Literature, Language and Cultural Studies
ISSN Print: 3079-5095
ISSN Online: 3079-5109
https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9180

On the Audiolingual Method in Foreign Language Teaching

Shang Xiang
China West Normal University, Nanchong 637000, China
Email: 2957867484@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Xiang, S. (2026). On the Audiolingual Method in Foreign Language Teaching. Literature, Language and Cultural Studies, 6(1), 22–30. ISSN Print: 3079-5095; ISSN Online: 3079-5109. https://doi.org/10.63313/LLCS.9180
Published: 2026-07-20

Copyright © 2026 by author(s) and Erytis Publishing Limited.
This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).
http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/

Abstract

The Audiolingual method gained widespread popularity in the field of English teaching during the 1950s. It prioritizes listening and speaking over reading and writing, utilizing dialogues as the primary instructional format and sentence patterns as the core training mechanism. However, due to inherent limitations and practical challenges, the method faced significant criticism from the 1960s onward, particularly with the emergence of new linguistic and psychological theories. Nevertheless, many of its principles and techniques remain pedagogically valuable today. This paper presents a critical review of the Audiolingual Method in foreign language teaching, aiming to reassess its theoretical foundations, analyze its pedagogical strengths and limitations, and explore its implications for contemporary language pedagogy. Adopting a literature review approach, the paper systematically examines the historical background, structuralist linguistic roots, and behaviorist learning theory underpinning the method, while critically evaluating its classroom applications. The analysis reveals that while the Audiolingual method effectively develops oral fluency and automatic language habits through repetitive drills and pattern practice, making it particularly suitable for beginners, it suffers from three critical drawbacks: neglect of learners' subjective initiative, insufficient focus on linguistic meaning, and limited development of reading and writing skills. The paper concludes that despite its theoretical and practical deficiencies, the Audiolingual method retains pedagogical relevance. By redefining teacher roles, optimizing drill forms, and integrating it with other teaching approaches, its strengths can be strategically harnessed to meet diverse learning objectives, thereby contributing to more balanced and effective foreign language instruction.

Keywords

Audiolingual Method; Habit Formation; Foreign Language Teaching; Teaching Method; Teacher Roles

1. Introduction

Since the 19th century, the emergence of numerous language schools has led to the development of various instructional methodologies. The evolution of language instruction is intricately linked to linguistic research, pedagogical practice, and

societal demands, influencing the establishment, advancement, and prevalence of various teaching methodologies. The audiolingual technique adheres to this fundamental principle. Over an extended duration, due to the emergence and evolution of structuralist linguistics research alongside changing societal demands, the audiolingual technique has gradually established itself as the predominant approach in language instruction and a critical pedagogical model. Nonetheless, since the 1960s, the preeminence of the audiolingual technique has progressively diminished due to the evolution of linguistic comprehension and the shifting demands of pedagogical practice. Nevertheless, its pedagogical concepts and principles continue to shape individuals' perceptions of foreign language instruction and maintain a beneficial impact on contemporary foreign language teaching practices. Consequently, a critical reassessment of its advantages, disadvantages, and pedagogical relevance is warranted.

2. Background

The Audiolingual method emphasizes the enhancement of listening and speaking skills in language instruction, highlighting learners' oral communication and expression in the target language (Luo & Dong, 2005). It was formally conceived in the United States during World War II in the 1940s (Brown, 2014). Howatt (1984) notes that the method derives primarily from Fries' structuralist approach. Three main factors contributed to its emergence.

The comprehensive advancement of linguistic study has established a significant theoretical foundation for the creation of the audiolingual technique. Skinner (1957) contended that language is not a cognitive phenomenon, but rather a behavioral one. This behaviour, like all human behaviors, is acquired through the establishment of habits.

In addition, societal needs constitute a significant foundation for the advancement of the audiolingual approach. During World War II, the United States discovered a deficiency of available interpreters. Consequently, the United States Government, in collaboration with the relevant colleges, established an Army Specialized Training Program (Brown, 2014). The language was instructed through methodical focus on pronunciation and rigorous oral practice of its fundamental sentence structures (Richards & Rodgers, 2004). Pedagogical methods centred on reading and grammatical studies are unlikely to meet the actual needs at that time.

Ultimately, the demand for the advancement of foreign language instruction facilitated the conditions requisite for the establishment and dissemination of the audiolingual approach. The Reform Movement at the close of the 19th century facilitated the creation of novel pedagogical concepts (Howatt, 1984). The Audiolingual method can satisfy the requirements of learners and society better. Motivated by the Audiolingual method, numerous linguists commenced integrating structuralist linguistics with foreign language instruction, ultimately developing this

novel pedagogical theory and system.

