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PERSPECTIVES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING.

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DESCRIPTORS- *AUDIOLINGUAL METHODS, *LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION, *TEACHING TECHNIQUES, *SPEECH SKILLS, *SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING, MODERN LANGUAGE CURRICULUM, INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS, COURSE OBJECTIVES, LANGUAGE TEACHERS, TEACHING METHODS, ORAL COMMUNICATION, AUDIOLINGUAL SKILLS, ARMY SPECIALIZED TRAINING PROGRAM,

DESPITE THE GENERAL ACCEPTANCE OF THE IDEA THAT LINGUISTIC BEHAVIOR AND COMMUNICATION ARE FIRST OF ALL SPOKEN, LANGUAGES ARE NOT ALWAYS TAUGHT ON THAT BASIS, AND CONFUSION STILL EXISTS ABOUT THE NATURE OF SPEECH AND WRITING. THE GRAMMAR-TRANSLATION METHOD WAS THE BASIC SYSTEM UNTIL WORLD WAR II, WHEN IT BECAME NECESSARY TO TRAIN MANY PEOPLE TO ACHIEVE ORAL FLUENCY. THE LINGUISTIC PRINCIPLES THAT FORMED THE BASIS OF THE ARMY SPECIALIZED TRAINING PROGRAM LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION (I.E., LANGUAGE IS SPEECH, LANGUAGE IS A SET OF HABITS, WE SHOULD TEACH THE LANGUAGE AND NOT ABOUT THE LANGUAGE, LANGUAGE IS WHAT NATIVE SPEAKERS SAY, AND LANGUAGES ARE DIFFERENT) HAVE BEEN DEVELOPED INTO AUDIOLINGUAL TEACHING SYSTEMS AND MATERIALS THAT EMPHASIZE THAT LANGUAGE MUST BE MASTERED BY IMITATION, VARIATION, AND SOME MEMORIZATION. DESPITE GREAT ADVANCES RECENTLY IN THE ADOPTION OF AUDIOLINGUAL METHODS AS POLICY, THE PROBLEM STILL EXISTS OF DEVELOPING DIFFERENT, MORE EFFECTIVE TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMS. (AB)

PERSPECTIVES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

By

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Today's approach to foreign language teaching, no matter how new or revolutionary it may appear, has its origins in the nineteenth century. It was in that period, in which the elaboration of the evolutionary postulate brought the whole study of man, his culture, and his behavior to the forefront of scientific study, the study of language--man's first and greatest invention--among them, that the period of modern linguistic investigation opens. What linguists and anthropologists stated as their objectives became the foundation of all modern linguistic study: to discover the nature of communication in culture and to examine minutely, without puristic bias, the structure of language as it was spoken, as it was used to communicate. The literary and historical aspects of language, previously the principal concern of philological study, were transcended so that the intensive study of language as a means of communication might be established on a firm scientific basis. It was in the context of this rapidly-expanding study of human communication that linguists began to direct their attention to the problem of teaching a given system of oral communication to people who used a different system; that is, to teach one spoken language to speakers of another.

Basic to this new pedagogy was an idea which, through incessant repetition during the last decade, has become almost a platitude: human linguistic behavior is first of all, and fundamentally, spoken, and only secondarily written. Nevertheless, no matter how many times we repeat it, and even recognize its truth from an abstract intellectual point of view, we still often find it difficult to apply in practice. It is all too easy for us to give lip-service to the oral nature of language and then to relapse into essentially written-language approaches in the language classroom. This almost universal confusion between speech and writing is today the principal obstacle to a clear understanding of the nature and function of language. Language--the spoken language--precedes writing. We must constantly remind ourselves that the spoken language is as old as man himself. Writing, quite to the contrary, has a history of at most a few thousand years. The distinction is a critical one. Speech is prior to writing in every sense, but the unfortunate confusion between language and writing continues to be widespread among all literate peoples, in which reading and writing abilities are the basic attributes of the "educated man."

The history of foreign language teaching in the United States has been summarized in many publications.[1] We know that major ethnic groups in the colonial and immediately post-colonial periods provided sporadic instruction for their own children in the languages of their national origins, such as the French in what is now northern New England, the Spanish in what is now the Southwest, and the Germans in Pennsylvania. The earliest American universities limited language instruction to the classical trio: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. French and German did not join these three languages in American higher education until the eighteenth century.

