

### 3 The Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching

Few language teachers today are familiar with the terms *Oral Approach* or *Situational Language Teaching*, which refer to an approach to language teaching developed by British applied linguists from the 1930s to the 1960s. Even though neither term is commonly used today, the impact of the Oral Approach has been long-lasting, and it has shaped the design of many widely used EFL/ESL textbooks and courses, including many still being used today. One of the most successful ESL courses published, *Streamline English* (Hartley and Viney 1978), reflected the classic principles of Situational Language Teaching, as did many other series that have been widely used (e.g., *Access to English*, Coles and Lord 1975; *Kernel Lessons Plus*, O'Neill 1973; and many of L. G. Alexander's widely used textbooks, e.g., Alexander 1967). Hubbard, Jones, Thornton, and Wheeler's comment in 1983 still holds true today: "This method is widely used at the time of writing and a very large number of textbooks are based on it" (Hubbard et al. 1983: 36). It is important, therefore, to understand the principles and practices of the Oral Approach and Situational Language Teaching.

#### Background

The origins of this approach began with the work of British applied linguists in the 1920s and 1930s. Beginning at this time, a number of outstanding applied linguists developed the basis for a principled approach to methodology in language teaching. Two of the leaders in this movement were Harold Palmer and A. S. Hornby, two of the most prominent figures in British twentieth-century language teaching. Both were familiar with the work of such linguists as Otto Jespersen and Daniel Jones, as well as with the Direct Method. They attempted to develop a more scientific foundation for an oral approach to teaching English than was evidenced in the Direct Method. The result was a systematic study of the principles and procedures that could be applied to the selection and organization of the content of a language course (Palmer 1917, 1921).

### *Vocabulary control*

One of the first aspects of method design to receive attention was the role of vocabulary. In the 1920s and 1930s, several large-scale investigations of foreign language vocabulary were undertaken. The impetus for this research came from two quarters. First, there was a general consensus among language teaching specialists, such as Palmer, that vocabulary was one of the most important aspects of foreign language learning. A second influence was the increased emphasis on reading skills as the goal of foreign language study in some countries. This had been the recommendation of the Coleman Report (Chapter 1) and also the independent conclusion of another British language teaching specialist, Michael West, who had examined the role of English in India in the 1920s. Vocabulary was seen as an essential component of reading proficiency.

This led to the development of principles of vocabulary control, which were to have a major practical impact on the teaching of English in subsequent decades. Frequency counts showed that a core of two thousand or so words occurred frequently in written texts and that a knowledge of these words would greatly assist in reading a foreign language. Harold Palmer, Michael West, and other specialists produced a guide to the English vocabulary needed for teaching English as a foreign language, *The Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection* (Faucett, West, Palmer, and Thorndike 1936), based on frequency as well as other criteria. This was later revised by West and published in 1953 as *A General Service List of English Words*, which became a standard reference in developing teaching materials. These efforts to introduce a scientific and rational basis for choosing the vocabulary content of a language course represented the first attempts to establish principles of syllabus design in language teaching.

### *Grammar control*

Parallel to the interest in developing rational principles for vocabulary selection was a focus on the grammatical content of a language course. Palmer had emphasized the problems of grammar for the foreign learner. Much of his work in Japan, where he directed the Institute for Research in English Teaching from 1922 until World War II, was directed toward developing classroom procedures suited to teaching basic grammatical patterns through an oral approach. His view of grammar was very different from the abstract model of grammar seen in the Grammar-Translation Method, however, which was based on the assumption that one universal logic formed the basis of all languages and that the teacher's responsibility was to show how each category of the universal grammar was to be expressed in the foreign language. Palmer viewed grammar as

the underlying sentence patterns of the spoken language. Palmer, Hornby, and other British applied linguists analyzed English and classified its major grammatical structures into sentence patterns (later called “substitution tables”), which could be used to help internalize the rules of English sentence structure.

A classification of English sentence patterns was incorporated into the first dictionary for students of English as a foreign language, developed by Hornby, Gatenby, and Wakefield and published in 1953 as *The Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English*. A number of pedagogically motivated descriptions of English grammar were undertaken, including *A Grammar of Spoken English on a Strictly Phonetic Basis* (Palmer and Blandford 1939), *A Handbook of English Grammar* (Zandvoort 1945), and Hornby’s *Guide to Patterns and Usage in English* (1954), which became a standard reference source of basic English sentence patterns for textbook writers. With the development of systematic approaches to the lexical and grammatical content of a language course and with the efforts of such specialists as Palmer, West, and Hornby in using these resources as part of a comprehensive methodological framework for the teaching of English as a foreign language, the foundations for the British approach in TEFL/TESL – the Oral Approach – were firmly established.

