period (ibid.).

Besides those representative methods and approaches mentioned above, there are also many other popular approaches and methods like Content Language Teaching, the Natural Approach, Total Physical Response and so on so forth. However, like David Nunan (1991) stated 'there never was and never will be a method for all' (Cited in Brown, 2002). In language teaching, the blending of different methods into teacher's own method has always been recommended by methodologists (Richards & Rogers, 2014). The mix-method approach is not an irresponsible mixture. It should be based on local circumstances and needs, and teachers should select and adapt approaches to their context.

## 2. Context

The students in college passed Gaokao and come from all over the country. Although they all have an over ten-year study of English, since English is a compulsory course since primary school, they still have very different levels on it. They not only need to finish the college English courses but also have to pass the CET4 and CET6 which are related to their graduation and further study. In the one hand, students have the pressure and needs for passing these two tests, on the other hand, they have strong willingness to improve their communicative competence through the college English and use what they have learnt in the real life (Zhao, Lei & Zhang, 2009). 'For those not majoring in English, the goal is to function adequately in English at work, but not many have developed the necessary competence (Wu, 2001).' Chinese university students hold the view that speaking and listening are the most important skills, however these two skills are their weakness (Wang & Liu, 2003).

### 3. Teaching by Principles

As Brown (2002) suggested, the approaches to language teaching should be principled. Teachers should choose appropriate methods to meet students' needs and also based on local circumstances (Richards & Rogers, 2014). Brown (2015) listed eight principles in his book *Teaching by Principles* for teachers to refer to in their own teaching. These principles are automaticity, transfer, reward, self-regulation, identity and investment, interaction, languaculture and agency. Among these eight principles, I would like to choose automaticity, self-regulation and interaction for a further discussion.

#### 3.1 Automaticity

Automaticity in second language acquisition is usually connected with language fluency, which referred to the ability to produce or comprehend language rapidly, smoothly and accurately (Segalowitz, 2003). According to Segalowitz and Hulstijn (2005), the main characteristics of automaticity are rapidity, effortlessness, unconscious nature, and ballistic nature. It represents one's language proficiency. Developing fluency is a long-term process, language learners usually start with controlled processing which needs a lot of attentional control, like using certain language forms, then through repeated activations and practices, the controlled processing becomes automatic and the learners can store the knowledge in the unit of long-term memory and use the language fluidly and error-free (Mitchell & Myles, 2005; Brown & Lee, 2015).

According to Brown and Lee (2015), when children learning additional language, they develop automatic skills naturally with little or no analysis of the forms of language, they usually immerse in huge language input and they produce their own language without overthinking the language forms like grammar, vocabulary and phonology. In the contrast, adult learners usually pay too much attention on the forms (ibid). The over analysis of the forms can be an impediment to the automaticity.

In college, students want to communicate with others in English smoothly and effortlessly in their real life. According to Segalowitz (2003), automaticity development needs massive repetition experiences and consistent practice. However, the English teaching always attaches great importance on grammar accuracy and use of appropriate vocabulary. Brown and Lee (2015) pointed out that using language in authentic contexts for meaning purpose is the efficient way to build language automaticity, and the primary focus should be on meaning, purpose, and interaction. Teachers need to create an authentic context for students to practice their language rather than only trained by rote memorization.

Emphasizing the language correctness and accuracy makes students have low motivation to speak, because they pay too much attention on the forms and do not want to make errors. Segalowitz (2003) claimed that increasing learner's fluency could also increase their motivation to use the language. Thus, improving the automaticity can help them to build up language confidence. Task-based language teaching (TBLT) can arouse greater motivation of learners and learning through solving tasks can also promote students' risk taking (Richards and Rogers, 2014).

Automaticity is a necessary principle that teachers should refer to in their teaching. Teachers could use TBLT to let students practice and authentic context should also be provided. Automaticity is a slow process, so teachers should be tolerated and patient.

#### 3.2 Self-regulation

Self-regulation is the second principle that I think should be referred to. Rubin (1975) put forward fourteen characteristics of "good language learners", in which he stated a good learner should take charge of their own learning, and it is their responsibility to improve their learning and to create opportunity to use the language (cited in Brown & Lee, 2015). Oxford (2011) claimed that self-regulation, which explained as the "deliberate goal-directed attempts to manage and control efforts to learn the L2", is the key to succeed in language learning. Self-regulation principle states successful second language learning depends on learners' ability of taking charge of their learning agenda, setting goals, developing self-awareness, using of effective strategies, and increasing autonomy (Brown & Lee, 2015).

