The Audio-Lingual Method

Introduction
The Audio-Lingual Method, like the Direct Method we have just examined, is also an oral-based approach. However, it is very different, in that rather than emphasizing vocabulary acquisition through exposure to its use in situations, the Audio-Lingual Method drills students in the use of grammatical sentence patterns. Also, unlike the Direct Method, it has a strong theoretical base in linguistics and psychology. Charles Fries (1945) of the University of Michigan led the way in applying principles from structural linguistics in developing the method, and for this reason, it has sometimes been referred to as the ‘Michigan Method.’ Later in its development, principles from behavioral psychology (Skinner 1957) were incorporated. It was thought that the way to acquire the sentence patterns of the target language was through conditioning—helping learners to respond correctly to stimuli through shaping and reinforcement, so that the learners could overcome the habits of their native language and form the new habits required to be target language speakers.

In order to come to an understanding of this method, let us now enter a classroom where the Audio-Lingual Method is being used. We will sit in on a beginning-level English class in Mali. There are 34 students, 13–15 years of age. The class meets for one hour a day, five days a week.
Experience
As we enter the classroom, the first thing we notice is that the students are attentively listening as the teacher is presenting a new dialogue, a conversation between two people. The students know they will be expected eventually to memorize the dialogue the teacher is introducing. All of the teacher’s instructions are in English. Sometimes she uses actions to convey meaning, but not one word of the students’ native language is uttered. After she acts out the dialogue, she says:

‘All right, class. I am going to repeat the dialogue now. Listen carefully, but no talking please.

Two people are walking along a sidewalk in town. They know each other, and as they meet, they stop to talk. One of them is named Sally and the other one is named Bill. I will talk for Sally and for Bill. Listen to their conversation:

SALLY: Good morning, Bill.
BILL: Good morning, Sally.
SALLY: How are you?
BILL: Fine, thanks. And you?
SALLY: Fine. Where are you going?
BILL: I’m going to the post office.
SALLY: I am, too. Shall we go together?
BILL: Sure. Let’s go.

Listen one more time. This time try to understand all that I am saying.’

Now she has the whole class repeat each of the lines of the dialogue after her model. They repeat each line several times before moving on to the next line. When the class comes to the line, ‘I’m going to the post office,’ they stumble a bit in their repetition. The teacher, at this point, stops the repetition and uses a backward build-up drill (expansion drill). The purpose of this drill is to break down the troublesome sentence into smaller parts. The teacher starts with the end of the sentence and has the class repeat just the last two words. Since they can do this, the teacher adds a few more words, and the class repeats this expanded phrase. Little by little the teacher builds up the phrases until the entire sentence is being repeated.

TEACHER: Repeat after me: post office.
CLASS: Post office.
TEACHER: To the post office.
Through this step-by-step procedure, the teacher is able to give the students help in producing the troublesome line. Having worked on the line in small pieces, the students are also able to take note of where each word or phrase begins and ends in the sentence.

After the students have repeated the dialogue several times, the teacher gives them a chance to adopt the role of Bill while she says Sally’s lines. Before the class actually says each line, the teacher models it. In effect, the class is experiencing a repetition drill where the students have to listen carefully and attempt to mimic the teacher’s model as accurately as possible.

Next, the class and the teacher switch roles in order to practice a little more: The teacher says Bill’s lines and the class says Sally’s. Then the teacher divides the class in half so that each half on their own gets to try to say either Bill’s or Sally’s lines. The teacher stops the students from time to time when she feels they are straying too far from the model, and once again provides a model, which she has them attempt to copy. To further practice the lines of this dialogue, the teacher has all the boys in the class take Bill’s part and all the girls take Sally’s.

She then initiates a chain drill with four of the lines from the dialogue. A chain drill gives students an opportunity to say the lines individually. The teacher listens and can tell which students are struggling and will need more practice. A chain drill also lets students use the expressions in communication with someone else, even though the communication is very limited. The teacher addresses the student nearest her with, ‘Good morning, Adama.’ He, in turn, responds, ‘Good morning, teacher.’ She says, ‘How are you?’ Adama answers, ‘Fine, thanks. And you?’ The teacher replies, ‘Fine.’ He understands through the teacher’s gestures that he is to turn to the student sitting beside him and greet her. That student, in turn, says her lines in reply to him. When she has finished, she greets the student on the other side of her. This chain continues until all of the students have a chance to ask and answer the questions. The last student directs the greeting to the teacher.

Finally, the teacher selects two students to perform the entire dialogue for the rest of the class. When they are finished, two others do the same. Not everyone has a chance to say the dialogue in a pair today, but perhaps they will sometime later in the week.
The teacher moves next to the second major phase of the lesson. She continues to drill the students with language from the dialogue, but these drills require more than simple repetition. The first drill the teacher leads is a single-slot substitution drill in which the students will repeat a sentence from the dialogue and replace a word or phrase in the sentence with the word or phrase the teacher gives them. This word or phrase is called the cue.

The teacher begins by reciting a line from the dialogue, ‘I am going to the post office.’ Following this she shows the students a picture of a bank and says the phrase, ‘the bank.’ She pauses, then says, ‘I am going to the bank.’