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Palmer, Hornby, and other British applied linguists from the 1920s onward developed an approach to methodology that involved systematic principles of *selection* (the procedures by which lexical and grammatical content was chosen), *gradation* (principles by which the organization and sequencing of content were determined), and *presentation* (techniques used for presentation and practice of items in a course). Although Palmer, Hornby, and other English teaching specialists had differing views on the specific procedures to be used in teaching English, their general principles were referred to as the Oral Approach to language teaching. This was not to be confused with the Direct Method, which, although it used oral procedures, lacked a systematic basis in applied linguistic theory and practice.

An oral approach should not be confused with the obsolete Direct Method, which meant only that the learner was bewildered by a flow of ungraded speech, suffering all the difficulties he would have encountered in picking up the language in its normal environment and losing most of the compensating benefits of better contextualization in those circumstances. (Pattison 1964: 4)

The Oral Approach was the accepted British approach to English language teaching by the 1950s. It is described in the standard methodology

textbooks of the period, such as French (1948–1950), Gurrey (1955), Frisby (1957), and Billows (1961). Its principles are seen in Hornby's famous *Oxford Progressive English Course for Adult Learners* (1954–1956) and in many other more recent textbooks. One of the most active proponents of the Oral Approach in the 1960s was the Australian George Pittman. Pittman and his colleagues were responsible for developing an influential set of teaching materials based on the Situational Approach, which were widely used in Australia, New Guinea, and the Pacific territories. Most Pacific territories continue to use the so-called Tate materials, developed by Pittman's colleague Gloria Tate. Pittman was also responsible for the situationally based materials developed by the Commonwealth Office of Education in Sydney, Australia, used in the English programs for immigrants in Australia. These were published for worldwide use in 1965 as the series *Situational English*. Materials by Alexander and other leading British textbook writers also reflected the principles of Situational Language Teaching as they had evolved over a 20-year period. The main characteristics of the approach were as follows:

1. Language teaching begins with the spoken language. Material is taught orally before it is presented in written form.
2. The target language is the language of the classroom.
3. New language points are introduced and practiced situationally.
4. Vocabulary selection procedures are followed to ensure that an essential general service vocabulary is covered.
5. Items of grammar are graded following the principle that simple forms should be taught before complex ones.
6. Reading and writing are introduced once a sufficient lexical and grammatical basis is established.

It was the third principle that became a key feature of the approach in the 1960s, and it was then that the term *situational* was used increasingly in referring to the Oral Approach. Hornby himself used the term *the Situational Approach* in the title of an influential series of articles published in *English Language Teaching* in 1950. Later, the terms *Structural-Situational Approach* and *Situational Language Teaching* came into common usage. To avoid further confusion, we will use the term *Situational Language Teaching* (SLT) to include the Structural-Situational and Oral approaches. How can Situational Language Teaching be characterized at the levels of approach, design, and procedure?

## **Approach**

### *Theory of language*

The theory of language underlying Situational Language Teaching can be characterized as a type of British “structuralism.” Speech was regarded as the basis of language, and structure was viewed as being at the heart of speaking ability. Palmer, Hornby, and other British applied linguists had prepared pedagogical descriptions of the basic grammatical structures of English, and these were to be followed in developing methodology. “Word order, Structural Words, the few inflexions of English, and Content Words, will form the material of our teaching” (Frisby 1957: 134). In terms of language theory, there was little to distinguish such a view from that proposed by American linguists, such as Charles Fries. Indeed, Pittman drew heavily on Fries’s theories of language in the 1960s, but American theory was largely unknown by British applied linguists in the 1950s. The British theoreticians, however, had a different focus to their version of structuralism – the notion of “situation.” “Our principal classroom activity in the teaching of English structure will be the oral practice of structures. This oral practice of controlled sentence patterns should be given in situations designed to give the greatest amount of practice in English speech to the pupil” (Pittman 1963: 179).