Even though French and German were modern spoken languages, in teaching them the emphasis was as unremittingly literary as it was in the teaching of the "classical trivium," focusing exclusively on the development of reading, writing, and translating abilities in the students.

The "natural" and "direct" methods of foreign language instruction, imported from Europe as early as 1866, succeeded in introducing some oral techniques in language teaching, but both methods lacked a truly systematic approach to the building of language skills in the learner leading ultimately to independent fluency. Neither method was able, in the final analysis, to counterbalance the established weight of the "grammar-translation" tradition in American schools.

Thus, the first century-and-a-quarter of American national educational life saw little fundamental change either in the selection of languages taught in schools and colleges or in the fundamental apprach to teaching them.

Despite the massive exposure of Americans to Europe during World War I, language teaching in the period between the two wars continued to limit its objectives to providing a "reading knowledge" of a foreign language. A two-year exposure was generally considered sufficient. Little progress was made in expanding the number of languages taught: Latin, French, and Spanish predominated in the schools; the same, with the addition of German and Greek, predominated in the colleges. Opportunities for studying other languages did, of course, exist, but were severly limited in number and few students were able to take advantage of them.

The outbreak of World War II and the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941 occasioned the creation of new methods of foreign language teaching. It was realized that very quickly large numbers of American soldiers would be sent to the far reaches of the globe where the demands of modern military intelligence would require thousands of persons with fluency in languages many of whose very names were unknown to the majority of Americans. The need was for persons who would be able to speak and understand these languages, often under the most difficult conditions, without reference to any resources other than their own command of the language in question. Since the schools and colleges had not produced persons capable of fluent oral communication even in the most familiar languages, the armed services were compelled to undertake an intensive program of language training different from any as yet known in the United States.

A model for this ambitious undertaking was provided by the Intensive Language Program, established in 1941 by the American Council of Learned Societies, in which the underlying principle was that a sound linguistic analysis of each language should be made, followed by the scientific elaboration of learning materials based upon that analysis.

In 1943 the first courses of the Army Specialized T· ing Program (ASTP) were initiated. Within a few months 27 languages were being taught in special programs in 55 colleges and universities, utilizing a wide variety of newly-developed materials.

Five fundamental linguistic principles formed the pedagogical basis of ASTP language instruction and have subsequently become the tenets of modern foreign language instruction in the secondary school and college classroom.[2] First, language is speech, not writing. Since language learning, as we have seen, had traditionally been associated with reading, writing, and translating, the average American teacher assumed that language learning and learning to read and write were two inseparable aspects of the same process. Linguistic analysts resolved, however, that the student must first learn to speak the language. Because reading and writing pose widely divergent problems, including visual perception and manual dexterity--both irrelevant in the acquisition of spoken language--, and should be undertaken only after the language learner has acquired a reasonable oral proficiency. After all, the young child is a relatively fluent speaker of his own native language long before he encounters reading and writing instruction in school. But since some kind of visual representation of language, such as spelling, is an important psychological adjunct for the literate adult language learner (and here we must remember that the high-school student is linguistically an adult), a system of phonemic transcription was devised in order to provide the student with a consistent visual guide to the spoken language without the irregularities and duplications of standard orthography. The student was never expected to learn to write phonemically, however.

Second, a language is a set of habits. The ordinary speaker is unaware of the mechanisms of speech, syntactic patterning, morphology, and other "automatic" processes involved in speaking one's native language. All of these components seem to him to fall into place subconsciously and his awareness is concentrated on what he says and not on how he says it. In learning a foreign language, the student must develop the important skill of perceiving these linguistic "building blocks" in the language he is studying. Once he is aware of them, he must proceed to make them automatic, habitual responses in his own behavior. This procedure of "habituation" in language learning is accomplished through intensive cycles of imitation, repetition, variation drill, and memorization. This process has become known in the profession as the "mim-mem" technique: mimicry and memorization.

Third, teach the language, not about the language. Traditional methods of foreign language instruction had required the student not only to learn the language itself, but also its inner structure, or grammar, so that he could talk about the language. Linguists consider this superfluous, since, in the foreign language classroom at least, the technical terminology of grammatical structure should never be more than a means to an end. Contrary to some misconceptions, however, the new materials did not fail to include pertinent grammatical generalizations, although the word "pertinent"

was carefully redefined. Grammatical analysis was to be used to help establish the new forms as matters of habit in the learner. After it had served this purpose, it was no longer to be of concern.