3. Theoretical Foundation

3.1. The Linguistic Theory

"Language is speech instead of writing... A language is some habits on it... teach the language, not about the language itself... Languages are different... A language is the contents native speakers say, not what someone thinks they should say" (Rivers, 1964). In the 1950s, American linguists proposed structural linguistics, which inspired the theory of Audiolingualism. As a reaction to traditional grammar, structural linguistics has developed in some aspects. Traditional approaches to language teaching are connected with a mentalist approach to grammar and the study of language in philosophy. Grammar was thought of as a branch of logic.

Language was viewed as a system of structurally related elements for the encoding of meaning, the elements being phonemes, morphemes, words, structures, and sentence types (Richards & Rodgers, 2004). An important principle of the Audiolingual method is that each language should be analyzed according to its structural features, but should not be analyzed according to any common grammar based on semantic analysis. Putting this principle into the language teaching, teachers emphasized differences between the target language and native language, and mainly focused on the different structural forms in language teaching.

3.2. The Learning Theory

Another basic theoretical foundation of the Audiolingual method is behaviorism. It was initially established by Watson in the 1920s. Watson stated that a psychologist, when adhering strictly to scientific principles, needs to dismiss subjective elements and concentrate primarily on observable behaviors. This perspective in linguistics and language instruction perceives language as a collection of behaviors, with language acquisition viewed as a process of habit building via stimulus-response associations. The manifestation of behaviors depends on three critical components in learning: a stimulus that elicits behavior, a response that is activated by the stimulus, and reinforcement that designates the response as appropriate or inappropriate, thereby promoting the recurrence of the responses in the future (Skinner, 1957).

4. Advantages of the Audiolingual method

4.1. Emphasis on Speaking and Listening

The Audiolingual method prioritizes the development of speech and oral language skills. It prioritizes auditory and verbal skills before literacy skills. Instructors allocate the majority of classroom instruction to listening training, directing students to engage in chain drilling exercises under their supervision or

to assume roles in dialogues, stipulating that the time dedicated to comprehension and activities should be approximately 15% and 85%, respectively (Tang, 2015). It prioritizes instruction in the language itself over mere knowledge of it, promotes the utilization of dialogues to introduce new vocabulary and structures, employs imitation and repetition for dialogue acquisition, and incorporates sentence patterns in dialogues to structure drills; it necessitates grammar instruction grounded in sentence patterns and reinforces students' accurate responses through extensive mechanical and repetitive speech practice activities to foster a comprehensive set of correct language habits to achieve the degree of automatization.

4.2. Effective Habit Formation and Error Correction

Beyond merely emphasizing oral practice, the Audiolingual method is deeply rooted in the belief that language learning is a process of habit formation. According to behaviorist theory, the establishment of automatic language habits relies not only on repetitive practice but also on a systematic mechanism of reinforcement and error correction (Skinner, 1957). In this framework, positive reinforcement, such as teacher approval and immediate confirmation, strengthens correct responses, while negative reinforcement eliminates errors before they become fossilized. Teachers thus function as "behavior shapers" who carefully design drill sequences to ensure that learners produce accurate outputs consistently.

A distinctive feature of this method is its zero-tolerance approach to errors. From the very first day of instruction, whether in pronunciation, vocabulary, or sentence patterns, students are held to high standards of accuracy. Teachers are trained to detect and correct errors immediately upon occurrence, preventing the formation of incorrect linguistic habits. This practice is grounded in the premise that "practice makes permanent." If errors are repeatedly practiced without correction, they become deeply ingrained and difficult to eradicate later. Consequently, corrective feedback is delivered promptly and explicitly, often through modeling the correct form and requiring immediate repetition from the student.

However, it is important to note that this rigid error-correction strategy has also drawn criticism. While it effectively ensures formal accuracy in controlled drills, it may hinder learners' willingness to take risks in spontaneous communication. In addition, excessive correction during communicative activities can disrupt the flow of interaction and increase learners' anxiety. Therefore, while the Audiolingual method's emphasis on accuracy and habit formation is pedagogically valuable at the initial stages, teachers should exercise flexibility by gradually relaxing error correction as learners advance, shifting the focus toward fluency and meaning negotiation in later phases.

4.3. Ideal for Beginners

The Audiolingual method mainly focuses on oral skills. It aims to improve students' speaking achievement. Language items are presented to students in spoken form without reference to the mother tongue so that they can learn language skills effectively. The goal of the Audiolingual method is, via teaching vocabulary and grammatical patterns through dialogues, to enable students to respond quickly and accurately in spoken language. The dialogues are learned through repetition and such drills as repetition, backward build-up, chain, substitution, transformation, and question-and-answer are conducted based upon the patterns in the dialogue (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). This structured approach is particularly advantageous for beginners who often feel overwhelmed by the complexities of a new language. It breaks down language into manageable chunks, allowing beginners to gradually build confidence and proficiency. By focusing on immediate oral communication, beginners can quickly acquire basic conversational skills, which are crucial for their motivation and continued engagement in language learning.