The theory that knowledge of structures must be linked to situations in which they could be used gave Situational Language Teaching one of its distinctive features. This may have reflected the functional trend in British linguistics since the 1930s. Many British linguists had emphasized the close relationship between the structure of language and the context and situations in which language is used. British linguists, such as J. R. Firth and M. A. K. Halliday, developed powerful views of language in which meaning, context, and situation were given a prominent place: “The emphasis now is on the description of language activity as part of the whole complex of events which, together with the participants and relevant objects, make up actual situations” (Halliday, McIntosh, and Strevens 1964: 38). Thus, in contrast to American structuralist views on language (see Chapter 4), language was viewed as purposeful activity related to goals and situations in the real world. “The language which a person originates . . . is always expressed for a purpose” (Frisby 1957: 16).

### *Theory of learning*

The theory of learning underlying Situational Language Teaching is a type of behaviorist habit-learning theory. It addresses primarily the pro-

cesses rather than the conditions of learning. Frisby, for example, cites Palmer's views as authoritative:

As Palmer has pointed out, there are three processes in learning a language – receiving the knowledge or materials, fixing it in the memory by repetition, and using it in actual practice until it becomes a personal skill. (1957: 136)

French likewise saw language learning as habit formation:

The fundamental is correct speech habits. . . . The pupils should be able to put the words, without hesitation and almost without thought, into sentence patterns which are correct. Such speech habits can be cultivated by blind imitative drill. (1950, vol. 3: 9)

Like the Direct Method, Situational Language Teaching adopts an inductive approach to the teaching of grammar. The meaning of words or structures is not to be given through explanation in either the native language or the target language but is to be induced from the way the form is used in a situation. “If we give the meaning of a new word, either by translation into the home language or by an equivalent in the same language, as soon as we introduce it, we weaken the impression which the word makes on the mind” (Billows 1961: 28). Explanation is therefore discouraged, and the learner is expected to deduce the meaning of a particular structure or vocabulary item from the situation in which it is presented. Extending structures and vocabulary to new situations takes place by generalization. The learner is expected to apply the language learned in a classroom to situations outside the classroom. This is how child language learning is believed to take place, and the same processes are thought to occur in second and foreign language learning, according to practitioners of Situational Language Teaching.

## **Design**

### *Objectives*

The objectives of the Situational Language Teaching method are to teach a practical command of the four basic skills of language, goals it shares with most methods of language teaching. But the skills are approached through structure. Accuracy in both pronunciation and grammar is regarded as crucial, and errors are to be avoided at all costs. Automatic control of basic structures and sentence patterns is fundamental to reading and writing skills, and this is achieved through speech work. “Before our pupils read new structures and new vocabulary, we shall teach orally both the new structures and the new vocabulary” (Pittman 1963: 186). Writing likewise derives from speech.

Oral composition can be a very valuable exercise. . . .

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Nevertheless, the skill with which this activity is handled depends largely on the control of the language suggested by the teacher and used by the children. . . . Only when the teacher is reasonably certain that learners can speak fairly correctly within the limits of their knowledge of sentence structure and vocabulary may he allow them free choice in sentence patterns and vocabulary. (Pittman 1963: 188)

### The syllabus

Basic to the teaching of English in Situational Language Teaching is a structural syllabus and a word list. A structural syllabus is a list of the basic structures and sentence patterns of English, arranged according to their order of presentation. In Situational Language Teaching, structures are always taught within sentences, and vocabulary is chosen according to how well it enables sentence patterns to be taught. "Our early course will consist of a list of sentence patterns [statement patterns, question patterns, and request or command patterns] . . . will include as many structural words as possible, and sufficient content words to provide us with material upon which to base our language practice" (Frisby 1957: 134). Frisby gives an example of the typical structural syllabus around which situational teaching was based:

	<i>Sentence pattern</i>	<i>Vocabulary</i>
1st lesson	This is . . . That is . . .	book, pencil, ruler, desk
2nd lesson	These are . . . Those are . . .	chair, picture, door, window
3rd lesson	Is this . . . ? Yes it is. Is that . . . ? Yes it is.	watch, box, pen, blackboard

(1957: 134)

The syllabus was not therefore a situational syllabus in the sense that this term is sometimes used (i.e., a list of situations and the language associated with them). Rather, situation refers to the manner of presenting and practicing sentence patterns, as we shall see later.

