



THE COGNITIVE APPROACH IN LANGUAGE TEACHING: INTERPRETATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

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Abstract

The article examines different interpretations of the cognitive approach in foreign language teaching. Four main interpretations are identified and analyzed: cognitive approach as conscious language learning, as application of cognitive linguistics, as integration of cognitive mechanisms at all learning stages, and as communicative-cognitive methods in modern textbooks. The study reveals inconsistencies between theoretical foundations and practical implementation, highlighting the need for clearer methodological frameworks.

Keywords: cognitive approach, foreign language teaching, cognitive linguistics, language acquisition, methodology, conscious learning.

Introduction

In modern language pedagogy, the cognitive approach holds a significant place, as it is believed to help learners develop a systematic understanding of language and facilitate successful acquisition of vocabulary and grammar. Many textbooks combine it with the communicative approach, making it particularly relevant. However, upon closer examination, it becomes clear that the term “cognitive approach” is interpreted differently by various scholars, leading to difficulties in its precise definition. The aim of this study is to analyze different interpretations of the cognitive approach in language teaching methodology and assess how well they align with the term’s original meaning. The analysis is based on works by domestic and foreign scholars in cognitive linguistics and language teaching methodology.

One of the most common interpretations equates the cognitive approach with conscious language learning. Within this view, the approach is contrasted with intuitive language acquisition and emphasizes the deliberate study of linguistic units, which is characteristic of the grammar-translation method [1, 2]. However, this



interpretation raises questions: if the cognitive approach simply means conscious learning, how does it differ from traditional methods used as far back as the Middle Ages? Moreover, the term “cognitive” is not synonymous with “conscious,” as cognitive processes can also occur subconsciously, which suggests that equating the two may oversimplify the nature of language acquisition.

A second interpretation links the cognitive approach to advances in cognitive linguistics, which views language as part of broader cognitive processes [3, 4]. In this framework, teaching focuses on raising awareness of the mental mechanisms underlying language, such as conceptual models, prototypes, and cognitive metaphors. This approach is primarily used when introducing new material and often involves visual aids like diagrams and schematics to explain linguistic phenomena [5]. However, cognitive linguistics itself remains a contested field. Some researchers criticize it for lacking a solid scientific foundation, arguing that it does not always rely on findings from cognitive psychology and neuroscience [7, 8]. Additionally, the proposed cognitive models sometimes appear overly complex and artificial, casting doubt on their practical applicability in the classroom.

A third interpretation suggests using cognitive principles not only when presenting material but also during its practice and application. Theoretically, this approach should incorporate insights from cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics, including memory mechanisms, categorization, and conceptualization [10]. Yet implementing such principles in practice proves challenging, as cognitive science has yet to provide clear and actionable teaching methodologies specifically designed for this purpose. While the idea of integrating cognitive mechanisms across all stages of learning is theoretically sound, its realization remains largely underdeveloped in mainstream language teaching materials.

A fourth understanding of the cognitive approach can be found in popular teaching materials, where it is often reduced to developing learners’ analytical and creative skills. For example, tasks may involve independent analysis of grammatical structures or identifying linguistic patterns [6]. However, such exercises can only loosely be called “cognitive”, as they are not necessarily linked to deep cognitive mechanisms but rather resemble traditional inductive learning methods. This interpretation, while widely used in contemporary textbooks, often lacks a clear connection to the theoretical foundations of cognitive science.



The analysis reveals that the term “cognitive approach” is used in language teaching methodology with different meanings, often leading to confusion. In some cases, it is equated with conscious grammar study; in others, it refers to the application of cognitive linguistics theories; and in yet others, it simply denotes the development of logical thinking in learners. This polysemy must be taken into account when analyzing scholarly works and teaching materials. Furthermore, there is often a noticeable gap between the theoretical justification of the approach and its practical implementation, which diminishes its overall effectiveness [9]. The discrepancies identified in this study highlight the need for clearer methodological frameworks that would allow the cognitive approach to be applied more consistently and productively in language teaching practice.

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