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Foreign Language Teaching Methodology: Dialectical Unity of Scientific Rigor and Artistry

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Abstract

By criticizing the cognitive misconceptions of "the cult of method" and "the rejection of method", this paper clarifies the intrinsic essence of foreign language teaching methodology, and dialectically elucidates its dual attributes of scientific rigor and artistry. This study employs a literature analysis approach, drawing on interdisciplinary theories from linguistics, second language acquisition, and educational psychology to distinguish among the three hierarchical levels of teaching approach, teaching method, and teaching technique. The study finds that foreign language teaching methodology is not a static set of operational tools, but rather a dynamic, hierarchical system composed of approach, method and technique. Its scientific nature is rooted in the objective laws of second language acquisition and serves as the basis for instructional practice, while its artistic nature stems from individual learner differences, diversity of teaching objectives, and contextual constraints, manifesting as dynamic and creative classroom adjustments. Effective foreign language teaching is precisely the dialectical unity of these two aspects. In the post-method era, it is necessary to move beyond both the blind pursuit and the wholesale rejection of any single method. The research proposes that teachers conducting foreign language instruction need to adhere to three core principles: student-centeredness, dynamic adaptation and creativity, and technology integration. Within a scientific framework, they should implement personalized, contextualized instruction to resolve cognitive dilemmas in methodology application and facilitate effective language learning.

Keywords

Essence of teaching methodology; Scientific rigor; Artistry; Post-method era

1. Introduction

In the field of foreign language education, when mentioning "methodology", many teachers subconsciously think of specific methods such as Grammar-Translation Method(GTM), Communicative Language Teaching(CLT) and Task-Based Language Teaching(TBLT). In the practice of English classroom teaching, teachers also treat these methods as ready-to-use tools.

However, this understanding narrows the essence of methodology and leads teachers into a binary cognitive dilemma: “the cult of method” and “the rejection of method”. The former views methodology as a directly transplantable panacea, assuming that simply adopting a particular method guarantees teaching effectiveness. The latter, due to the incompatibility with local contexts of methods in practice, denies their theoretical and practical value, and advocates replacing methodology with teacher experience. This either-or cognitive misconception essentially reduces methodology to a static tool, overlooking its essential characteristics. Therefore, clarifying the essence of teaching methodology and revealing the dialectical relationship between its scientific rigor and artistry is key to resolving this cognitive dilemma.

2. The Intrinsic Essence of Teaching Methodology

To transcend the binary dilemma of “the cult of method” and “the rejection of method”, teachers must first clarify what teaching methodology is—its intrinsic essence. When discussing the concept of teaching methodology, it is essential to distinguish the concepts of teaching approach, teaching method and teaching technique. Richards and Rodgers, in Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, draw a clear distinction between methods and approaches and critique the cult of methods[1].

2.1. Teaching Approach: The Foundation of Methodology

Teaching approach constitutes the underlying logic of methodology, addressing the most fundamental questions of "why teach?" and "what to teach?". Traditional methodological schools, grounded in structural linguistics, view language learning as the mastery of language structures and rules. Consequently, learning language structures and rules becomes the main content of teaching. This approach gave rise to the Grammar-Translation Method. In contrast, communicative approach emphasizes the communicative function of language, asserting that language learning is for doing things with language and communication. Teaching content thus focuses more on language functions and meaning. Guided by this approach, Communicative Language Teaching and Task-Based Language Teaching emerged.
This demonstrates that approach is the foundation of methodology, and differences in teaching approach directly lead to the differentiation of teaching methods.

2.2. Teaching Method: The Practical Framework for Translating Approach

Approach is the theoretical basis for method , while teaching method is the concrete expression of approach, serving as a bridge between theory and practice. For example, TBLT translates the communicative approach into a specific teaching process characterized by task-driven and meaning-focused activities, requiring

learners to use language naturally while solving real-world problems. Methods provide a relatively stable framework for teaching and learning, but their effective application requires adaptation based on the teaching context.

2.3. Teaching Technique: Micro-strategies for Method Implementation

Teaching techniques are the specific, diverse, and flexible means of implementing methods. Their application, however, is not arbitrary; it serves the teaching approach and method. For instance, when employing CLT, teachers can stimulate genuine communicative needs through activities such as information-gap tasks, role-plays, and debates, giving students opportunities to use language purposefully. Simultaneously, multimedia resources such as videos and images can be used to create authentic contexts. These techniques serve the communicative approach and facilitate the implementation of the teaching method.

In summary, teaching methodology is not merely a set of operational procedures but a unity of teaching approach, teaching method, and teaching technique. Approach is the root, method is the branch, and technique is the leaf.

