

# A Review of Audio-lingual Methods

Wenwen Tian

China West Normal University, Nanchong, Sichuan, 637000, China

---

**Abstract:** As one of the international foreign language teaching schools, the audio-lingual method plays an undeniable role in second language teaching. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive study on audio-lingual method. This review will summarize the concepts, theoretical foundations, and related research of audio-lingual method. On this basis, this review comments on its advantages and disadvantages, and provides suggestions for the future application of audio-lingual methods in second language teaching.

**Keywords:** Audio-lingual method; Foreign language teaching.

---

## 1. Key Term

### (1) Definition

The audio-lingual method is a foreign language or second language teaching method that emerged in the United States in the 1950s and later became popular in Europe and America. This teaching method emphasizes teaching listening and speaking first, followed by reading and writing, while using dialogue for practice[4]. It is a teaching method system aimed at mastering spoken language, opposing the use of the mother tongue in the classroom.

### (2) Background

The audio-lingual method was a product of the United States during World War II. The language isolationist policy pursued by the United States before the war resulted in extremely backward foreign language teaching. The lack of foreign language talents is extremely disproportionate to its international status as a major country, and the United States needs a large number of foreign language talents for military occupation tasks. Therefore, at that time, military teaching adopted audio-lingual method. Due to the outstanding contribution of the audio-lingual method to the foreign language training of the US military during World War II, and the demonstration of many advantages that translation and direct methods did not possess, many language training institutions and schools after the war attempted to apply the wartime foreign language teaching method to their daily foreign language teaching.

### (3) Differentiation of Similar Concepts

Foreign language educator C. C. Fries criticized the grammar translation method based on structuralist linguistic theory and advocated Oral Approach.

The difference between audio-lingual method and Oral Approach is that the former refers to teaching native speakers how to learn a foreign language method, while the latter refers to teaching foreigners methods for learning their own language. Although teaching methodologies and language teachers have given different names to audio-lingual method, the essence of this teaching method is the same. No matter how it is called, it is a teaching method system for training oral English.

## 2. Theoretical Foundations

### (1) Behaviourism in Psychology

Behavioral psychology forms the psychological foundation

of the audio-lingual method. Watson, the founder of behaviorist psychology, discovered through observation and analysis of psychological outcomes that human and animal behavior share common elements: stimulus and response. Influenced by Watson, Skinner viewed the learning of animals and humans as operations, with reinforcement being the law governing the conditions of these operations. Therefore, Skinner categorized teaching procedures as: stimulus, response, and reinforcement. Behaviorist psychology views language as a behavior that establishes associative responses through stimuli, emphasizing the formation of subconscious conditioned reflexes through extensive and repetitive stimuli, where reinforcement is the most critical factor, enabling the acquisition of new language habits through constant reinforcement[12].

The behaviorist movement seeks to identify various patterns of human learning, particularly in language acquisition. According to J. Janitze(1975)[2], language learning patterns can be summarized as follows: first, the patterns of trial and error, where learning occurs through continuous experimentation and mistakes; second, the habit pattern, where learning is achieved through practice, with habits formed through constant practice reaching a level of automation; third, the law of effect rate, where learning occurs when a behavior is rewarded with positive effects or punished with negative effects; fourth, the law of similarity, where learning is transferred to new situations when those situations bear similarities to learned ones. These principles were incorporated into the audio-lingual method, becoming its principal theoretical pillars.

### (2) Structuralism in Linguistics

The audio-lingual method, also known as structural method, is based on the language theory of structuralist linguistics. Western scholar Saussure was the first to propose structuralism in a groundbreaking way. Structuralism emphasizes the description and analysis of discourse, with Bloomfield being one of its main representatives. He emphasizes that language is a habit, spoken rather than written. Structural linguist Franz Boas[2] pointed out that studying every language requires identifying its functional units and internal structure, and general language theories should not be established too early. Edward Sapir[1] is a student of Boas. He pointed out that language is a phonetic symbol, which can be replaced by mechanical or visual symbols. Language is a structure and a framework for thinking.

The audio-lingual method has developed based on the theoretical foundations of structural linguistics. It is the first teaching method system that systematically applies linguistic and psychological theories.

### 3. Related Researches

#### 3.1. Theoretical Researches

##### (1) Research on Teaching Procedures

Professor Tewelader from Brown University in the United States has scientifically analyzed and organized the teaching process, identifying it as a five step process. His theory has been accepted by the experts and teachers. The five steps in the process of audio-lingual method are as follows:

**Cognition:** Teachers use physical objects, models, images, and other auxiliary means to send language signals to students, enabling them to connect language with the meaning it represents.

**Imitation:** In the initial stage, the main role of teachers is to repeatedly demonstrate and correct mistakes in a timely manner, while the main task of students is to accurately imitate.

**Repetition:** Students repeatedly practice and imitate until they can memorize.

**Transformation:** In order to cultivate students' practical ability, the first step is to practice changing sentence structures.

