# Understanding Key Terms in Language Teaching: A Guide to Avoid Common Confusions

فهم المصطلحات الأساسية في تدريس اللغة: دليل لتجنب الالتباسات الشائعة

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**الملخص:**

لقد تسبب الغموض المستمر للمصطلحات الأساسية في مجال تعليم اللغة في قدر كبير من الارتباك بين بعض المعلمين والطلاب والباحثين. تُستخدم بعض هذه المصطلحات بشكل متبادل في كثير من الأحيان، على الرغم من أن لها معاني وتداعيات مختلفة. تهدف هذه المقالة إلى توضيح التمييز بين المصطلحات التي غالبًا ما يتم الخلط بينها، وهي النهج والطريقة، والتقنية والاستراتيجية، والمهمة والتمرين. و تهدف هذه المقالة  إلى معالجة المفهوم الخاطئ الشائع لهذه المصطلحات وتقديم الإرشادات اللازمة لاستخدامها بدقة. فهي تحددها، وتقارن بين معانيها، وتوضح تطبيقاتها العملية ضمن السياقات التعليمية. ومن خلال هذا الإطار التحليلي، تسعى المقالة إلى تحسين فهم أكثر صرامة لهذه المصطلحات وتعزيز استخدامها الدقيق. ويساهم هذا في تسهيل اتخاذ القرارات التربوية المستنيرة وتعزيز التواصل العلمي الأكثر فعالية في تعليم اللغة

# Understanding Key Terms in Language Teaching: A Guide to Avoid Common Confusions

**Abstract**

The ongoing ambiguity of fundamental terms in the field of language education has caused a great deal of confusion among some educators, students and researchers. Some of these terms are frequently used interchangeably, although they have distinct meanings and implications. This article aims to clarify the distinction between often confused terms, namely approach and method, technique and strategy, and task and exercise.

It intends to address the common misconception of these terms and provide guidance for their accurate use. It defines them, compares and contrasts their meanings, and clarifies their practical applications within instructional contexts. Through this analytical framework, the article seeks to improve a more rigorous understanding of these terms and promote their accurate use. This contributes to facilitating informed pedagogical decision-making and fostering more effective scholarly communication in language education.

**Keywords:** approach, method, technique, strategy, task, exercise

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The accurate use of terms related to the field of language education is essential for understanding the philosophy and practice of teaching and learning languages. It is also fundamental for the advancement of teaching and research practices in this field. For example, the distinction between the terms approach and method is crucial to understanding the concept and implementation of language teaching in various educational contexts (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). However, it has been observed that many students and some educators and researchers use these terms interchangeably. This may form conceptual misunderstanding and inconsistencies in language teaching and research practices. Hence, this article focuses on six key terms that are frequently misunderstood in the field of language education: approach, method, technique, strategy, task, and exercise. Firstly, it provides comprehensive definitions of these terms. It then proceeds to differentiate their meaning and explains the crucial distinction between them. Finally, it gives examples clarifying their roles in language teaching and learning.

These six terms were selected due to their central role in language education, and their conceptual overlap which leads to frequent misuse in literature and instructional context. This emphasizes the need for more clarification to the concepts of these terms. Based on a thorough review and analysis of the most influential publication of scholars in language education (e.g., Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Nunan, 2004), this article adopts a conceptual approach to define each term, describe and analyze their distinguishing features and illustrate their practical application. Through the processes of definition, comparison, and exemplification, this article aims to

promote conceptual clarity and rigorous use of these terms in both teaching and research practices.

## 2.  APPROACH AND METHOD

The terms approach and method are often misunderstood in the academic and professional settings, and this leads to confusion and inconsistencies in language teaching and research practices. A deep understanding of these terms is essential for students, educators, and researchers to engage effectively with and in the field of  language education. The following sections define these terms, distinguish between them, and  explore their practical implications through relevant examples.

### 2.1. Definitions of Approach and Method

In language education, the term approach has been defined by several scholars, and all these definitions indicate that an approach introduces the theoretical base of the nature of language, language learning and language teaching. Brown (2000:16) states that an approach describes "theoretically well-informed positions and beliefs about the nature of language, the nature of language learning, and the applicability of both to pedagogical settings." Richards and Rodgers' (2001:20) point out that an approach refers to "theories about the nature of language and language learning that serve as the source of practices and principles in language teaching." Harmer (2001:78) also maintains that "an approach describes how people acquire their knowledge of the language and make statements about the conditions which will promote successful language learning." These definitions suggest that an approach represents the philosophical base and theoretical framework that shape the nature of language and the ways in which language learned and taught in classroom. Overall, the theoretical perspectives of an approach shape the teaching practice, but they do not specify the techniques and the strategies utilized by educators and students to facilitate students' language learning.