3. Teaching Methodology: The Dialectical Unity of Scientific Rigor and Artistry

Having clarified the essence of teaching methodology as a dynamic hierarchical system of approach, method, and technique, the next step is to consider how to effectively apply it in the English classroom. The central premise is to recognize that teaching methodology is the dialectical unity of scientific rigor and artistry.

3.1. The Scientific Rigor of Teaching Methodology

The rationale for applying teaching methodology in the classroom stems from its scientific foundation. A proper understanding of this scientific rigor helps to move beyond the rejection of method. Scientific rigor is a core attribute of methodology as a guiding framework for second language teaching practice and it is amply supported by both theoretical and empirical research.

3.1.1. Theoretical Support

From a theoretical perspective, sound teaching methodology is consistently grounded in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research. Krashen's input hypothesis highlighted the critical role of "comprehensible input" (i+1) in language acquisition, providing a cognitive psychological basis for methods such as Immersion and CLT[2]. Loewen' s interaction hypothesis further explored how classroom interaction facilitates effective language output[3]. This insight also underpins the design of information-gap tasks in TBLT. Wen Qiufang , in her research on Chinese L2 teaching, further pointed out that the essence of scientific methodology is translating acquisition laws into teaching strategies[4].These findings

collectively support the scientific rigor of teaching methodology.

3.1.2. Empirical Research

Empirically, numerous cross-cultural teaching experiments have confirmed that scientifically grounded methods can significantly enhance learning outcomes.

Lightbown and Spada found through comparative experiments that classes using CLT combined with explicit grammar instruction showed 38% higher accuracy and fluency in language production than those relying solely on the traditional GTM[5].

Conversely, teaching practices lacking scientific guidance tend to exhibit widespread drawbacks. Richards and Rodgers, in Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching, pointed out the limitations of empiricist methodology. Such teaching often depends on teachers' personal intuition, ignoring both learner individual differences and the developmental nature of language acquisition, and ultimately lead to high input but low output[6].

Additionally, Horwitz noted that in classrooms lacking scientific design, 68% of learners experienced reduced participation due to anxiety. Instruction without scientific guidance can cause learning anxiety due to a disconnect between input and cognitive level, and may even lead to "fossilization" through mechanical practice[7].

These studies collectively affirm the essential role of scientific methods in enhancing teaching effectiveness.

3.2. The Artistry of Teaching Methodology

As mentioned earlier, acknowledging the scientific rigor of methodology helps to overcome the rejection of method, while recognizing its artistry helps to discard the cult of method. Together, these two recognitions point toward an awareness of their dialectical unity.

3.2.1. The Essence of Artistry in Teaching Methodology

The essence of artistry lies in creative transformation and dynamic generation, which resonates with the practical logic of teaching methodology.

From the perspective of creativity, artistic creation rejects rigid replication, just as methodology opposes mechanical application, which requires teachers to translate scientific theories into teaching strategies suited to specific contexts.

From a dynamic perspective, artistic performance involves real-time interaction between performer and audience; similarly, teaching methodology involves ongoing interaction between teacher and learners within a specific time and space. Although teachers may plan to use a particular method, they need to adjust it continually based on classroom feedback in order to achieve better learning outcomes.

3.2.2. Roots of Teaching Artistry in Practice

The roots of teaching artistry in classroom practice can be traced to three interrelated factors.

The first factor lies in individual learner differences. A one-size-fits-all method cannot accommodate the diverse cognitive styles, affective states, and proficiency levels that learners bring to the classroom. For instance, teachers need to use different mediums like mind maps for visual learners and dialogues for auditory learners. Besides, the timing and manner of corrective feedback also require differentiated design for anxious versus confident learners. This process of "teaching students in accordance with their aptitude" is a manifestation of teaching artistry.

The second factor is the diversity of teaching objectives, which requires flexible adaptation of methods. English language teaching in China is expected to balance instrumental goals—equipping learners with practical communication skills—with humanistic goals, such as promoting critical thinking, intercultural awareness, and whole-person development. Teaching therefore needs to cultivate not only cross-cultural communicative competence but also broader humanistic qualities. When conflicts arise between these two sets of goals in the classroom, teachers need to make creative and dynamic adjustments to the methodology to strike a balance. This balancing act goes beyond the mechanical application of any single method.

The third factor concerns contextual constraints, including class size, available facilities, and socio-cultural background. The same teaching method may require quite different implementation strategies depending on these contextual variables.

In sum, it is because of the individual differences in learners, the multidimensionality of teaching objectives and the variability of contextual conditions that the practice of methodology inevitably requires a high degree of creativity and adaptability, which is itself a reflection of artistry.