**Select:** Ask students to select words, phrases, and sentence patterns from the language materials they have already learned to describe a specific scene, situation, or narrate an event.

At home, Jiang Liping(2008)[5] also summarized the order of classroom teaching operations for audio-lingual method in her works. In general, it is: dialogue imitation, sentence pattern practice, and application activities.

##### (2) Research on Teaching Principles

Xu Ziliang and Wu Renfu (2005) summarized the basic teaching principles of audio-lingual method, including:

1. prioritizing listening and speaking.
2. Practice repeatedly to form habits.
3. Focus on sentence patterns. And be able to use sentence patterns and variations reasonably in different contexts.
4. Exclusion or restriction of native language. Structuralist experts believe that it is difficult for various languages to correspond one by one in terms of word meaning and grammar rules. Therefore, it is advocated to use the target language for teaching.
5. Compare language structures. Beginner Chinese learners are susceptible to the negative transfer of their mother tongue, which hinders the learning of the target language. Therefore, it is necessary to practice by comparing language structures to make teaching more targeted.
6. Timely correction and cultivation of correct language habits. Encourage learners to respond correctly to stimuli through imitation and training.

#### 3.2. Practical Researches

In the 1960s, audio-lingual method was cautiously introduced to China, and the academic research on it is still in the exploratory stage. After 1980, the application of audio-lingual method in education and teaching in China gradually became widespread, becoming the mainstream teaching method in English teaching. Relevant academic research has also developed rapidly. In 2000, listening to lectures was

widely applied in foreign language teaching and teaching Chinese as a foreign language in China, and research on its related teaching theories and practical applications gradually deepened. According to Zhang Min (2021)[10], from the 1980s to the 21st century, 61% of research literature on audio-lingual method in China is related to English teaching. And this review focuses on summarizing the applications in English teaching.

Audio-lingual method are widely used in English classrooms in primary, middle, and high schools as well as universities in China.

Wang Xiao (2015)[9] compared audio-lingual method with communicative approach, considering the current English teaching situation, class arrangement, and teacher strength in China. Through teaching practice in primary school English classrooms, it was found that audio-lingual method is more suitable than communicative approach in English classroom teaching in China.

Dai Yanyan (2019)[5] advocates the application of audio-lingual method in middle school English classrooms for learning English grammar and sentence patterns. Through extensive high-intensity training, students can automatically grasp grammar rules and form language rules through extensive language practice.

Leng Xiao (2014)[6] explored the application of audio-lingual method in high school English grammar teaching. Through questionnaire surveys and classroom observations, it was confirmed that most high school English teachers will flexibly use audio-lingual method for teaching based on student characteristics and teaching content. Teaching characteristics such as sentence structures, English teaching, and flexible and varied practice methods in the classroom are more conducive to cultivating students' English thinking and oral expression abilities.

Zheng Anwen (2007), Zhang Min (2008), Lu Cheng, and Mo Yuxiu (2012) all studied the application of audio-lingual method in English teaching in universities. Zheng Anwen (2007) [13] summarized based on the characteristics of listening and speaking that using audio-lingual method in teaching is beneficial for improving pronunciation accuracy and enhancing student classroom participation, and is an effective teaching method for improving English oral teaching in Chinese universities. Zhang Min (2008)[11] proposed, based on behaviorism theory, that the use of teaching methods such as listening and speaking introduction, oral communication as the main focus, imitation, and repetition in comprehensive experiential English teaching in universities can provide students with a large amount of language input. Lu Cheng [8]and Mo Yuxiu (2012), from the perspective of college English teaching objectives and teaching practice, adopted a reward mechanism, emphasizing the positive reinforcement effect of stimulation, effectively avoiding the boredom caused by mechanical practice, and bringing better teaching results to college English teaching.

### 4. Comments

#### 4.1. Superiorities in Language Teaching

##### (1) The Inheritance of Direct method

The audio-lingual method inherits the basic theory of the Direct method, believing that language is first and foremost oral language. Speech with sound is the primary form of expression, while writing is the secondary form of language. Influenced by the Direct method, audio-lingual method

stresses the target language in the class. Students are encouraged to speak the target language rather than to translate the target language. Translation will affect the speed and accuracy of expression. The audio-lingual method stresses standard English through imitation and repeatedly practices. Besides, students are urged to think in English ways. So English culture learning is paid more attention.

### (2) Staged Teaching

According to the education researches, students' learning ability development has five phases: totally rely on teachers, basically rely on teachers, relatively independent learning, basically independent learning, and completely independent learning. The audio-lingual method stresses incrementalism. Teachers teach the patterns one by one, only moving to the next when the previous one has been mastered. It suits for students' learning ability development. Besides, At the secondary level, students' learning ability will change from totally rely on teachers to completely independent learning gradually. Correspondingly, the teachers' teaching methods need to alter.