On the other hand, a method describes specific procedures that a teacher follows to teach a language. It is "a set of derived procedures for teaching a language …" (Richards & Rodgers, 2001:19). It is "a way of teaching a language which is based on systematic principles and procedures i.e. which is an application of views on how a language is best taught and learned and

a particular theory of language and of language learning" (Richards & Schmidt, 2010: 363). It is "the practical realization of an approach" Harmer (2001:19). These definitions suggest that a method refers to the procedures followed by a teacher to teach a language, and these procedures are based on theoretical framework represented by an approach. In other words, a method introduces the ways of putting the principles of an approach into practice. It usually explains the roles of the teachers and learners, clarifies the types of activities to be implemented in the classroom, and describes the kind of material to be used in the classroom (Harmer, 2001; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Briefly, a method is the systematic application of the teaching principles derived from an approach. It usually addresses these questions: what are the roles of teachers and students in the learning process? What types of activities should be used? What are the helpful materials used in the classroom?

## 2.2. Distinctions between Approach and Method with Examples

From the scholars' definitions of approach and method, it is clear that these terms have distinct scopes and functions within language education. The main distinction between them is that an approach is related to the beliefs, theories, and assumptions about language teaching and learning, while a method refers to the specific procedures, techniques and strategies utilized in the classroom to teach and learn a language (Harmer, 2001; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). An approach is rooted in theoretical perspectives regarding how language functions, how it is acquired, and how it can be taught effectively. It provides a framework for understanding the nature of language and language learning, influencing decisions on general instructional practices. In contrast, a method is more pragmatic and operational, focusing on how language is taught. It includes specific classroom activities, teaching techniques, and materials used to implement the principles outlined by an approach. It is influenced by the theoretical assumptions of an approach but is often adapted and modified to meet the needs of different students or educational contexts. An approach provides the theoretical foundation of language teaching, while a method translates these beliefs into concrete practice.

In practice, teachers who believe in the behaviorist principles of language acquisition, which emphasize habit formation through repetition and reinforcement, may use the audio-lingual method or the direct method (Ellis, 1994; Larsen-Freeman, 2000). These teachers use drills and repetitive practice as the means to build language habits (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Similarly, those who believe in the principles of constructivists to language acquisition need to adopt the communicative language teaching approach, grounded in the belief that language is best learned through meaningful interaction and communication (Littlewood, 2004). This approach emphasizes the use of language in context and prioritizes meaningful interaction and fluency over rote memorization of rules (Nunan, 1989; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). To implement these principles, teachers use communicative methods, such as task-based language teaching. This method uses tasks as the central unit of language instruction, allowing students to engage in authentic communication through practical, real-world activities (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Willis & Willis, 2007). However, with the emergence of eclecticism in language teaching, teachers adopt, combine or alter methods over time to meet the needs of their students, the teaching context, and the objectives of the lessons or the courses (Brown, 2007; Kumar, 2013).

The terms method and approach are often used interchangeably; therefore, it is important for educators and researchers to recognize the distinction between them. An approach provides the overarching theoretical framework that guides language teaching, while a method involves the specific practices and procedures used to implement the framework in the classroom. Understanding these distinctions assists educators to make informed decisions about the strategies and techniques they employ to enhance the effectiveness of language teaching. This understanding also helps researchers to enhance research in this field.

## 3. TECHNIQUE AND STRATEGY

After discussing the distinctions between the terms approach and method, the next logical terms to be addressed are technique and strategy. These terms are used to describe the procedures utilized to facilitate teaching and learning in the classroom. Technique and strategy play crucial roles in

language teaching and learning practices. However, they are often confused and used interchangeably. A deep understanding of the differences between them is essential for enhancing language teaching and learning practices and research. The following sections define these two terms, distinguish between them, and give practical examples and implications.

### 3.1. Definitions of Technique and Strategy

Techniques are specific classroom activities or tasks used by teachers to accomplish particular objectives within a particular method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Harmer, 2001; Brown, 2007). They serve to implement the teaching procedures informed by a method that corresponds with a theoretical framework represented by an approach. They can vary according to the method in use. Techniques can be simple drills and exercises or sophisticated communicative tasks, depending on the methods in practice. These activities can also vary according to the objectives of the lessons, students' needs and classroom environment. For example, a teacher may use repetition drill technique to apply the Audio-Lingual Method. This technique is designed to carry out the Audio-lingual Method which is consistent with behaviorist principles, and it is used to reinforce the correct use of grammatical structures and vocabulary through repetition and reinforcement (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Teachers also use role-plays, discussion, or problem-solving activities to apply the communicative language teaching principles, which focus on improving students' language competence through enhancing students interaction (Nunan, 1989). In short, techniques serve as practical applications of the method which reflects a specific approach.

