

## The Thinking Approach to Language Teaching as a Tool for the Resolution of the Key Contradictions of Language Teaching and Education

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**Abstract.** Key contradiction is seen as a central problem underlying the development of any field. The key contradictions of language teaching are formulated at three levels, namely the ones of approach, method, and procedure.

At the same time, language teaching being a part of education must take account of the problems of the latter. The key contradiction of education is seen as the one between a necessity to impart knowledge valuable for students and the pace at which this knowledge becomes outdated.

It appears that any new approach to language teaching in the knowledge society must take account of the above contradictions.

The Thinking Approach to language teaching is presented as a possible step to the resolution of the key contradictions of language teaching and education.

### Background

It has already become usual to say that we are living in the time of rapid changes. Language teaching is hardly an exception. Changes are often associated with problems arising from the necessity to adapt to the new situation. Traditionally, we try to avoid problems as the word itself usually causes negative connotations. It is even more so when another word – contradiction – is used in reference to problems. Contradictions are often associated with a situation without an exit and must be avoided at all costs.

According to the principles of the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving (TRIZ) contradictions underlie every problematic situation (Senrich, 1999). Contradiction is defined as a situation when two incompatible requirements are set to one element (both material and immaterial) (<http://www.trizminsk.org>). In order to find a solution to the problem, it is necessary to identify and resolve one or several contradictions.

The Key Contradiction underlies the development of a class of systems. In the process of its resolution the system is growing and improving. The resolution of the key contradiction leads to the appearance of a new class or generation of systems (Khomenko, 2000). Attempts at resolution of the key contradictions underlying language teaching appear to be one of the major educational issues for language teaching in the knowledge society.

The given paper is **aimed** at demonstrating the main **problems** (key contradictions) of language teaching and propose a possible solution to them. For this reason, we employ the TRIZ **methodology** developed by Genrich Altshuller. The Thinking Approach is presented as a result of the application of TRIZ to language teaching.

### Present Situation in Education

Language learning does not exist in vacuum. It is a part of education in general and its development depends to a certain extent on the tendencies in this field. The rapid pace of development of modern civilization is causing knowledge to become out of date very fast<sup>1</sup>. It may happen that the knowledge students acquired in the process of studies is no longer useful when they graduate as the world has changed.

### Key Contradiction of Education

*Education must impart valuable knowledge in order to prepare students (and society in general) for the life in the future and education cannot impart valuable knowledge as it is becoming out of date faster than a teacher realises what and how should be given to students.*

According to the rules of TRIZ, it is necessary to intensify the contradiction to make a step closer to its resolution. Then, the key problem of education will look as follows:

At present teachers must prepare their students to live in the world they both know nothing of.

Unfortunately, none of the currently used approaches in language teaching brings us to the solution of the above problem (Khomenko). Any new approach to language teaching must provide the resolution of the contradiction formulated above. This need is supported by leading ELT methodologists (Khomenko, Sokol and others).

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<sup>1</sup> - 'In a lifetime an individual may expect to have ten or more different occupations.' (Littlejohn, 1998)

## Specifying the Problem (Language Teaching)

Taking into consideration the key contradiction of education formulated above, let us look at the key contradictions of language teaching. Following the distinction made by Michael Lewis (1993), we will describe these contradictions at three levels, namely why we teach something or the level of approach, what we teach or the level of method, and how we teach it or the level of procedure.

### *The Level of Approach*

Problems at this level deal with reasons for choosing this or that approach to language teaching. If we accept that language teaching is a part of education, the language teacher is no longer responsible for just 'language competence' of his or her students. As well as teachers of other subjects, we have to cope with the problems facing education as such. Thus, the key contradiction at this level may look as follows:

### **Key Contradiction of Language Learning 1**

Language teachers have to spend most of their time on teaching language as it is their primary subject, and they should not spend most of the time on language, as language competence is not sufficient to prepare students for the future life, which is the purpose of education.

### *The Level of Method*

When we speak we always choose from a great number of variants of the language those we find optimal for expressing our ideas. It is not just the matter of choosing the right grammar form – the situation is much more complex. We simultaneously solve problems at different levels – phonological (articulation, intonation, stresses), morphological (endings, verb forms, prepositions), lexical (synonyms), syntactical (word order), etc. We must find the optimal solution to all these problems in that very specific situation we encounter them. And this is absolutely necessary if we want to communicate the language fluently. The ability to find those solutions quickly means fluency. However, it never happens that we solve, for instance, a grammar problem itself. It always occurs, sometimes subconsciously though, that at the same time we deal with many other problems. In linguistic terms, we deal with paradigmatic choices at each level and, at the same time, interaction of language levels.

