



Topic 1: Evolution of Language Teaching Methodology. Current Trends in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language. Communicative Approaches

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1. Introduction

The history of language teaching methodology is inseparable from broader developments in linguistics, psychology, sociology, and educational theory. Each methodological shift reflects changing assumptions about what language is, how it is learned, and what purposes it should serve in society. In contemporary EFL education, the goals of schooling go beyond grammatical accuracy and extend to functional communication, intercultural understanding, and the ability to operate in multilingual, digitally mediated environments. For this reason, understanding the **evolution of methodologies** is not merely a historical exercise: it enables teachers to interpret current practices critically, select pedagogical options coherently, and justify them in relation to curriculum aims and learning evidence.

Within this panorama, **communicative approaches** occupy a central place. They have reshaped classroom priorities, promoted meaning-focused interaction, and broadened the concept of language competence to include pragmatic, sociolinguistic, and strategic dimensions. At the same time, present-day trends, such as task-based learning, integrated content-language teaching, plurilingual education, and technology-mediated instruction, demand that teachers reconcile innovation with principled decision-making, inclusivity, and assessment validity. This topic therefore provides a conceptual map for designing rigorous and motivating EFL teaching in secondary education.

2. Evolution of language teaching methodology

2.1 From structural traditions to early communicative orientations

A useful way to interpret methodological evolution is to view it as a sequence of responses to limitations detected in previous approaches. Early modern methodologies were strongly influenced by the prestige of classical languages and by a view of language as a stable system of forms. The **Grammar-Translation Method** exemplifies this orientation: language learning was equated with mastering grammatical rules and bilingual equivalences, and the classroom was dominated by explanation, written exercises, and translation. Its enduring legacy is visible in the continued usefulness of explicit rule awareness for literate learners, yet its main limitation lies in treating communicative use as secondary, which often results in learners who can analyse sentences but struggle to interact spontaneously.

The emergence of **Direct Method** principles in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted an early reaction. Oral skills, exposure to the target language, and inductive

grammar became priorities, based on the belief that second language learning should mimic first language acquisition. In practical classroom terms, this could mean presenting vocabulary through realia and teacher talk rather than translation, for instance introducing “container” words by pointing to classroom objects and eliciting meaning through questions and gestures. While these practices increased immediacy and listening input, they often assumed small groups, extensive teacher proficiency, and limited curricular pressure, conditions rarely met systematically in public education.

Mid-twentieth-century approaches were shaped by structural linguistics and behaviourist psychology, producing the **Audio-Lingual Method**. Language was conceptualised as patterns to be habitually formed through stimulus-response reinforcement. Drills, repetition, and substitution exercises sought to prevent errors and automate structures. A typical procedure involved modelling “If I were you, I would. . .” and then requiring rapid substitutions: “If I were you, I would study,” “If I were you, I would apologise,” and so on. Such practice can support pronunciation and fluency at micro-level, but research and classroom experience revealed that learners may perform well in drills without transferring these forms to authentic communication, because drills often lack genuine meaning negotiation and personal intention.

In Europe, a parallel structural orientation developed in the form of **situational language teaching**, where grammar and lexis were taught in contexts such as “at the shop” or “at the doctor.” This approach moved closer to communicative needs by embedding structures in situations, but the situations were frequently scripted and teacher-controlled. Its contribution lies in anticipating later interest in functional language use; its drawback is that “situations” do not automatically generate interaction unless learners must make choices, respond unpredictably, and pursue goals.

The shift towards communicative thinking accelerated when linguists and educators questioned the sufficiency of “structure” as the core of proficiency. Sociolinguistic insights emphasised that using language appropriately depends on context, roles, and intentions. This perspective made it increasingly difficult to justify methodologies that treated language primarily as isolated grammar and vocabulary.