3.3. The Practice Based on Dialectical Unity of Scientific Rigor and Artistry

There is no "one-size-fits-all" teaching method, nor is there any pure artistry detached from scientific foundations. Scientific rigor forms the skeleton of methodology, ensuring it conforms to language acquisition principles and cognitive science principles, while artistry constitutes its flesh and blood, endowing it with the flexibility and creativity to respond to complex practice. Effective teachers must also operate within the framework of scientific methods, responding to particular classroom circumstances with artistic wisdom.

To address the contextual misfit of imported approaches such as CLT in China, scholars have deepened their inquiry into foreign language pedagogy in pursuit of this dialectical unity. Professor Wen Qiufang proposed the Production-oriented Approach (POA) theoretical and practical system in 2015[8]. Building on foreign

language teaching theories while drawing on international insights, POA aims to solve the persistent problem of separating learning from use in China's foreign language teaching[9] . Its empirical success strongly demonstrates the feasibility and effectiveness of integrating scientific rigor and artistry.

4. Principles for Applying Methodology: Reflections Based on the Post-Method Era

The understanding of the dialectical unity of methodology's scientific rigor and artistry provides a crucial foundation for comprehending a major contemporary trend in foreign language teaching—the post-method era. It is the recognition that there is no single "best method" and that teaching practice is essentially a form of artistic creation within a scientific framework—a recognition that has given rise to the post-method perspective. This perspective moves beyond both the blind cult of and the wholesale rejection of specific methods.

Kumaravadivelu first systematically articulated the post-method concept in 1994 in his book Understanding Language Teaching: From Method to Post-method. The post-method era does not signify the end of methods, nor does it advocate doing away with them altogether. Rather, it encourages teachers to draw on methodological knowledge from a broader perspective, with greater critical awareness and creativity[10]. In essence, post-method pedagogy is the concrete embodiment of the dialectical unity of scientific rigor and artistry in contemporary teaching practice. From this perspective, language teachers' practice should adhere to the following core principles.

4.1. The Student-centeredness Principle

This principle requires that the selection and implementation of methodology consistently revolve around learners' needs, potential, and experiences.

During the planning phase, teachers should deeply analyze two core questions: What are the students' learning needs? What are the students' current language proficiency and cognitive ability? With a clear understanding of these factors, teachers can select the most suitable methodology rather than blindly pursuing the theoretically optimal one.

During teaching, teachers should avoid becoming a slave to any single method. They need to closely monitor student feedback and flexibly adjust teaching pace and strategies. The application of methodology should serve the students' learning process, not force students to adapt to a rigid procedure.

4.2. The Principle of Dynamic Adaptation and Creativity

This principle emphasizes flexible adaptation and creative generation of methodology in classroom practice.

Teachers should begin by drawing on their accumulated experience and ongoing

theoretical engagement to monitor, in real time, the effectiveness of the methods they are using.

Moreover, rather than adhering rigidly to a preset plan, they need to remain alert to shifts in the teaching situation, such as widespread student difficulties, unanticipated classroom incidents, or adjustments to the schedule. When such changes occur, teachers should respond with immediate modifications or adaptations to the planned method, so as to maximize its appropriateness and support student learning. For instance, while implementing TBLT, a teacher who notices that students are struggling to advance a task due to limited vocabulary may promptly provide cue cards with key expressions or structures, thereby offering the scaffolding needed for student output. This kind of on-the-spot adjustment preserves the core TBLT principle of "meaning-first and learning by doing" while addressing a practical obstacle through creative teaching.

4.3. The Technology Integration Principle

This principle advocates embracing technological advancements and harnessing technology to reinforce both the scientific rigor and artistry of methodology. The rapid development of technologies such as generative AI is infusing new momentum into foreign language teaching. Teachers should capitalize on this opportunity by integrating modern technology into the implementation and refinement of pedagogical methods.

The integration of technology aims to enhance learner engagement, contextual authenticity, instructional flexibility, and overall efficiency. For instance, generative AI tools can be used to simulate authentic cross-cultural conversational scenarios that involve conflict or misunderstanding, allowing students to practice communication strategies and language use through role-play exercises with AI.

5. Conclusion

Foreign language teaching methodology is a dynamic hierarchical system in which scientific rigor and artistry are dialectically intertwined. Its essence lies in the contextualized application of theory to practice. The key to overcoming the cognitive misconceptions of "the cult of method" and "the rejection of method" is to develop a clear understanding of the relationship among teaching approach, teaching method, and teaching technique, thereby grasping both the solid scientific foundation and the essential artistic qualities of methodology. In the post-method era, teachers should adhere to three core principles—student-centeredness, dynamic adaptation and creativity, and technology integration—and translate methodological knowledge into creative teaching practice informed by scientific theory. Only in this way can they respond flexibly to complex and ever-changing teaching contexts and, in turn, promote more effective student learning.

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