

Audio-Lingual Method

SARAH RILLING

Framing the Issue

The audio-lingual method (ALM) of language teaching was a US-based teaching method begun during the 1940s. ALM was the prevailing teaching method in the 1950s and 60s when it became packaged by university and commercial publishers for foreign and second language teaching/learning. As a packaged teaching method, ALM continued well into the 1970s, with approaches and techniques of ALM persisting to a greater or lesser extent in teaching practices today.

ALM was based on scientific theory of the day from various disciplines (psychology, linguistics, etc.) in curriculum development of teaching and learning of foreign and second languages. Early development of ALM was undertaken by the US military and intelligence agencies as “the naïve and conventional views of language have been so much in control that it has taken a world war, with its practical contacts with a dozen languages little heard of before, to provide an opportunity even to try materials and methods based upon our scientific knowledge and research” (Fries, 1945, Preface). In the public sector, the use of ALM was promoted by various newly formed professional organizations. The Modern Language Association (MLA) was established in 1952 for the teaching of foreign languages (Rivers, 1964), and Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) was founded in 1966 for teachers of English as an additional language. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) was established in 1967 with a focus on oral skills as assessed in an oral proficiency interview paralleling the Defense Language Institute’s interview testing protocols.

The audio-lingual method largely replaced the grammar translation method, which had focused on reading and translating texts and in which explicit grammar rules were at the core of each lesson. In the grammar translation method, word by word decoding of texts was promoted, not much language input was provided, and conscious control of grammar was expected with resulting low levels of productive competence (Krashen, 1982). ALM was practiced concurrently with a British language teaching method (Structural-Situational), which

The TESOL Encyclopedia of English Language Teaching, First Edition.

Edited by John I. Liantas (Project Editor: Margo DelliCarpini).

© 2018 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2018 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

DOI: 10.1002/9781118784235.eelt0157

utilized an early service list of general English vocabulary estimated to be the top 2,000 English words in frequency, use, and productivity (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Both the audio-lingual and structural-situational methods focused on situational dialogues and sentence pattern practice, although ALM was the stricter of the two in terms of specific steps and procedures (Celce-Murcia, 2014), including rote repetition and memorization of dialogues, pattern practice, and drills.

As its name implies, ALM focused on language learning through listening to and repeating (speaking) dialogues and drills that exemplified linguistic patterns in the target language, the target always defined by an idealized native-speaker standard. Lado used the term “Mim-Mem” to describe the method which he characterized as mimicry and memorization (Lado, 1978, p. ix), mimicking and memorizing dialogues and other sentence-based patterns to build automaticity in language use. Culture was learned through language patterns, which ALM proponents believed represented ways of conceptualizing the world. The use of modern technologies, including especially language laboratories and audiovisual equipment, was deemed useful to teaching and learning, and technology ensured the scientific appeal of the methodology.

ALM for English as a second language teaching in the US has been called “The Michigan Method” (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011, p. 35), since many early methodology books for teachers, learner textbooks, and testing materials were published by the University of Michigan Press. A proliferation of leveled textbooks with tests and tape packages were promoted by various publishing companies for the teaching and learning of English and foreign languages. These textbook/tape packages contained carefully selected and controlled language structures, from what was deemed easiest and most useful to what was more difficult or less useful. As packaged foreign/second language teaching products, often including teachers’ manuals and test samples, ALM materials served as a type of early learning management system.

Teaching techniques from the audio-lingual method are still employed by teachers in a variety of contexts as aids in learning language in both high and low-technology environments. ALM involves listening and repeating, often in choral format with all class members repeating language elements orally in unison (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011), a technique that has practical appeal to the low-technology classroom. Dialogues in situated contexts provide the source materials for linguistic patterning and cultural conveyance, and drills focus learners implicitly on intonational contours and morpho-syntactic patterning in declarative, imperative, and interrogative sentence types. The listen and repeat technique may be augmented by recordings for listening and speaking practice with historic goals of error-free, native-speaker production, although today video and audio recordings of varieties of English heighten students’ awareness of natural variations in language and interactional/professional use. Academic and general word lists as teaching and learning aids continue in the tradition of the structural-situational method, including general word lists compiled using modern corpus technologies (see *A New General Service List*, 101).

Making the Case

Audio-lingualism as a language teaching method has various theoretical underpinnings based on language and learning research in the early part of the 20th century. ALM demonstrates intersections of “philosophy, philology, literature, psychology, linguistics, anthropology, and pedagogy” (Brooks, 1960, p. 175). From philosophy, proponents of ALM drew on symbolic representations, logic and mental representations, and aesthetics through fine arts (literature); from philology and literature, the reading and comparison of literary texts; from linguistics, structural understanding of phonetic/phonemic and morpho-syntactic patterns; from anthropology, cultural, and comparative language knowledge; and from pedagogy, applications of behavioral conditioning from psychology as well as integration of technologies as language and drill master.