2.2 Humanistic, cognitive, and interactionist turns

From the 1970s onwards, multiple currents converged to challenge purely structural, teacher-fronted instruction. One influential current was the humanistic movement in education, which foregrounded the learner's affective state, self-concept, and motivation. Approaches such as **Community Language Learning**, **Suggestopedia**, and **Total Physical Response** varied greatly, but they shared the conviction that anxiety and fear of error inhibit learning, and that supportive classroom climates can facilitate risk-taking. In an EFL classroom, the humanistic legacy can be seen when a teacher designs low-stakes speaking routines, for example short “pair rehearsals” before open-class reporting, so that learners can try out formulations and gain confidence. The methodological point is not to replace language objectives with comfort, but to acknowledge that affect is a condition for sustained engagement.

At the same time, cognitive psychology reframed learning as information processing rather than habit formation. This supported approaches that valued meaningful practice, noticing, and learner strategies. The distinction between **declarative knowledge** (knowing rules) and **procedural knowledge** (being able to use them) became pedagogically relevant. A teacher might, for instance, briefly clarify the form and meaning contrast between “used to” and “be used to,” then set up an information-gap task in which learners must discover classmates' past habits and current routines, prompting repeated communicative use that can proceduralise the distinction. The key methodological evolution here is that explicit instruction is not rejected, but integrated into meaning-oriented practice.

Interactionist theories, influenced by research on second language acquisition, provided a further push towards communication. The **Interaction Hypothesis** and the concept of **negotiation of meaning** suggested that comprehensible input becomes particularly beneficial when learners must resolve breakdowns, request clarification, and reformulate messages. Classroom practices aligned with this view include tasks where each learner holds different information and must collaborate to complete a goal. For example, in a “timetabling problem,” one student has the club schedule and another has the bus times; to plan a feasible afternoon, they must ask follow-up questions, confirm details, and rephrase constraints. Such interaction naturally elicits clarification requests (“Do you mean it starts at six or ends at six?”) that are less likely in teacher-led question-answer sequences.

Another influential development was the rise of **English for Specific Purposes (ESP)** and the functional-notional syllabus, which shifted focus from grammar sequences to communicative functions (requesting, apologising, suggesting) and notions (time, quantity, frequency). This

move acknowledged that learners need language to achieve purposes, not merely to display knowledge of forms. A classroom realisation could involve teaching the pragmatics of polite requests by comparing “Open the window” with “Could you possibly open the window?” and then embedding these choices into a role-play where social distance and power relations vary, such as student-to-student versus student-to-teacher interactions. The methodological implication is that appropriacy becomes teachable content, and correctness is reframed as including pragmatic correctness.

Nevertheless, the evolution is not a simple replacement narrative. Many contemporary classrooms blend explicit grammar work, controlled practice, and communicative use. The methodological challenge is to avoid eclecticism without principles. A principled approach recognises what each stage can offer and sequences them coherently in relation to goals, learner needs, and assessment.

3. Communicative approaches: foundations and classroom realisation

3.1 Communicative competence and principles of communicative pedagogy

Communicative approaches arose as an umbrella term for pedagogies that treat language primarily as a resource for creating meaning in social contexts. Their theoretical cornerstone is **communicative competence**, often associated with Hymes and later elaborations. Communicative competence extends beyond grammatical knowledge to include:

- **Grammatical competence**, referring to control of lexis, morphology, syntax, and phonology. In classroom terms, this includes accurate formation of tense, word order, and pronunciation features that affect intelligibility.
- **Sociolinguistic competence**, which concerns appropriacy to context, register, politeness, and cultural norms. For example, teaching complaint strategies involves not only vocabulary, but also mitigating devices (“I’m afraid there’s a problem with. . .”) and tone.
- **Discourse competence**, involving coherence and cohesion across utterances and texts. This becomes visible when students learn to structure an oral presentation with signposting (“First, I will outline. . .”) and cohesive devices (“however,” “as a result”).

- **Strategic competence**, the ability to compensate for breakdowns and gaps through paraphrase, asking for help, or using discourse strategies. A communicative classroom legitimises these strategies by valuing successful meaning-making over perfect form.

A further influential model is Canale and Swain's view, which emphasises the interdependence between these dimensions and the importance of strategic behaviour. In didactic practice, this supports teaching learners how to keep communication going, for instance by training them to use circumlocution ("It's a device you use to...") when they cannot recall a word.