From her example the students realize that they are supposed to take the cue phrase (‘the bank’), which the teacher supplies, and put it into its proper place in the sentence.

Now she gives them their first cue phrase, ‘the drugstore.’ Together the students respond, ‘I am going to the drugstore.’ The teacher smiles. ‘Very good!’ she exclaims. The teacher cues, ‘the park.’ The students chorus, ‘I am going to the park.’

Other cues she offers in turn are ‘the café,’ ‘the supermarket,’ ‘the bus station,’ ‘the football field,’ and ‘the library.’ Each cue is accompanied by a picture as before. After the students have gone through the drill sequence three times, the teacher no longer provides a spoken cue phrase. Instead, she simply shows the pictures one at a time, and the students repeat the entire sentence, putting the name of the place in the picture in the appropriate slot in the sentence. A similar procedure is followed for another sentence in the dialogue, ‘How are you?’ The subject pronouns ‘he,’ ‘she,’ ‘they,’ and ‘you’ are used as cue words. This substitution drill is slightly more difficult for the students since they have to change the form of the verb ‘be’ to ‘is’ or ‘are,’ depending on which subject pronoun the teacher gives them. The students are apparently familiar with the subject pronouns since the teacher is not using any pictures. Instead, after going through the drill a few times supplying oral cues, the teacher points to a boy in the class and the students understand they are to use the pronoun ‘he’ in the sentence. They chorus, ‘How is he?’ ‘Good!’ says the teacher. She points to a girl and waits for the class’s response, then points to other students to elicit the use of ‘they.’
Finally, the teacher increases the complexity of the task by leading the students in a multiple-slot substitution drill. This is essentially the same type of drill as the single-slot the teacher has just used. However with this drill, students must recognize what part of speech the cue word is and where it fits into the sentence. The students still listen to only one cue from the teacher. Then they must make a decision concerning where the cue word or phrase belongs in a sentence also supplied by the teacher. The teacher in this class starts off by having the students repeat the original sentence from the dialogue, ‘I am going to the post office.’ Then she gives them the cue ‘she.’ The students understand and produce, ‘She is going to the post office.’ The next cue the teacher offers is ‘to the park.’ The students hesitate at first; then they respond by correctly producing, ‘She is going to the park.’ She continues in this manner, sometimes providing a subject pronoun, other times naming a location.

The substitution drills are followed by a transformation drill. This type of drill asks students to change one type of sentence into another—an affirmative sentence into a negative or an active sentence into a passive, for example. In this class, the teacher uses a substitution drill that requires the students to change a statement into a yes/no question. The teacher offers an example, ‘I say, “She is going to the post office.” You make a question by saying, “Is she going to the post office?”’

The teacher models two more examples of this transformation, then asks, ‘Does everyone understand? OK, let’s begin: “They are going to the bank.” The class replies in turn, ‘Are they going to the bank?’ They transform approximately fifteen of these patterns, and then the teacher decides they are ready to move on to a question-
and-answer drill.

The teacher holds up one of the pictures she used earlier, the picture of a football field, and asks the class, ‘Are you going to the football field?’ She answers her own question, ‘Yes, I’m going to the football field.’ She poses the next question while holding up a picture of a park, ‘Are you going to the park?’ And again answers herself, ‘Yes, I’m going to the park.’ She holds up a third picture, the one of a library. She poses a question to the class, ‘Are you going to the library?’ They respond together, ‘Yes, I am going to the library.’

‘Very good,’ the teacher says. Through her actions and examples, the students have learned that they are to answer the questions following the pattern she has modeled. The teacher drills them with this pattern for the next few minutes. Since the students can handle it, she poses the question to selected individuals rapidly, one after another. The students are expected to respond very quickly, without pausing.

The students are able to keep up the pace, so the teacher moves on to the next step. She again shows the class one of the pictures, a supermarket this time. She asks, ‘Are you going to the bus station?’ She answers her own question, ‘No, I am going to the supermarket.’

The students understand that they are required to look at the picture and listen to the question and answer negatively if the place in the question is not the same as what they see in the picture. ‘Are you going to the bus station? The teacher asks while holding up a picture of a café. ‘No, I am going to the café,’ the class answers.

‘Very good!’ exclaims the teacher. After posing a few more questions that require negative answers, the teacher produces the pictures of the post office and asks, ‘Are you going to the post office?’ The students hesitate a moment and then chorus, ‘Yes, I am going to the post office.’

‘Good,’ comments the teacher. She works a little longer on this question-and-answer drill, sometimes providing her students with situations that require a negative answer and sometimes giving encouragement to each student. She holds up pictures and poses questions one right after another, but the students seem to have no trouble keeping up with her. The only time she changes the rhythm is when a student seriously mispronounces a word. When this occurs she restates the word and works briefly with the student until his pronunciation is closer to her own.