### Types of learning and teaching activities

Situational Language Teaching employs a situational approach to presenting new sentence patterns and a drill-based manner of practicing them:

our method will . . . be situational. The situation will be controlled carefully to teach the new language material . . . in such a way that there can be no doubt in the learner's mind of the meaning of what he hears. . . . almost all the vocabulary and structures taught in the first four or five years and even

later can be placed in situations in which the meaning is quite clear. (Pittman 1963: 155–156)

By *situation* Pittman means the use of concrete objects, pictures, and realia, which together with actions and gestures can be used to demonstrate the meanings of new language items:

The form of new words and sentence patterns is demonstrated with examples and not through grammatical explanation or description. The meaning of new words and sentence patterns is not conveyed through translation. It is made clear visually (with objects, pictures, action and mime). Wherever possible model sentences are related and taken from a single situation. (Davies, Roberts, and Rossner 1975: 3)

The practice techniques employed generally consist of guided repetition and substitution activities, including chorus repetition, dictation, drills, and controlled oral-based reading and writing tasks. Other oral-practice techniques are sometimes used, including pair practice and group work.

### *Learner roles*

In the initial stages of learning, the learner is required simply to listen and repeat what the teacher says and to respond to questions and commands. The learner has no control over the content of learning and is often regarded as likely to succumb to undesirable behaviors unless skillfully manipulated by the teacher. For example, the learner might lapse into faulty grammar or pronunciation, forget what has been taught, or fail to respond quickly enough; incorrect habits are to be avoided at all costs (see Pittman 1963). Later, more active participation is encouraged. This includes learners initiating responses and asking each other questions, although teacher-controlled introduction and practice of new language is stressed throughout (see Davies, Roberts, and Rossner 1975: 3–4).

### *Teacher roles*

The teacher's function is threefold. In the presentation stage of the lesson, the teacher serves as a model, setting up situations in which the need for the target structure is created and then modeling the new structure for students to repeat. Then the teacher "becomes more like the skillful conductor of an orchestra, drawing the music out of the performers" (Byrne 1976: 2). The teacher is required to be a skillful manipulator, using questions, commands, and other cues to elicit correct sentences from the learners. Lessons are hence teacher-directed, and the teacher sets the pace.

During the practice phase of the lesson, students are given more of an opportunity to use the language in less controlled situations, but the



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teacher is ever on the lookout for grammatical and structural errors that can form the basis of subsequent lessons. Organizing review is a primary task for the teacher, according to Pittman (1963), who summarizes the teacher's responsibilities as dealing with

1. timing
2. oral practice, to support the textbook structures
3. revision [i.e., review]
4. adjustment to special needs of individuals
5. testing
6. developing language activities other than those arising from the textbook  
(Pittman 1963: 177–178)

The teacher is essential to the success of the method, since the textbook is able only to describe activities for the teacher to carry out in class.

## *The role of instructional materials*

Situational Language Teaching is dependent on both a textbook and visual aids. The textbook contains tightly organized lessons planned around different grammatical structures. Visual aids may be produced by the teacher or may be commercially produced; they consist of wall charts, flashcards, pictures, stick figures, and so on. The visual element together with a carefully graded grammatical syllabus is a crucial aspect of Situational Language Teaching, hence the importance of the textbook. In principle, however, the textbook should be used “only as a guide to the learning process. The teacher is expected to be the master of his textbook” (Pittman 1963: 176).

## **Procedure**

Classroom procedures in Situational Language Teaching vary according to the level of the class, but procedures at any level aim to move from controlled to freer practice of structures and from oral use of sentence patterns to their automatic use in speech, reading, and writing. Pittman gives an example of a typical lesson plan:

The first part of the lesson will be stress and intonation practice. . . . The main body of the lesson should then follow. This might consist of the teaching of a structure. If so, the lesson would then consist of four parts:

1. pronunciation
2. revision (to prepare for new work if necessary)
3. presentation of new structure or vocabulary
4. oral practice (drilling)
5. reading of material on the new structure, or written exercises

(1963: 173)

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Davies et al. give sample lesson plans for use with Situational Language Teaching. The structures being taught in the following lesson are “This is a . . .” and “That’s a . . .”

- Teacher: (holding up a watch) Look. This is a watch. (2 ×) (pointing to a clock on wall or table) That’s a clock. (2 ×) That’s a clock. (2 ×) This is a watch. (putting down watch and moving across to touch the clock or pick it up) This is a clock. (2 ×) (pointing to watch) That’s a watch. (2 ×) (picking up a pen) This is a pen. (2 ×) (drawing large pencil on blackboard and moving away) That’s a pencil. (2 ×) Take your pens. All take your pens. (students all pick up their pens)
- Teacher: Listen. This is a pen. (3 ×) This. (3 ×)
- Students: This. (3 ×)
- A student: This. (6 ×)
- Teacher: This is a pen.
- Students: This is a pen. (3 ×)
- Student: (moving pen) This is a pen. (6 ×)
- Teacher: (pointing to blackboard) That’s a pencil. (3 ×) That. (3 ×)
- Students: That. (3 ×)
- A student. That. (6 ×)
- Teacher: That’s a pencil.
- Students: (all pointing at blackboard) That’s a pencil. (3 ×)
- Student: (pointing at blackboard) That’s a pencil. (6 ×)
- Teacher: Take your books. (taking a book himself) This is a book. (3 ×)
- Students: This is a book. (3 ×)
- Teacher: (placing notebook in a visible place) Tell me . . .
- Student 1: That’s a notebook.