From these theoretical foundations emerge widely accepted principles of **Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)**:

1. **Meaningful communication as both goal and means of learning.** Learners should use English to accomplish purposes, not only to practise structures. This is enacted when classroom talk includes genuine information exchange, such as "Find someone who..." tasks where answers are not predetermined and learners must listen attentively to discover differences.
2. **Priority of interaction and negotiation.** Interaction is not decorative; it is a learning engine. For example, during group problem-solving, a teacher can observe recurrent negotiation sequences and later conduct a brief focus-on-form episode, drawing attention to useful clarification expressions ("So, what you're saying is...").
3. **Tolerance of developmental errors and attention to intelligibility.** CLT does not ignore accuracy, but reframes errors as evidence of interlanguage development. A practical implication is that correction becomes selective: the teacher may intervene immediately when an error blocks meaning or fossilises a target form, but postpone correction during fluency work.
4. **Integration of skills and language components.** Real communication typically involves multiple skills. A communicative sequence can start with listening to a short interview, move to small-group discussion, and culminate in writing a brief opinion text, thereby linking comprehension, interaction, and production.
5. **Learner-centredness and autonomy.** Learners are positioned as agents who make choices, evaluate progress, and use strategies. For example, after completing a speaking task, learners can use a checklist to self-assess interactional moves (asking follow-up questions, building on others' ideas), which supports metacognitive awareness.

CLT has often been misinterpreted as "just speaking" or "no grammar." A more accurate characterisation is that CLT promotes **focus on meaning**, combined with **focus on form** when needed. Focus on form refers to brief pedagogic attention to linguistic features that arise incidentally.

tally during communication. For instance, if students repeatedly say “He go” during a debate, the teacher can interrupt momentarily to elicit the third person singular as a resource for clarity and precision, then return to the communicative activity. This is distinct from long grammar lectures detached from use.

Assessment is also transformed in CLT. If communication is the target, assessment must include performance tasks. An oral interaction rubric might value turn-taking, responsiveness, and discourse management alongside grammatical range. This alignment between objectives, teaching, and assessment is central to methodological coherence.

3.2 Task-Based Language Teaching and Content and Language Integrated Learning

Two prominent communicative implementations in contemporary EFL are **Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)** and **Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL)**. Both aim to ground language learning in purposeful activity, but they differ in organisational logic.

TBLT is rooted in the concept of the “task” as a meaning-focused activity with a clear outcome, where learners use language as a tool. A robust definition usually includes: primary focus on meaning, some kind of gap (information, reasoning, or opinion), reliance on learners’ own resources, and a non-linguistic outcome. In a secondary EFL classroom, a reasoning-gap task could involve choosing the best proposal for reducing school waste based on different constraints provided on separate cards. Learners must justify choices, compare options, and reach consensus, producing an outcome such as a short action plan. Language emerges as necessary for persuasion, agreement, and conditional reasoning, rather than as an end in itself.

A common TBLT cycle includes pre-task, task, and post-task phases. The **pre-task** stage can provide topic activation and planning support without over-teaching language. For example, the teacher might elicit key vocabulary for environmental actions, then model useful discussion frames (“I see your point, but...”). During the **task**, learners interact with minimal interruption, focusing on meaning. In the **post-task**, the class reflects on performance and attends to form, perhaps by analysing excerpts of student language (anonymised) to improve accuracy and sophistication. This sequencing responds to the tension between fluency and accuracy, and it operationalises the idea that form is best learned when it becomes communicatively relevant.

TBLT also raises important considerations: task complexity must be calibrated, and teachers need strategies to ensure participation equity. If one student dominates, the communicative

benefit becomes uneven. Techniques such as assigning rotating roles (facilitator, summariser, language monitor) can structure collaboration while preserving authentic interaction, provided these roles are explained as supports rather than rigid constraints.

CLIL integrates content learning with language learning. Its communicative rationale is that language develops through meaningful engagement with knowledge, and that content provides depth, cognitive challenge, and authentic purposes for communication. A CLIL-informed EFL teacher may incorporate subject-related themes and discourse practices, even outside bilingual programmes, by designing units around conceptual content (media literacy, basic economics, scientific thinking) and guiding learners to use English for explaining, hypothesising, and evaluating.