For the final few minutes of the class, the teacher returns to the dialogue with which she began the lesson. She repeats it once, then has the half of the class to her left do Bill’s lines and the half of the class to her right do Sally’s. This time there is no hesitation at all. The students move through the dialogue briskly. They trade roles and do the same. The teacher smiles, ‘Very good. Class dismissed.’

The lesson ends for the day. Both the teacher and the students have worked hard. The students have listened to and spoken only English for the period. The teacher is
tired from all her action, but she is pleased for she feels the lesson went well. The students have learned the lines of the dialogue and to respond without hesitation to her cues in the drill pattern.

In lessons later in the week, the teacher will do the following:

1. Review the dialogue.
2. Expand upon the dialogue by adding a few more lines, such as ‘I am going to the post office. I need a few stamps.’
3. Drill the new lines and introduce some new vocabulary items through the new lines, for example:
   - I am going to the supermarket.  
   - I need a little butter.  
   - … library  
   - … few books.  
   - … drugstore  
   - … little medicine.
4. Work on the difference between mass and count nouns, contrasting ‘a little/a few’ with mass and count nouns respectively. No grammar rule will ever be given to the students. The students will be led to figure out the rules from their work with the examples the teacher provides.
5. A contrastive analysis (the comparison of two languages, in this case, the students’ native language and the target language, English) has led the teacher to expect that the students will have special trouble with the pronunciation of words such as ‘little,’ which contain /i/. The students do indeed say the word as if it contained /i:./. As a result, the teacher works on the contrast between /i/ and /i:/: several times during the week. She uses minimal pair words, such as ship/sheep, live/leave, and his/he’s to get her students to hear the difference in pronunciation between the words in each pair. Then, when she feels they are ready, she drills them in saying the two sounds—first, the sounds on their own, and later, the sounds in words, phrases, and sentences.
6. Sometime towards the end of the week, the teacher writes the dialogue on the blackboard. She asks the students to give her the lines and she writes them out as the students say them. They copy the dialogue into their notebooks. They also do some limited written work with the dialogue. In one exercise, the teacher has erased 15 selected words from the expanded dialogue. The students have to rewrite the dialogue in their notebooks, supplying the missing words without looking at the complete dialogue they copied earlier. In another exercise, the students are given sequences of words such as ‘I,’ ‘go,’ ‘supermarket’ and ‘he,’ ‘need,’ ‘butter,’ and they are asked to write complete sentences like the ones they have been drilling orally.
7. On Friday the teacher leads the class in the ‘supermarket alphabet game.’ The game starts with a student who needs a food item beginning with the letter ‘A.’ The
student says, ‘I am going to the supermarket. I need a few apples.’ The next student says, ‘I am going to the supermarket. He needs a few apples. I need a little bread’ (or ‘a few bananas,’ or any other food item you could find in the supermarket beginning with the letter ‘B’). The third student continues, ‘I am going to the supermarket. He needs a few apples. She needs a little bread. I need a little cheese.’ The game continues with each player adding an item that begins with the next letter in the alphabet. Before adding his or her own item, however, each player must mention the items of the previous students. If the student has difficulty thinking of an item, the other students or the teacher helps.

8 A presentation by the teacher on supermarkets in the United States follows the game. The teacher tries very hard to get meaning across in English. The teacher answers the students’ questions about the differences between supermarkets in the United States and open-air markets in Mali. They also discuss briefly the differences between American and Mali football. The students seem very interested in the discussion. The teacher promises to continue the discussion of popular American sports the following week.
**AUDIO LINGUAL METHOD**

**Reviewing the Principles**
At this point we should turn to the 10 questions we have answered for each method we have considered so far.

1. What are the goals of teachers who use the Audio-Lingual Method?
2. What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?
3. What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?
4. What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?
5. How are the feelings of the students dealt with?
6. How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?
7. What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?
8. What is the role of the students’ native language?
9. How is evaluation accomplished?
10. How does the teacher respond to student errors?

**Reviewing the Techniques**
Please explain all these techniques done in the Audio-Lingual Method

- Dialogue Memorization
- Backward Build-up (Expansion) Drill
- Repetition Drill
- Chain Drill
- Single-slot Substitution Drill
- Multiple-slot Substitution Drill
- Transformation Drill
- Question-and-answer Drill
- Use of Minimal Pairs
- Complete the Dialogue
- Grammar Game

**Check your understanding of the Audio-Lingual Method.**
1. Which of the techniques below follows from the principles of the Audio-Lingual Method, and which ones do not? Explain the reasons for your answer.

   a. The teacher asks beginning-level students to write a composition about the system of transportation in their home countries. If they need a vocabulary word that they do not know, they are told to look in a bilingual dictionary for a translation.

   b. Toward the end of the third week of the course, the teacher gives students a reading passage. The teacher asks the students to read the passage and to answer certain questions based upon
The passage contains words and structures introduced during the first three weeks of the course.

c The teacher tells the students that they must add an ‘s’ to third person singular verbs in the present tense in English. She then gives the students a list of verbs and asks them to change the verbs into the third person singular present tense form.

2 Some people believe that knowledge of a first and second language can be helpful to learners who are trying to learn a third language. What would an Audio-Lingual teacher say about this? Why?