Based on research in cultural anthropology and structural linguistics, ALM methodologists viewed language as highly systematic within a speech community. A finite number of language patterns could be identified, described, graded in terms of complexity, taught, and learned. Language was conceptualized as having various components: gestural/visual, audio-lingual, and graphic-material with audio-lingual being the focus of second/foreign language instruction (Brooks, 1960). Speech was understood as primary and therefore the goal of language teaching.

Comparative linguistics shaped ALM as errors could be directly tied to identifiable differences between the learner’s first language and his/her second/foreign language (Lado, 1957) with the home language being both “a help and hindrance” (Brooks, 1960, p. 22) in the transfer of language patterns and contrastive errors. Grammar patterns were sequenced based on principles of linguistic simplicity “but also influenced by frequency and predictions of difficulty based on contrastive analysis” (Krashen, 1982, p. 131). Oral language was taught through contrasts in phonemes, comparisons of phonemic segmentals, and application of cognates, if any exist. Oracy (known as aural-oral skills) was primary and literacy secondary. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson comment of ALM that anyone who has “learned one language (his native speech) can learn another within a reasonable time if he has sound guidance, proper materials and if he cooperates thoroughly” (2011, p. 9). In the early stages of language learning, the study of written forms was only used to support oral language (such as an aid to memorizing dialogues or reproducing orally words, phrases, and sentences as marked with sentence contours).

Theoretical constructs of psychology in the 1950s (especially Skinnerian behavioral conditioning) greatly influenced language-teaching methodologists in the development of ALM. Language was viewed as a set of subconscious habits (Lado & Fries, 1958) and “a form of human behaviors” (Rivers, 1964, p. 5). When habits are strengthened it was believed that language patterns would become automatic. Learners who already spoke a home language could learn a foreign/second language through new “habits that are both neural and muscular ... that function automatically” (Brooks, 1960, p. 21). Learning was believed to involve a stimulus with response and immediate reinforcement. Repeated exposure, practice, and

habit formation were believed to aid learners. Errors were to be corrected immediately in the stimulus-response-reinforcement cycle of teacher-fronted instruction.

By the mid-1950s, modern technologies such as voice recording and playback were relatively available. The language lab as designated classroom space was firmly grounded by the 1960s (Rivers, 1964), complete with booths for individual listening and response, and attention to details such as room acoustics (Brooks, 1960). Findings from research using speech spectrograms to describe structural attributes of various languages were applied to the language lab, which provided learners with unlimited practice in mimicking native-speaker articulation and structural patterns in the process of dialogue memorization and practice of structured drills. The language lab became the ideal teaching site to “practice until it becomes second nature” and to adhere to the adage that “language learning is overlearning” (Bloomfield, 1942, p. 16, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 100). Repetition until saturation was to produce automatic performance (Rivers, 1964).

Pedagogical Implications

As strict method, dialogues within a carefully constructed social language context are presented to learners. The dialogues contain all the structural elements of a unit of instruction with limited new vocabulary. Dialogues are modeled by the teacher, who uses a variety of techniques in presenting them for practice and memorization. Listening comes first as the learner hears the dialogue and is asked to repeat in choral response lines and interchanges from the dialogue prior to seeing it in print. Learners practiced lines, exchanges, and the complete dialogue before presenting it in memorized form with a partner to the class. The presentation, practice, production approach (PPP) has been attributed to ALM with the presentation of language through listening, the practice of that language and those patterns, with subsequent hopes for automatic production (Kumaravadivelu, 2006).

Based on the structural patterns presented in the dialogue (for example, noun or verb forms, questions or negation) structured drills were conducted, which Brooks equated to the musician playing scales as warm up and practice (1960). Drills took a variety of forms from simple repetition drills, to sentence build-up drills (“We go ... We go swimming ... We go swimming on Wednesday”; or “on Wednesday ... swimming on Wednesday, go swimming on Wednesday ... We go swimming on Wednesday”) to substitution drills of one or more elements (slot and filler activities where limited new vocabulary is introduced to fill a gap created in sentences exemplifying a specific pattern), to transformation drills (declarative to imperative sentences, or sentence combining to create relative clauses) (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Drills are carefully controlled and form-focused. No drill or activity lasts more than 10–15 minutes to avoid boredom or fatigue, but Rivers reassures us that the fatigue is emotional and not physical (1964). The mechanical response required in drills may render meaning irrelevant, but since grammar

patterns were practiced for habit formation at the subconscious level of thought, repeated drills were believed to free the individual to create new mental representations of the vocabulary items and assist in understanding new words within familiar structural patterns (He's drinking *tea* ... He's drinking *water* ... He's drinking *cocoa* ...).