A widely used framework is the **4Cs** (Content, Communication, Cognition, Culture). In practice, this means that a lesson on climate change can target content understanding (greenhouse effect basics), communication objectives (explaining cause and effect with “as a result,” “therefore”), cognition (evaluating evidence or proposing solutions), and culture (comparing environmental policies or attitudes across contexts). Within such a lesson, an integrated writing task might require students to produce a short policy recommendation, using modal verbs for obligation and suggestion (“should,” “must,” “could”) with appropriate hedging. Here, language forms are not random: they are functional tools for disciplinary thinking.

CLIL’s methodological strengths include increased motivation and richer discourse, but it also poses risks: cognitive overload, superficial content treatment, or inequity if language demands are not scaffolded. Scaffolding techniques include visual organisers, sentence starters, structured note-taking, and staged output. For instance, before an oral explanation, learners may complete a cause-effect diagram, then rehearse using frames such as “The main cause is . . . , which leads to . . . ,” gradually moving from supported to freer production.

Both Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) and Content and Language Integrated Learning (CLIL) embody the progressive evolution of the communicative paradigm in language education. Communication, within this expanded framework, is no longer confined to informal, everyday exchanges or transactional dialogue. Rather, it encompasses the sophisticated use of language required for academic inquiry, civic participation, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the critical interpretation of information.

4. Current trends in EFL: evidence-informed innovation

4.1 Plurilingual, intercultural, and mediation-oriented teaching

Current EFL trends are increasingly shaped by European language policy and by the realities of multilingual classrooms. A central notion is **plurilingualism**, which differs from multilingualism as a societal fact. Plurilingualism refers to the individual's dynamic repertoire of languages and varieties, used flexibly according to context. This view challenges monolingual norms and encourages strategic use of learners' linguistic resources.

In practice, a plurilingual stance legitimises **translanguaging** as a pedagogical resource when it supports learning, while still maintaining substantial exposure to English. For example, during pre-reading, students may briefly discuss in pairs what they already know about a topic using their strongest language, then switch to English to share key ideas with the class, allowing cognitive engagement without reducing English use to minimal levels. The methodological principle is purposeful alternation, not uncontrolled switching.

A related trend is the emphasis on **intercultural communicative competence**. Communicative success involves understanding perspectives, managing cultural references, and avoiding simplistic stereotypes. Intercultural teaching moves beyond "facts about countries" and focuses on interpretive skills, attitudes, and critical awareness. A teacher might use a set of short authentic comments from an online forum about a cultural practice and ask learners to identify viewpoints, implicit assumptions, and polite ways to disagree. This develops pragmatic sensitivity and critical literacy, aligning communication with democratic citizenship.

The **CEFR Companion Volume** foregrounds **mediation** as a key activity: learners often act as intermediaries who interpret, summarise, and re-express meaning for others. Mediation is highly relevant to secondary education, where students regularly process information and present it in accessible forms. In EFL, a mediation task could involve reading a short article on digital wellbeing and then producing a spoken summary for a peer group, selecting key points, defining terms, and adapting the message to the audience. This requires comprehension, transformation, and interaction, and it naturally integrates skills.

Mediation also includes relational aspects, such as facilitating group understanding and managing collaboration. In a group project, a student may mediate by clarifying a peer's idea ("What she means is that...") or by resolving disagreement through reframing. Teaching these moves explicitly through discourse frames and reflective feedback supports not only language development but also classroom coexistence and inclusive participation.

Another trend concerns **pronunciation and intelligibility** in a global English context. The traditional goal of native-like accent has been questioned in favour of intelligibility, comprehensibility, and pragmatic effectiveness, especially given English as a lingua franca. Pedagogically, this can translate into prioritising features that most affect understanding, such as word stress, sentence stress, and certain consonant contrasts, rather than spending excessive time on low-impact accent features. A teacher might run short “stress and meaning” activities where students compare “I didn’t say he stole the money” with different stress patterns to observe pragmatic implications, linking pronunciation to communicative intent.