Fourth, a language is what its native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say. The primary source of information about a language, and the model upon which audio-lingual texts are built, is the language as spoken by educated native speakers. The literary usage of earlier centuries upon which most grammars are based is no more the model for conversation among today's educated adults in France, China, or Japan than it is in the United States.

Fifth, languages are different. The traditional grammatical categories of Latin and Greek cannot be applied wholesale to all languages. Each language must, rather, be analyzed in terms appropriate to its own unique internal structure and usage. This dealt a deathblow to the role of translation, in either direction, in language instruction. Once we realize the impossibility of word-for-word equivalents in any two languages, we appreciate the need to teach the student to express himself in the target language on its own terms, without recourse to "how English says it." We present to the student familiar contexts and situations to which he responds and reacts in the foreign language, without the obstacle of puzzle-solving involved in translation.

With these concepts, language investigators designed a teaching system which successfully produced a practical speaking ability in as short a time as possible. It was never claimed that there are not other aspects of language learning (structure of the language, stylistics, culture, literature) which rightfully constitute a significant part of a liberal education. But the idea, established in the elaboration of these wartime courses, that grammar is only a means to an end, and that language must be mastered thoroughly by imitation, variation, and some memorization until it can be manipulated without comparative reference to the student's native language, is certainly the only realistic goal for modern foreign language teaching.

Since the war, large numbers of our colleagues have been at work, in the United States and abroad, preparing materials for the American classroom. Among them, as among ourselves, there is substantial agreement on the basic point that the initial stages of learning a foreign language must focus on aural-oral, or as we prefer to call them "audio-lingual", skills. The reason audio-lingual practice is important, beyond the already established fact that language is primarily spoken,

is that language is a set of habits. The ability to use and understand a language depends on the instant and accurate habitual comprehension and production of sounds, sentence-patterns, and vocabulary. In conversation the words follow one another so rapidly that there is no time to recall and apply rules to what is being said. The student must respond at once. The native speaker of a language has, of course, acquired his language habits in early childhood through long practice, correction, more practice and more correction. By the time he is ten or eleven years old all the complicated processes which our students must learn are second nature to him. He is not by now even aware of them. But the learning of a foreign language cannot duplicate the slow, natural pace of a child learning to speak his mother tongue. Even though the order of the formation of language habits is the same--listening comprehension, speaking, reading, writing--, it must be accomplished in hours instead of years of daily exercise and in environments which lack the vital linguistic stimulation of the native country. Within these serious limitations, only a well-informed teacher and intelligently designed materials can hope for success.

Inherent in the design of successful materials is the recognition of certain facts of language learning. In simplest terms, there are five such steps. First, the learner hears a new utterance. We use the term "utterance" to refer to any spoken sentence, word, or sequence. Second, he recognizes part of the meaning of the utterance he has heard. He manages this in one of three ways: (1) he has already encountered some of its components; (2) he guesses from the context; (3) someone tells him. Third, he grasps the meaning of the whole utterance by associating the parts with the grammatical structure being studied. If he fails in this, the teacher immediately prompts him. Fourth, he imitates meaningfully after the model. Continued imitation of each utterance, once its meaning is clear (without reference to English), reinforces the assurance with which he utters longer sequences of target-language sounds. Now he must form a habit, that is, he must learn to use the newly acquired form authentically. Habit calls for repetition, now guided by his own memory rather than as an echo of an outside model. Whenever his repetition or his memory is imperfect, he must revert to direct imitation of the outside model before repeating further. Fifth, as soon as this procedure of repetition has made the habit secure, variation practice is introduced. Such drills vary one component or another of the model utterance to produce other expressions. Such variations explore the patterns of similarity and difference tolerated by the language.

Once a reliable habit has been formed in this way, the learner will understand the model form and related utterances automatically and rapidly. The process is by no means limited to single words or "idiomatic expressions," however. It is just as valid, if indeed not more so, for the meaningful use of all grammatical forms.

Again it is the work of the linguistic analysts which has made us aware of the incredible amount and variety of practice needed to make these recognitions, variations, and selections truly automatic and habitual, and, by so doing, usable. Indeed, a major part of the strategy behind the intelligently-designed materials we have been discussing is to make them so efficient that there will remain time in class to insure the necessary repetitions of the essential language patterns.

As we become aware of these essential facts of language learning, we cannot but conclude that oral practice is the one vehicle for the early stages of language study. And simply from the practical viewpoint of time, a model utterance can be imitated and repeated far more often orally than in writing, to say nothing of variations and articulatory corrections. An entire class can repeat a model many times under the immediate supervision of the teacher. Mistakes are caught on the spot and necessary corrections made. The dual advantage of greater intensity in guided practice and immediate correction and follow-up makes oral practice the logical classroom medium.