5. Disadvantages of the Audiolingual Method

5.1. Neglect of Students' Subjective Initiative

In the Audiolingual method, the teacher's role is central and active, while learners are viewed as passive recipients who can be directed by skilled training techniques to produce correct responses (Richards & Rodgers, 2004). The teacher controls the content, pace, or style of learning, and the students are in a passive response position. Learners are not encouraged to initiate interaction, because this may lead to mistakes. This teaching model runs counter to the equal negotiation of meaning in real communication. It negates the learner's subjective role in learning English. It is not conducive to students' creativity in finding more efficient ways of learning. Some students may need to focus more on improving their English grammar and meaning, while the Audiolingual method, which emphasizes only listening and speaking, is not conducive to maximizing students' potential in other aspects of English. Therefore, to address these limitations, the Audiolingual method is best used in combination with other teaching approaches to meet the diverse needs of learners in contemporary society.

5.2. Insufficient Focus on Meaning

The Audiolingual method is based on behaviorist psychological theory, which promotes the development of target language habits through repetitive stimulus-response training, such as drills and dialogues. This method, however, has considerable theoretical and practical deficiencies, primarily evident in its unilateral treatment of the essence of language. It excessively prioritizes the exact replication of linguistic forms while neglecting the nature of language, meaning, and function.

An extensive mechanical training allows learners to precisely replicate particular phrase patterns; yet, this technique frequently lacks connection to authentic linguistic contexts and communication purposes. Consequently, learners retain the sound and structure of discrete sentence patterns but struggle to appropriately employ these linguistic forms in the specific contexts requiring self-expression. Language is simplified to a structural code detached from context, resulting in learners possessing a limited comprehension of the function and pragmatic significance of utterances in genuine interpersonal exchanges.

This method fails to sufficiently elucidate the creative aspect of language acquisition and overlooks the profound cognitive processes involved. As Chomsky (2006) highlights, the inherent "language acquisition device" (LAD) in humans can produce an infinite array of novel grammatical sentences derived from a finite set of rules. The conditioned reflex model of habit development highlighted by the audiolingual technique fails to sufficiently account for the creativity and rule-generating capacity of learners in authentic communication.

The insufficient focus on language utilization during the practice process hinders the effective acquisition and transfer of language. Students concentrate predominantly on the morphological and articulatory elements of language structures, sometimes neglecting the social norms, cultural connotations, and appropriateness criteria inherent in the language. This simple formal connection, devoid of meaningful construction and contextual relevance, renders the practice process tedious and significantly impairs the internalization of linguistic knowledge and the stability of long-term memory. The primary consequence is that learners cannot effectively transfer the language forms and skills learned in the classroom to dynamic and complex real-life communication contexts.

5.3. Limited Development of Reading and Writing Skills

The Audiolingual method has significantly contributed to the enhancement of oral communication skills; nonetheless, its intrinsic limitations have resulted in one-sided skill growth. The fundamental issue lies primarily in its excessive dependence on mechanical repetition training. This method facilitates habitual vocal responses but hinders pupils' profound comprehension and active formulation of the language's intrinsic laws. Learners are overly preoccupied with imitation and rote memorization of set patterns, hindering their ability to properly comprehend and master the grammatical system and its principles, resulting in a superficial command of the language devoid of a cognitive foundation for flexible application.

The notable deficiency in reading input is more pronounced. The Audiolingual method prioritizes immediate oral production and auditory reaction, yet lacks adequate and systematic avenues for written language input. Without adequate and diverse reading exposure, pupils struggle to develop vocabulary, grasp intricate sentence patterns, comprehend discourse logic, and recognize linguistic variations

within cultural contexts.

The superficiality of grammatical understanding and the absence of reading input result in a significant imbalance in the advancement of students' language skills. They may exhibit some speaking proficiency; however, they frequently struggle with written assignments that necessitate deeper cognitive engagement, exact articulation, and structural precision, leading to the common occurrence of "being able to speak but not to write." This deficiency in literacy not only restricts the comprehensive development of students' linguistic abilities but also hinders their capacity to utilize language for advanced learning and communication.

6. Teaching Recommendations

6.1. Adjust the Roles of Teachers

In contemporary foreign language learning, students should be regarded as the subject of their learning. Accordingly, the Audiolingual method ought to shift away from a teacher-centred model. Educators must transform their roles, moving away from being absolute controllers and instead embracing the roles of guides, organizers, and resource facilitators. To achieve this, the creation of a safe and inclusive classroom environment is essential. Teachers ought to be attentive to students' responses, actively incorporating diverse elements such as pictures, images, and games into the learning process. Timely recognition and praise for students' achievements can significantly boost their learning confidence.