Overall, these trends reframe the communicative classroom as a space where learners use English to navigate complex meaning-making across languages, cultures, and modalities, while developing ethical and critical capacities.

4.2 Digital, multimodal, and AI-enhanced language learning

Digitalisation has expanded what counts as “communication” and what counts as “text.” Learners now interact through multimodal genres combining written language, audio, images, hyperlinks, and algorithmic feeds. Consequently, EFL teaching increasingly targets **multiliteracies**, including the ability to interpret and produce multimodal texts, evaluate sources, and manage online interaction.

A practical implication is that writing instruction can incorporate authentic digital genres. For instance, learners might analyse the language of short product reviews to identify hedging, evaluative adjectives, and politeness strategies, then produce their own reviews under constraints such as word limits and audience expectations. This is communicative because it assumes a real social purpose: influencing and informing others.

Technology also supports **blended learning** and differentiated instruction. Learning platforms can distribute input, enable repeated listening, and provide low-stakes practice. However, a methodology aligned with communicative goals avoids reducing technology to decontextualised drills. For example, students may record short spoken reflections on a topic, exchange peer feedback using a rubric focused on message clarity and interactional features, and then re-record improved versions. This cycle uses technology to increase opportunities for meaningful output and reflection.

The rise of **AI tools** has introduced new possibilities and new responsibilities. AI can support brainstorming, drafting, and language feedback, but it can also undermine authenticity and create dependency. An evidence-informed approach treats AI as a scaffold for learning processes,

not as a substitute for them. In classroom practice, a teacher can require students to document how they used AI, evaluate AI-generated suggestions critically, and justify final choices. For instance, when revising a formal email, learners might compare their draft with an AI-proposed version, identify differences in register and politeness, and explain which changes they accept and why. This maintains learner agency, develops metalinguistic awareness, and aligns with ethical digital citizenship.

Digital communication also makes **interactional competence** more complex. Turn-taking, clarity, and politeness operate differently in asynchronous forums or chat-based collaboration. A communicative syllabus can therefore include explicit instruction on online discourse: how to signal agreement without being abrupt, how to disagree constructively, and how to reference others' contributions. In a moderated classroom forum discussion, learners may be assessed on their ability to build on peers' ideas ("I'd like to add to what X said...") and to ask genuine questions, not merely on grammatical correctness.

Finally, technology enables increased exposure to **authentic input**, but authenticity alone does not guarantee learning. The teacher's role becomes curatorial and pedagogical: selecting materials with appropriate linguistic load, designing tasks that require active processing, and guiding learners to notice language patterns. A short video clip can be turned into a communicative lesson by asking learners to infer speakers' intentions, identify stance markers ("actually," "to be honest"), and then use those markers in a role-play requiring similar pragmatic effects.

In summary, current trends emphasise the expansion of communicative competence into digital, multimodal, and ethically charged communicative spaces, while insisting that innovation must be aligned with pedagogy and assessment.

5. Didactic implications in the Spanish secondary education context

In Spain, EFL methodology must be justified within a competence-based curriculum and aligned with the legal framework shaped by **Organic Law 3/2020** (LOMLOE) and the national regulations for secondary education: **Royal Decree 217/2022** (Compulsory Secondary Education) and **Royal Decree 243/2022** (Baccalaureate). These texts foreground key competences, inclusive education, and methodologies that promote active learning, critical thinking, and meaningful communication. Consequently, the evolution towards communicative approaches is not optional fashion; it is consistent with the curriculum's emphasis on learners' ability to use languages for social participation, academic development, and lifelong learning.

From a planning perspective, communicative methodology supports a coherent alignment between **competence-based objectives**, **learning situations**, and **assessment criteria**. Rather than organising teaching exclusively around grammar units, teachers can design sequences around communicative purposes and text types, ensuring that linguistic content is selected because it enables performance. For example, a learning situation centred on “participating in a school debate about mobile phone use” naturally integrates argument structure, modal verbs for obligation and recommendation, discourse markers for contrast, and interactional skills such as turn management. This type of design facilitates explicit links between classroom activities and competence descriptors, which is essential in official programming and evaluation.