### (3) Inductive Learning

The audio-lingual method regards language learning as a question of habit formation rather than problem-solving. So explanation is not important for teachers and students. It advocates that grammar rules should be summarized by students themselves. Both inductive learning and the deductive learning have their own advantages. But with the inductive learning, students must listen and think carefully in class. So students' autonomous learning ability are trained. Discovery is better than directly teach. Under the academic pressure, most Chinese students can not independently arrange extra-curricular learning, find out and solve problems. The inductive learning will help internalizing learning.

## 4.2. Deficiencies in Language Teaching

### (1) Structured Language

Teachers divide the language into structures and sentence patterns, then teach the patterns one by one. A variety of sentence pattern drills are used for teaching English grammar teaching. Most of drills are mechanical and decontextualized. They always break away social content and language content, just repeatedly practices. It places excessive emphasis on the structural form of language and neglects the content and meaning of language. It places excessive emphasis on mechanical practice and rote memorization, neglecting the cultivation of language and communication abilities. As a result, it is bad for training students to communicate appropriately.

### (2) Overlooked reading and writing

The audio-lingual method puts speaking on the first place, then listening. Writing is easily overlooked by teachers and students. Actually, the four skills are the same important and complementary, but they should be learned in order. They are the teaching aim, also are the teaching instrument. The intensive reading can review knowledge, and the extensive reading can expand knowledge and improve students' interests. Writing is a kind of productive ability. It is a skill which is needed to learn. Students should know some writing's special conventions. So English teaching must improve students comprehensively.

## 5. Summary

The audio-lingual method is a teaching method system

aimed at mastering spoken language. It is proposed based on the theories of structuralist linguistics that "language is speech, not writing" and "language is a system of structural patterns.". The following suggestions are proposed for the application of audio-lingual method in practical teaching.

In teaching, teachers should focus on oral communication and take sentence patterns or structures as the outline. The teaching materials should be expressed in conversational form. The teacher should emphasize imitation, emphasize fixed phrases, and repeat them extensively. At the same time, great emphasis is placed on the accuracy of pronunciation, with a particular emphasis on intonation training. Teachers should make extensive use of the comparative method, analyze the difficulties of learning a foreign language based on the comparison between their mother tongue and foreign language, and address them in a targeted manner in teaching. Teachers can also apply the research results of language structure analysis to foreign language teaching, providing a scientific basis for the writing of textbooks and the arrangement of teaching processes.

We also need to improve on the drawbacks of audio-lingual method. When using the audio-lingual method, reduce the emphasis on mechanical training, increase meaningful training, and leverage the role of context. Simultaneously we need to emphasize the guiding role of language rules. We should not overly value the structural form of language, but should equally guide students to pay attention to the content and meaning of language.

In short, various schools of foreign language teaching have their own experiences and strengths, otherwise it would be impossible to spread and have vitality. But at the same time, each has its own shortcomings and limitations, otherwise there will be no new systems emerging and coexisting. I hope that in future teaching, more teachers will use audio-lingual method in appropriate situations. I also hope to increase research on further improving audio-lingual method to adapt to current teaching in future studies.

## References

- [1] E. Sapir, *Language: An Introduction to the Study of Speech*. Liu Runqing (Ed.), *Schools of Western Linguistics*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2002: 128-132.
- [2] F. Boas (Ed.), *A Handbook of American Indian Languages*. Liu Runqing (Ed.), *Schools of Western Linguistics*. Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2002: 126-128.
- [3] Jean Janitze, Three learning Theory, *TESOL Quarterly*, 1975(5).
- [4] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. C. *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- [5] Dai Yanyan. "The Application of the Situational Method and Audio-Lingual Method in Junior High School English Teaching," *Journal of Jiamusi Vocational College*, 2019(06): 133+138.
- [6] Jiang Liping. *Introduction to Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language* [M]. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 2008: 106-108.
- [7] Leng Xiao. "The Application of the Audio-Lingual Method in High School English Grammar Teaching" [D]. Sichuan Normal University, 2014.
- [8] Lu Cheng, Mo Yuxiu. "A Review of the Application Research of the Audio-Lingual Method in College English in Recent Seven Years," *Journal of Guangxi Teachers Education*

- University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, 2012, 33(01): 129-133.
- [9] Wang Xiao. "Improving the Effectiveness of Primary School English Classroom Teaching by Applying the Audio-Lingual Method," *Journal of Dalian Institute of Education*, 2015, 9.
- [10] Zhang Min. "The History, Current Situation and Reflection of Audio-Lingual Method Research," *Journal of Chongqing University of Arts and Sciences*, 2021, 4(01): 130-140.
- [11] Zhang Min. "A Preliminary Study on the Application of Behaviorist Theory in College English Teaching," *Journal of Yangzhou University (Higher Education Research Edition)*, 2008(05): 93-96.
- [12] Zhang Jianzhong. *Main Schools of Foreign Language Teaching Methods Abroad* [M]. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2016.
- [13] Zheng Anwen. "The Application of the Audio-Lingual Method in College English Teaching," *Journal of Anhui University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, 2007(01): 120-121.