According to Oxford (2017), self-regulated learning is goal-driven and involves strategies. Students can set goals for their self-regulated learning. With the personal goals, they can monitor their learning process and effectiveness, in addition, these personal goals can facilitate learners' motivation (ibid.). Through self-regulation, students can use their own learning styles and develop personal learning strategies based on their personal needs and preferences, which can help to improve the learning efficiency.

Autonomy, which is a key element of self-regulation, is described as the capacity that learners can control their learning and the ability that learners can continue study beyond the classroom and without teachers monitoring (Brown & Lee, 2015). Autonomous learning is more personal and focused, can help learners achieve a more satisfying outcome since learning is based on learners' own needs and preferences (Victoria and Lockhart, 1995; cited in Brown & Lee, 2015).

However, at the beginning stage of language learning, teacher need to give students suitable guided practices and strategy training for the autonomy's development. Strategy teaching is useful in developing learner autonomy, teacher need to raise the awareness of students on the strategies they have already used and also present new strategies models (Cohen, 2011; cited in Richard & Rogers, 2014). Encouraging students set goals for their learning and helping students find out their preferences, styles, strengths and weaknesses are also what teachers need to do in helping students acquire self-regulation capacity (Brown & Lee, 2015).

### 3.3 Interaction

According to Richard and Rogers (2014), in the communicative view, language is a system for expression of meaning and the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication. Communicative competence is the ability that enable a person to interpret and convey message and to negotiate with others in different contexts, which was first raised by Hymes in 1972 (Brown, 2014). Michael Long (2007) posited an interaction hypothesis, he viewed interaction and input play a major role in the process of acquisition. In his view, interactive communication is the very basis of second language acquisition development (Brown & Lee, 2015).

Hatch (1978) proposed that learners can learn second language through interaction rather than only practice what they have already learnt in the process. Interaction is important in learning language because learners can get the information about correctness and incorrectness of their utterance through this process (VanPatten & Williams, 2015). Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes on interaction and views the primary function of language is to allow interaction and communication, and CLT focuses on building learners' communicative competence (Richard & Rogers, 2014). Since students feel that they are deficient in communication, using CLT approach can be a suitable choice to meet my students' needs. Meaningful and purposeful negotiation can help them develop the communicative competence; thus, they can use the language for expression and communication. Teachers should carefully design an interaction context and create an authentic environment to encourage students to use the language. After communication process, teachers should also give students feedback which can indicate the errors and weakness, then students can correct them and learn the language more efficiently. As Swain (1995) claims that language production asks learners to move from comprehension to syntactic use of language, so the language output plays a very significant role in second language development (Rod, 1999). Cooperative language learning (CLL) can increase the frequency and variety of language practice through interaction, in which students learn in pairs or small groups to complete different tasks.

As mentioned above, most of students want to improve their speaking and listening skills through college English courses. However, when there is an opportunity for them to speak, they have a low willingness to speak. This unwillingness of communicate might come from being afraid of making mistakes, so they do not volunteer to speak. Teachers need to encourage students to "take some risks" and give them some help and guide. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (ZPD) described a stage between what learners can do by themselves and what they can achieve with the support and instruction of a more knowledgeable person (Brown & Lee, 2015). Scaffolding from teachers helps to simplified the tasks for learners and lead to a success, which can increase students' willingness to communicate and raise the intrinsic motivation (ibid.).

## 4. Conclusion

There is no single method or approach can be suitable for all situation. Many teachers begin to use eclectic approach that combines different methods together to make a new teaching method. However, eclecticism should be principled according to different context.

By analysing the teaching characteristics and students' needs, I think that automaticity, self-regulation and interaction are the three most important principles which need to be applied when developing an appropriate methodology in teaching college English. Communication and interaction in the authentic context can cultivate the communicative competence of students. Through optimal practices, students' fluency and automaticity can be strengthen. Since there is limited in class time for students learning English under the guide of teachers, self-regulation and autonomy is essential. Tasked-based language teaching motivates students to use the language to solve the problems which promote forming their special learning strategies.

In conclusion, principles and teaching methods should be adapted to the different circumstances and needs. Teacher needs to have the ability to choose the appropriate methods according to the needs of students. Language learning is not easy but a long-term and sometimes tedious process, so teachers should be patient and thoughtful towards their students and give students efficient supports.

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