There is a need to reduce reliance on simple, one-word instructions and one-way communication. Instead, increase opportunities for open-ended questioning. This can be effectively combined with group cooperative learning and peer assessment. Students should be allowed and even encouraged to make "meaningful mistakes" as they attempt to express themselves. These mistakes are a natural and integral part of the learning journey. When it comes to corrective strategies, a multifaceted approach is recommended. This can include peer assessment, self-assessment by students, and group evaluation. Such strategies can help maintain students' self-esteem and self-confidence, thereby motivating them to learn English.

6.2. Optimize the Form of Drills

The Audiolingual method regards listening and speaking as the cornerstones of language learning, a concept that has demonstrated its irreplaceable value at the beginning stage of language learning — the beginner's period. Teachers should fully recognize and continue to utilize the value of the Audiolingual method in developing beginners' listening and speaking habits, improving accuracy of intonation, and automaticity of sentence patterns. Basic imitation, repetition, and sentence drills remain essential, especially at the introductory level. However, over-reliance on meaningless, out-of-context mechanical drills should be avoided.

To optimize the form of drills and shift students' focus toward linguistic meaning,

teachers can incorporate the following strategies. First, design context embedded drills where students use target language in simulated real life situations, such as role plays or situational dialogues. In these activities, students can not only practice pronunciation and sentence patterns but also convey and understand meaning within a specific context. Second, employ task-based activities that require students to complete meaningful tasks using the target language. For example, students could be asked to gather information through interviews or solve problems through discussions. These tasks motivate students to focus on both the form and meaning of the language to achieve the desired outcome. Third, integrate interactive tasks that encourage students' interaction. Pair work and group work activities, such as information gap exercises or collaborative storytelling, provide opportunities for students to negotiate meaning and use language for authentic communication. In this way, students learn to adjust their language based on their partners' responses, enhancing their attention to linguistic meaning. By adopting these strategies, teachers can transform traditional drills into more meaningful and engaging activities, helping students develop not only accurate pronunciation and fluent sentence patterns but also a deeper understanding and effective use of language in meaningful contexts.

6.3. Integrate Other Teaching Methods

Experienced educators adopt a comprehensive and eclectic methodology, recognizing that no single pedagogy can address all educational challenges. They employ a pragmatic strategy, employing their strengths while avoiding their weaknesses, and effectively utilizing the resources offered by various methods of instruction to accomplish their instructional objectives (Chu, 2011).

When selecting methods of teaching, educators must carefully evaluate some important elements such as students' age, language proficiency, learning styles, and learning goals. For lower grades or beginners, the Audiolingual method serves as a foundational approach to rapidly enhance auditory perception and oral expression in the target language. Conversely, for higher grades or students with an established language foundation, educators may employ communicative language teaching and task-based teaching methods to advance comprehensive language proficiency and critical thinking skills. Simultaneously, educators must consider the unique distinctions among students and offer tailored instructional assistance and guidance to address the distinct qualities and needs of each learner, so that every student advances in language acquisition.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, the Audiolingual method emphasizes the development of speaking and listening skills through repetitive drills and pattern practice, which is highly effective for beginners in acquiring basic language structures. However, it overlooks

learners' subjective initiative and their holistic language competence. In addition, it does not realize the importance of focusing on the meaning of language. To maximize its benefits while mitigating its shortcomings, educators should initially adjust their roles to serve as facilitators of student learning; subsequently, they should seek to enhance the efficacy of listening and speaking exercises to bolster students' auditory and verbal competencies; ultimately, educators must acknowledge that while various pedagogical approaches exist, no singular method is definitive, and the paramount objective is to effectively employ these methodologies to fulfill the true aims of English instruction.

References

[1] Brown, H. D. (2014). Principles of language learning and teaching: A course in second language acquisition. Pearson.

[2] Chomsky, N. (2006). Language and mind. Cambridge University Press.

[3] Chu, X. (2011). On the foundation and application of foreign language teaching methodologies. Theory and Practice of Foreign Language Teaching, 2, 1-5.

[4] Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). A History of English Language Teaching. Oxford University Press.

[5] Richards, J. C. , & Rodgers, T. S. (2004). Approaches and methods in language teaching. Cambridge University Press.

[6] Larsen-Freeman, D. (2000). Techniques and principles in language teaching. Oxford University Press.

[7] Rivers, W. M. (1964). The psychologist and the foreign language teacher. University of Chicago Press.

[8] Skinner, B. F. (1957). Verbal Behavior. Appleton-Century-Crofts.

[9] Luo, L., & Dong, Y. (2005). On the theoretical background and practical significance of the Audio-Lingual Method. Foreign Language Teaching, 4, 43-46.

[10] Tang, W. (2015). A modest proposal on the Audio-Lingual Method and Communicative Approach in foreign language teaching. Foreign Language Education Research, 3(1), 25-27.