Analogy, not analysis, was the central focus of language pattern recognition and repetition (Brooks, 1960). Analogy, or pattern repetition, was more important than analysis (grammar explanation) (Rivers, 1964). With analogy, learners are implicitly taught similarities and differences in linguistic patterns between the first and second languages, including grammar and phonemics, and intonational and morphological patterns. Learners practiced dialogues and drills before reading structural (especially grammatical) explanations. Grammar and phonemic patterning were taught implicitly first and then explicitly through brief explanations. The teacher/textbook was to use learners' first language to give brief structural descriptions, especially focusing on any contrasts between the first and second languages. A minimum of three example sentences with the structural model were presented and practiced before any explanation or written support. Teachers had the class repeat sentences or other language patterns first in unison and then through individual recitation. Teachers and learners were to use only full sentences (Lado & Fries, 1958). For languages with sentence intonation, textbooks marked these patterns visually on individual words, phrases, or sentences to show patterns and pattern contrasts. Teachers marked words, phrases, and sentences on classroom boards in a similar manner (i.e., to demonstrate Y/N versus informational question intonation). The language laboratory was to be used twice a week if possible, perhaps at a designated course time where machines could repeat and drill "without fatigue or irritation" (Brooks, 1960, p. 147).

As to course design, ALM took a four-skills approach with listening, speaking, reading and writing (LSRW) in that order. Brooks suggests the distribution of skills outlined in Table 1.

Units of instruction focused on spoken forms first before written forms were used for reinforcement so as to highlight the "fine details of articulation" (Brooks, 1960, p. 154). When reading texts were used, Brooks recommended literature as literature demonstrated "excellence of language in its graphic form and [is] raised to the level of fine art" (p. 173).

Proponents of audiolingualism recognized that professional teachers and bilingual users of more than one language needed high levels of proficiency in each

Table 1 Distribution of skills in percentages across three language levels.

<i>Level</i>	<i>Listening</i>	<i>Speaking</i>	<i>Reading</i>	<i>Writing</i>
1	50	30	15	5
2	30	20	40	10
3	20	20	40	20

Adapted from Brooks (1960, p. 129).

language. Knowledge of linguistic structures and native or near-native abilities in each language were essential for instructors to serve as models. Language teachers were expected also to be current in theory and method, familiar with materials and assessments in a lockstep curriculum as well as being familiar with classroom procedures using “electro-mechanical aids” (Brooks, 1960, p. 175).

Today, techniques and practices from ALM continue. Some form of “listen and repeat” can be heard in many classrooms today, although generally this technique is used as just one aspect of a lesson, or one form of teacher recast for the benefit of the whole class. Textbook explanations of pronunciation continue to use International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) and sentence contours to demonstrate phonemic variation and intonation patterns, minimal pair practice to refine contrasting phonemes, and phrase and sentence-level repetition and practice. Grammar textbooks often contain slot and filler exercises in sentence-level pattern drilling and many modern grammar books take an implicit rather than explicit approach to grammar instruction with explanations reserved until after the grammatical structure has been presented using authentic text samples.

Early limitations within the language lab, including having only one language master tape that the class must listen to in lock-step, were overcome in technology-rich teaching environments over the three decades during which ALM was actively promoted as a method (1940s–1970s). Since the 1980s more resources for individual and whole class activities were developed and new technologies employed in the language lab, including self-access materials and resources, and computer integration with individual speech analysis capabilities and endless repetition possibilities. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL), like ALM, strongly persisted in being drill-based into the 21st century until interactive Web 2.0 technologies became available allowing for more interactive convergent and divergent tasks and authentic interactions via computer.

SEE ALSO: CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning); Correcting Errors; Corrective Feedback in L2 Speech Production; Curriculum Development; Design; Explicit Versus Implicit Grammar Knowledge; Grammar in Foreign and Second Language Classes; Historical Perspectives on Teaching Speaking; Learning Management Systems; Oral Language Proficiency Tests; PPP: Presentation–Practice–Production; Transfer; Using Cognates for Vocabulary Development

References

- A New General Service List (101). <http://www.newgeneralservicelist.org/>
- Brooks, N. (1960). *Language and language learning*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace and World.
- Celce-Murcia, M. (2014). An overview of language teaching methods and approaches. In M. Celce-Murcia, D. M. Brinton, & M. A. Snow (Eds.), *Teaching English as a second or foreign language* (4th ed., pp. 1–14). Boston, MA: Heinle Centage Learning.
- Fries, C. C. (1945). *Teaching and learning English as a foreign language*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. New York, NY: Pergamon Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2006). *Understanding language teaching: From method to postmethod*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lado, R. (1957). *Linguistics across cultures: Applied linguistics for language teachers*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lado, R. (1978). *English series: Teacher's manual 1* (3rd ed.). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Lado, R., & Fries, C. C. (1958). *English pattern practices: Establishing the patterns as habits*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Larsen-Freeman, D., & Anderson, M. (2011). *Techniques and principles in language teaching* (3rd ed.). Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Rivers, W. (1964). *The psychologist and the foreign-language teacher*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.