On the other hand, a strategy refers to the cognitive plan that students and teachers use to achieve language learning goals. In the context of learning, strategies are defined as "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford, 1990:8). They are mental processes employed by students to enhance their language learning process and facilitate their language learning and use (Rubin, 1987; Nunan, 2004). They are used by the learners to overcome challenges and accomplish specific learning objectives (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley &

Chamot, 1990). Strategies are categorized into cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective (O'Malley et al., 1985). Cognitive strategies involve direct manipulation of language, such as memorization, translation and note-taking, while metacognitive strategies involve planning, monitoring, and evaluation of one's learning, such as setting goals and assessing progress. However, socio-affective strategies involve engaging with others through collaborative efforts, such as cooperation and asking questions for clarification. For example, students may use a cognitive strategy (e.g. memorization) to memorize a list of vocabulary to improve their lexical knowledge, a metacognitive strategy (e.g. self-monitoring) to track their progress while reading in the target language, or a socio-affective strategy (e.g. question for clarification) to ask their teacher for repetition or more explanation. In contrast, teaching strategies are the structured plans that teachers develop to facilitate and ensure effective teaching and learning. They may include the teaching methods and techniques that teachers employ to engage their students and promote their learning outcomes (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). For instance, teachers may use communicative strategies, such as collaborative problem-solving, where students work together to develop both linguistic skills and social interaction strategies (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). Ultimately, effective teaching strategies present language content in accessible ways and create engaging, supportive learning environments.

### 3.2. Distinctions between Technique and Strategy with Examples

The distinction between technique and strategy lies in their focus and application. Techniques are narrower and more specific than strategies as they are used by teachers within a particular method to achieve specific teaching objectives, while strategies are mental processes and plans employed by students or teachers to enhance the learning process (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Furthermore, techniques are observable, as they involve concrete actions, such as guiding students through exercises and prompting them to produce language. On the other hand, strategies are invisible, as they refer to mental processes or decisions made by students or teachers to optimize the students learning process. While both are integral to the language learning process, understanding the distinction between them is

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crucial for students, teachers, and researchers to enhance the processes of language learning and teaching.

In practice, a teacher can use a problem-solving task as a technique in TBLT classroom (e.g., planning a visit to a historical place). This task involves students to work together to complete this assignment using the target language. Another example of techniques is that teachers who apply direct method can use the question-and-answer drill technique, where students respond to questions in the target language without translation. On the other hand, an example of strategies is that students can use socio-affective strategies, such as discussing ideas with peers to increase comprehension and retain vocabulary. Another example is that students can use cognitive strategies like drawing mind maps to help them organize and remember information. They can also use contextual guessing strategy to figure out the meaning of unknown words, drawing on the surrounding context to understand the meaning of new vocabulary.

While both techniques and strategies are integral to language learning process, understanding their distinctions is essential for educators and researchers. Techniques are the specific activities used in the classroom to implement broader methods, whereas strategies are the mental processes and plans that students and teachers employ to guide the language learning journey. By recognizing the unique roles of these two concepts, teachers can be in a better position to design their instructional practices, and learners can develop a more conscious and effective approach to their own language learning.

## 4. TASK AND EXERCISE

After discussing the distinction between technique and strategy, it is important to explore the differences between task and exercise in language instruction. These terms describe activities that engage students in practicing and learning a language. Understanding the differences between these concepts is fundamental for teachers and researchers who are engaging in and with the language education field. The following sections define and differentiate between these two terms as well as giving examples about them.

### 4.1. Definitions of Task and Exercise

The concept of a task in language teaching is presented in various ways, and all of them indicate that a task is an activity that requires students to use language to achieve a specific, real-world goal. For instance, Willis (1996) focuses on the communicative nature of the task. She defines it as "an activity in which the target language is used by the learner for a communicative   purpose in order to achieve an outcome" (p. 23). Additionally, Ellis (2003) emphasizes the cognitive processes involved in completing a task, underscoring the importance of meaning focused interaction. He articulates that a task is "a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an objective" (p. 16). He elaborates that a task is an activity in which learners use the target language to achieve a specific communicative goal, such as solving problem, making decisions, or completing a project. Nunan (2004) also stresses the role of language processing and comprehension as central components of a task. He clarifies that a task is "an activity or action which carried out as the result of processing or understanding language" (p. 4). From these definitions, it is evident that tasks, in the context of TBLT, are the core of language learning, as they engage students in real-world communicative activities, ranged from simple everyday activities to more complex problem-solving activities. They engage students in authentic communication without a focus on the correctness of their language use. Their main aim is to engage students in practicing language in real contexts to promote their communicative competence.