### **Key Contradiction of Language Learning 2**

*We must learn to solve problems of various aspects of the language separately in order to understand how they may work together, but we must understand how all parts work together if we want to find the optimal solution to every separate problem.*

If we bring the contradiction to the standard form, it will look as follows:

*In order to communicate fluently a student should be able to know all the aspects of the language (i.e. to possess all the necessary skills in all the aspects at once, to understand how they all work together), but in order to understand how they all work together a student needs to*

*know peculiarities of each aspect and thus deal with every aspect separately.*

### *The Level of Procedure*

At this level we deal primarily with methodological aspects of teaching. The key contradiction may look as follows:

### **Key Contradiction of Language Learning 3**

*The content of the language course should be given in a linear way to make it easier to plan and conduct teaching (gradation, sequencing, evaluation, etc) and it should be given in a non-linear way as the nature of both language and learning (and our life in general) is non-linear and students need to learn to deal with real problems.*

## **The Ideal Approach**

According to the rules of TRIZ, the ideal solution gives us a guiding line in problem solving. It helps us understand what kind of solution we eventually aim at. Thus, given the contradictions formulated above, we can define the features of the Ideal Approach to language teaching, i.e. the one which provides the resolution of the contradictions without causing unnecessary changes and complications to the system of teaching.<sup>2</sup>

The Ideal Approach must allow us to do the following:

- Lead students to the highest level of language competence and at the same time develop all the other necessary skills for the future life of students.
- Make it possible for students to understand peculiarities of each aspect of the language separately and at the same time see how the aspects interact with each other.
- Provide an opportunity for both teachers and students to deal with real world problems and at the same time to make it possible to plan the content of teaching.

## **A Way Forward**

We would like to introduce the Thinking Approach (TA) to language teaching as a step to the resolution of the above contradictions.

***There are five meta-principles underlying the Thinking Approach (TA) to language teaching.***

**Non-linear organization of the course** (Khomeiko, 1998). Unlike in many traditional approaches where various parts of the syllabus are taught step by step, the TA offers an opportunity to stop at virtually any part of the syllabus at every lesson<sup>3</sup>. Learning is organized through trainings – complexes of tasks giving a full ranged practice of both language and thinking skills. We may draw an analogy with driving here. In order to learn to drive, you

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<sup>2</sup> - We would like to underline that the Ideal Approach is an abstract model, which should by no means be associated with any specific approach to language teaching.

<sup>3</sup> - It is true that such an approach imposes much higher requirements on the teacher. Still, we believe that in order to meet the demands of the future it is not only our students, but also us, teachers, who have to be ready to change.

have to acquire a large number of various skills, ie using the pedals, shifting the gear, noticing traffic signs, etc. However, you are not offered to do it in a step-by-step fashion – the instructor makes you drive from the very beginning, focusing on each of the skills in the process when it becomes essential. A similar thing happens in the language classroom. Students are always in the process of doing a task, while the teacher has an opportunity to focus on any point of the syllabus as soon as they see that it becomes important.

*Course Dynamics.* The TA incorporates many ideas from other approaches to language teaching. Depending on the specific situation (class needs, peculiarities of the learners, teacher's aims, etc), a certain lesson can be both teacher or student centred, the emphasis may be on lexis, structures or pronunciation, exercises offered to students may be both closed and open-ended, etc.

*Integrated Syllabus.* There are at least 2 parts of the syllabus in any TA language course, ie language and thinking ones. In addition to this, other parts may be integrated into syllabus depending upon the requirements of a specific situation. Any of the TA modules (10) can be developed into a separate part of the syllabus.

*Thinking Models or Tools.* Most tasks and activities offered under TA have a carefully selected thinking focus. An activity may appear familiar at a first glance, yet the way students deal with it is often radically different. Rather than just encouraging students to think and be creative, the TA teacher offers students specific *models* or *tools* for thinking, ie it teaches students *how* one can be creative.

*Learner's Independence.* One of the highest priorities of the TA is to develop an independent learner, the one who can master necessary skills without or with the minimum assistance from the teacher.

*The following methodological principles are essential when working in the framework of the TA.*

Problem based. Students learn best when they have to deal with problems and look for suitable solutions to them. Under a problem in the context of the TA we understand a situation when contradictory requirements have to be met. Problems can be both language and non-language ones. In the former case, language itself will be the object of study at the lesson (eg., in case of grammar), while in the latter case language will be a means, and linguistic skills will be practiced while working upon the problem.