In methodological terms, the Spanish secondary context requires balancing communicative interaction with systematic progression. Large classes, limited contact hours, and heterogeneous proficiency levels make it necessary to incorporate **scaffolding** and **differentiation**. Communicative approaches can address heterogeneity through task design that allows multiple entry points. For instance, in a jigsaw reading, each group receives a text with tiered support: a more challenging version with fewer glosses, and a more supported version with key vocabulary and guiding questions. All learners contribute to a shared outcome, but the cognitive and linguistic load is adjusted to ensure participation. This reflects inclusive principles while maintaining communicative authenticity.

Assessment must also reflect communicative goals and comply with the demand for continuous, formative evaluation. Teachers can operationalise communicative competence through performance-based instruments such as analytic rubrics for interaction, mediation, and writing. A rubric might include descriptors for clarity of message, coherence, appropriacy of regis-

ter, range and accuracy, and collaborative behaviours. Importantly, communicative assessment should include **formative feedback loops**, where students use feedback to revise and improve. For example, after a group oral presentation, learners can receive targeted feedback on discourse organisation and pronunciation features affecting intelligibility, then re-present a shorter version incorporating improvements. This approach supports learning as progression, not as one-off grading.

The curriculum's emphasis on inclusion implies that communicative classrooms must be accessible to learners with diverse needs. Universal Design for Learning principles can be integrated into communicative methodology by offering multiple ways of accessing input and producing output. For example, a mediation task can allow students to summarise information orally, in writing, or via a structured infographic with key phrases in English, as long as the communicative objective is maintained. Similarly, interaction tasks can be structured to reduce anxiety and promote equitable participation, using predictable routines, clear success criteria, and supportive language frames.

Current trends such as plurilingualism and mediation are particularly relevant in Spain's multilingual reality. Communicative pedagogy can incorporate respectful use of learners' linguistic repertoires while ensuring that English remains central. Strategic comparisons between English and other known languages can support noticing and reduce misconceptions, for instance when clarifying false friends or pragmatic conventions. This is not a return to grammar-translation as a dominant method, but a modern, purposeful use of cross-linguistic resources consistent with a plurilingual approach.

Digital competence, also central in the current educational framework, intersects with communicative EFL through multimodal tasks and responsible technology use. Teachers can design learning situations where students evaluate online sources, participate in moderated digital discussions, and produce multimodal texts, while explicitly teaching ethical behaviour, citation practices, and privacy awareness. The emergence of AI reinforces the need to teach critical evaluation and authorship. A coherent policy at classroom level may require process evidence, drafts, and reflective statements explaining how digital tools were used to improve language. This protects academic integrity while embracing innovation as part of communicative literacy.

Finally, teacher professionalism in this context involves adopting an evidence-informed stance. Communicative approaches are most effective when they are not implemented as a rigid dogma, but as a principled set of practices adapted to constraints. In Spanish secondary education, a realistic synthesis often includes planned attention to form, systematic vocabulary teaching,

extensive reading and listening, and rich interaction. The key is to ensure that these components are integrated around communicative purposes and competence development, thereby meeting curricular expectations and supporting learners' long-term communicative autonomy.

6. Conclusion

The evolution of language teaching methodology reveals a gradual expansion from form-centred instruction towards approaches that treat language as social action. Structural and habit-based traditions contributed valuable tools for accuracy and controlled practice, yet they proved insufficient to develop flexible, context-sensitive communication. Humanistic, cognitive, and interactionist perspectives strengthened the case for meaningful engagement, learner agency, and negotiation of meaning as drivers of acquisition. Communicative approaches consolidated these insights through the concept of communicative competence and through classroom principles that integrate skills, prioritise purposeful interaction, and link attention to form with communicative need. Contemporary developments, including TBLT, CLIL-informed practices, plurilingual and mediation-oriented teaching, and digitally mediated communication, further broaden the scope of what it means to be competent in English today. In the Spanish secondary education context, these methodological orientations align with competence-based curricular demands and require coherent planning, inclusive scaffolding, and valid assessment. Ultimately, methodological knowledge enables teachers to make principled decisions that connect theory, classroom realities, and educational aims in order to foster effective, ethical, and lasting communicative development.

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