In contrast, an exercise is a more structured activity that focuses on practicing specific language forms, such as grammar, vocabulary, or pronunciation. Richards and Schmidt (2010: 208) define it as "an activity that is designed to practise a learning item." Ellis (2003) also states that an exercise is utilized to focus on form and accuracy. These definitions clarify that exercises are mainly designed and utilized to assist students to internalize specific linguistic forms through repetition and practice. They are useful for students to reinforce specific linguistic features, and give them the opportunities to practise particular linguistic elements of a language in isolation, such as grammatical rules, sentence structure, or lexical items

(Ellis, 2003). They usually involve mechanical practice, such as fill-in-the-blank activities, transformation drills, or sentence completion exercises.

## 4.2. Distinctions between Task and Exercise with Examples

The primary distinction between tasks and exercises is grounded in their objectives, focus and scope. Tasks prioritize the use of language in context, fostering communicative competence, while exercises aim to reinforce language structures and accuracy (Ellis, 2003). Tasks are typically more communicative, emphasizing the use of language to a achieve meaningful outcome, whereas exercises are more focused on the practice and reinforcement of specific language forms, aiming to develop accuracy in language use. Tasks are more open-ended and dynamic, requiring learners to produce language that is flexible and adaptable to different context. They may involve students working together, negotiating meaning and engaging in problem-solving activities that reflect real-world language use (Nunan, 2004). In contrast, exercises are more controlled activities, limiting opportunities for students to use language creatively. Moreover, tasks are integrated into communicative teaching methods, such as TBLT, which aims to promote fluency and interaction. Exercises, however, are frequently associated with more traditional, form-focused methods that emphasize grammar instruction and the systematic practice of language forms (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Overall, the main criteria for a task are focusing on meaning, having some kind of gap, giving the opportunities for students to use their own linguistic and nonlinguistic features, and having a defined outcome. On the other hand, the main criteria for an exercise are focusing on the use of language correctly and accurately, and giving the students some linguistic features of the language to manipulate them in some ways (e.g. substitution exercises).

In practice, a teacher can assign a task such as having students work in pairs to plan a trip abroad, during which they need to negotiate their preferences, make decisions about destinations, and discuss travel arrangements in the target language. This task involves communicative interaction, requires learners to use language in context to achieve a shared goal. On the other hand, an exercise involves students completing a worksheet that focuses on the use of the simple past tense. For example,

students complete sentences with the past simple form of the verbs in brackets. Such exercises allow students to focus on accuracy and practice a specific language form, but they do not necessarily involve meaningful communication or real-world scenarios. Both tasks and exercises play important roles in language teaching and learning. Tasks promote communicative competence and fluency, while exercises help learners solidify their understanding of language forms and structures.

Although, the terms, task and exercise, are often used interchangeably in everyday language teaching discourse, they serve distinct purposes within the language teaching framework. A task is a broader, meaningful activity designed to engage learners in real-world communication and problem-solving, while an exercise is more focused, form-based activity intended to reinforce specific linguistic structures. Recognizing the differences between these two concepts allows educators to design lessons that effectively balance fluency development with accuracy practice, ensuring that learners develop both communicative and linguistic precision.

Understanding the distinctions between these terms: approach, method, technique, strategy, task, and exercise is essential for both theoretical insights into teaching and learning and effective classroom practice. This understanding provides teachers with a clear framework for selecting appropriate approaches, teaching methods, strategies and techniques that suit their teaching objectives. It also supports the design of effective lessons that integrate both communicative tasks and form-focused exercises. In curriculum planning, understanding these distinctions is essential for developing comprehensive programs that address all language skills (speaking, listening, reading, and writing) through both real-world communicative tasks and focused language exercises. It helps in creating a curriculum that ensures learners development of both communicative competence and linguistic precision. The distinctions between these terms are also crucial for research studies in language education, especially those related to teaching approaches, methods, techniques, or others. These studies can provide more insights into how different instructional practices influence language learning outcomes. Additionally, understanding the distinctions between these terms enables researchers to draw more accurate

conclusions about effective teaching and learning strategies. Ultimately, these distinctions contribute to the overall quality of language instruction by giving educators, curriculum developers, and researchers a more precise language to communicate more effectively and make more informed decisions about language teaching and learning.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This article endeavors to examine several key terms in language teaching that are often used interchangeably or confused due to their overlapping roles. These terms are method, approach, technique, strategy, task, and exercise. While these terms are interconnected, each one plays a unique role in shaping language teaching and learning. Understanding the distinction between them is crucial for learners, teachers, and researchers as it allows for more precise communication and more effective instructional planning, and precise research. The primary insights of this article are that methods and approaches define the broad framework within which teaching takes place, while techniques and strategies are the specific tools and actions used by teachers and learners to implement those frameworks. Tasks and exercises, on the other hand, are the practical components of a lesson: tasks focus on real-world application of language and exercises focus on accuracy and practice. Understanding and applying these terms appropriately, educators can foster both the effectiveness of teaching and the quality of learning. This understanding also assists researchers to ensure their research studies are original and valuable.

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