**Cross-curricula links.** Thanks to the module structure of the TA, it easily integrates with other subjects in the curriculum. The modules mastered by students can be applied to acquisition of various disciplines, while trainings and activities developed under the TA may be successfully employed for teaching other subjects, especially humanities.

*Awareness.* The TA promotes awareness activities as an alternative to mere memorization as much as possible. It does not mean, however, that memorization should be excluded from the language classroom, however its role

should be restricted and awareness activities should have preference.

*Non-linguistic task focus.* Most tasks in the TA have an extra linguistic focus. Language is used as one of the means for finding a solution to a problem. The emphasis is on mastering processing (how to) skills.

*Extension of cultural values.* Various materials offered under the TA (texts, films, etc) aim to extend the cross-cultural knowledge of students, awareness of the target culture as well as promote the formation of their own cultural values.

*Emphasis on Learner's Individuality.* As any TA course is non-linear, each student has a chance to acquire as much as he or she is ready to do at any given moment of time and later add 'new knots' of the semantic net of the subject to their knowledge. The information presented at every lesson is multi-layered, thus teaching becomes much more individual.

**Peer teaching.** Those students who have already mastered important aspects of the syllabus ('knots') start explaining some points to other students, thus performing some of the teacher's functions. Besides increasing learners' independence, it leads to a useful discussion as a result of which students reach a deeper understanding of the subject.

## Conclusions

Each of the principles separately can be hardly called new. Moreover, most of the ideas emphasized by the TA have been known in education for many years. What makes the TA stand aside however, is a systematic course (9) which comprises ALL of the above principles and as a result leads us towards the resolution of the key contradictions formulated at the beginning of this article.

### Key Contradiction of Education - Resolution

*Valuable knowledge is discovered by students rather than given to them. As a result, students do not just get new information, but master skills of acquiring and retrieving it. Thus, they develop general tools for dealing with new and unknown things and phenomena. The given skills may be applied to any new field and problems they will encounter in the future.*

### Key Contradictions of Language Learning - Resolutions

#### The Level of Approach

*At every lesson most of the time is spent simultaneously on the development of both language and thinking skills (10). The former are primarily how-to skills mastered when dealing with various tasks and activities with thinking focus. Or language itself may become the object of study (eg, in case of grammar, vocabulary, etc) and then thinking skills are mastered while dealing with language problems. As a result, at every lesson language teachers have an opportunity to focus on virtually any skill students need, paying equal attention to all of them.*

#### The Level of Method

At every lessons students deal with language as a whole while the focus is made (i.e. teaching starts) on those

moments, which they find problematic in this particular situation. Thus, focusing one particular aspect of the language, students always see it in interaction with all the other aspects.

### *The Level of Procedure*

*TA courses have a module structure, each module being a node of a semantic net of the subject.*

*Modules themselves can be planned and their acquisition can be evaluated. At the same time, connections between modules and within them and are built in a non-linear fashion which reflects the nature of language and learning as such.*

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In addition to the above contradictions, the TA brings us to the resolution of a number of other pertinent problems of language teaching. For instance, it allows us to make teaching mass and individual at the same time (Emphasis on Learner's Individuality), simultaneously put students into active and passive roles (Peer Teaching), present one and the same lesson as both student and teacher centered (Course Dynamics) and many others.

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### **Māstymo požiūris ī kalbos mokymā kaip pagrindiniū kalbos mokymo ir švietimo prieštaravimų sprendimo įrankis**

#### Santrauka

Vystantis kiekvienai sričiai kyla prieštaravimų, kurie yra pagrindinė vystymosi problema. Esminiai kalbos mokymo prieštaravimai formuluojami trijuose lygiuose: požiūrio, metodo ir procedūros. Kadangi kalbos mokymas yra švietimo dalis, reikia atsižvelgti į švietimo problemas. Pagrindiniai prieštaravimai švietimo sistemoje kyla dėl būtinumo perteikti studentams vertingas žinias ir šių žinių nuvertėjimo greičio. Paaiškėjo, kad bet koks naujas požiūris į kalbos mokymą žinių visuomenėje turi atsižvelgti į šiuos prieštaravimus. Māstymo požiūris į kalbos mokymā pateikiamas kaip galimas žingnis link kalbos mokymo ir švietimo prieštaravimų sprendimo.

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