You can now begin taking objects out of your box, making sure they are as far as possible not new vocabulary items. Large objects may be placed in visible places at the front of the classroom. Smaller ones distributed to students. (1975: 56)

These procedures illustrate the techniques used in presenting new language items in situations. Drills are likewise related to “situations.” Pittman illustrates oral drilling on a pattern, using a box full of objects to create the situation. The pattern being practiced is “There’s a NOUN + of + (noun) in the box.” The teacher takes objects out of the box and the class repeats:

- There’s a tin of cigarettes in the box.
- There’s a packet of matches in the box.
- There’s a reel of cotton in the box.
- There’s a bottle of ink in the box.
- There’s a packet of pins in the box.

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There's a pair of shoes in the box.

There's a jar of rice in the box.

(Pittman 1963: 168)

The teacher's kit, a collection of items and realia that can be used in situational language practice, is hence an essential part of the teacher's equipment.

Davies et al. likewise give detailed information about teaching procedures to be used with Situational Language Teaching. The sequence of activities they propose consists of the following:

1. Listening practice in which the teacher obtains his student's attention and repeats an example of the patterns or a word in isolation clearly, several times, probably saying it slowly at least once (where . . . is . . . the . . . pen?), separating the words.
2. Choral imitation in which students all together or in large groups repeat what the teacher has said. This works best if the teacher gives a clear instruction like "Repeat," or "Everybody" and hand signals to mark time and stress.
3. Individual imitation in which the teacher asks several individual students to repeat the model he has given in order to check their pronunciation.
4. Isolation, in which the teacher isolates sounds, words, or groups of words which cause trouble and goes through techniques 1–3 with them before replacing them in context.
5. Building up to a new model, in which the teacher gets students to ask and answer questions using patterns they already know in order to bring about the information necessary to introduce the new model.
6. Elicitation, in which the teacher, using mime, prompt words, gestures, etc., gets students to ask questions, make statements, or give new examples of the pattern.
7. Substitution drilling, in which the teacher uses cue words (words, pictures, numbers, names, etc.) to get individual students to mix the examples of the new patterns.
8. Question-answer drilling, in which the teacher gets one student to ask a question and another to answer until most students in the class have practiced asking and answering the new question form.
9. Correction, in which the teacher indicates by shaking his head, repeating the error, etc., that there is a mistake and invites the student or a different student to correct it. Where possible the teacher does not simply correct the mistake himself. He gets students to correct themselves so they will be encouraged to listen to each other carefully.

(Davies et al. 1975: 6–7)

Davies et al. then go on to discuss how follow-up reading and writing activities are to be carried out.

## Conclusion

Procedures associated with Situational Language Teaching in the 1950s and 1960s were an extension and further development of well-established techniques advocated by proponents of the earlier Oral Approach in the British school of language teaching. The essential features of SLT are seen in the “P-P-P” lesson model that thousands of teachers who studied for the RSA/Cambridge Certificate in TEFL were required to master in the 1980s and early 1990s, with a lesson having three phases: Presentation (introduction of a new teaching item in context), Practice (controlled practice of the item), and Production (a freer practice phase) (Willis and Willis 1996). SLT provided the methodology of major methodology texts throughout the 1980s and beyond (e.g., Hubbard et al. 1983), and, as we noted, textbooks written according to the principles of Situational Language Teaching continue to be widely used in many parts of the world, particularly when materials are based on a grammatical syllabus. In the mid-1960s, however, the view of language, language learning, and language teaching underlying Situational Language Teaching was called into question. We discuss this reaction and how it led to Communicative Language Teaching in Chapter 14. But because the principles of Situational Language Teaching, with its strong emphasis on oral practice, grammar, and sentence patterns, conform to the intuitions of many language teachers and offer a practical methodology suited to countries where national EFL/ESL syllabuses continue to be grammatically based, it continues to be widely used, though not necessarily widely acknowledged.

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