Many teachers hesitate to try an essentially oral approach for any number of reasons. Perhaps the teacher has been unable to live abroad and feels that he is not sufficiently fluent, or that his accent is deficient. Perhaps he was not specifically trained as a language teacher and feels insecure of his practical control of the grammar. Perhaps he is used to a more "traditional" approach and feels unprepared methodologically to conduct and meet the needs of an orally-based class. For such teachers, of course, additional training in the various areas of weakness described is essential. Yet there is a practical point at which a teacher is adequately prepared for meeting the challenge of the beginning courses in an audio-lingual approach without being virtually a native speaker. After all, it would be impossible to chat with students at length in the target language about general topics before the students have mastered the fundamentals of the language itself. To establish these areas of control, the teacher must lead the students through the intensive drill patterns to which we have referred. The teacher's indispensable qualifications for this rôle can be more specifically listed.

First, the teacher serves as an oral model for his students. In order to do so competently, he must know how to pronounce the material his students will be using and to control the structures in which they are contained. Part of every teacher's professional advancement depends upon the constant self-improvement in these two areas and upon keeping his level of linguistic competence well ahead of the needs of the particular classes he is teaching. The fact that absolute mastery of a second language is generally beyond the reach of all but the most gifted should not necessarily discourage the teacher, for the important feature is his continued inner drive toward self-betterment. The teacher who himself continues to learn best understands the problems of his students.

If the teacher's own pronunciation is faulty, he must learn to make proper and efficient use of pre-recorded materials in class to serve as models for his students. Although there can be no substitute for the adequately-trained teacher, such audio aids can be used successfully while the devoted teacher continues his own efforts to improve.

Second, the teacher is the judge of his pupils' accuracy. He must be able to detect serious mistakes. His knowledge of the points of conflict and contrast between his students' native language and the target language will help him predict the occurrence of such errors as well as in the determination of the appropriate nature and intensity of corrective practice.

Third, and finally, the teacher is a drillmaster. The textbook must provide the raw material, but conducting the most efficient types of drills is unquestionably an art. To make certain that all participate, that individuals are singled out when they need to be, and that the delicate balance between too much and too little is maintained, are all a part of the work of the successful teacher in his rôle as drillmaster.

The success of the approach which we have been discussing[3] has been impressive. In many areas of the United States professional organizations have adopted far-reaching policies which establish the audio-lingual approach as the methodological norm for their respective districts. The following declaration of underlying philosophy in modern foreign language teaching, for example, adopted on November 14, 1959, by the Foreign Language Association of Northern California, summarizes that organization's commitment to the principles we have touched upon. While some of the language of the declaration is admittedly a bit over-enthusiastic, it remains fundamentally a worthy statement of essentially sound objectives.

I. A modern language is mainly a spoken form of communication.

II. The best way to learn a foreign language is:

   A. As to place, the country where the language is spoken.
   B. As to time, when the learner is a young child.
   C. As to method, by understanding the spoken language and speaking it before reading and writing it.

III. The best way of teaching a foreign language to those who are neither in the country in which the language is spoken nor young children is:

   A. To recreate in so far as possible the language learning environment of the foreign country.
   B. To train the learner to regain his childhood faculty of learning by ear.
   C. To train the learner to understand the spoken language and to speak it before reading and writing it.

IV. In learning a foreign language outside the foreign country the most important single factor is the good teacher and not the foreign language laboratory.

V. A good teacher of a foreign language speaks like a native of the foreign country and teaches in the audio-lingual approach.

VI. The foreign language laboratory serves as an aid to the teacher by supplementing and intensifying the instruction first given directly by a good teacher.

Although the years which have passed since 1959 have witnessed great improvements in the techniques and materials for achieving the goals set forth in the above and similar declarations, we are still far from universal success in achieving them. Moreover, at the same time that the imperatives of such declarations are for many teachers still relatively "revolutionary," no single methodology has yet been devised to make of each and every interested and dedicated teacher an effective and efficient model of what today's foreign language teacher must be.

The achievement of such a training mode is an impressive objective. But dedicated efforts toward its attainment must not diminish in the face of the difficulty of the task. Today's foreign language teacher and teacher-in-training are confronted by a profession in the midst of profound change and development. Only the teacher who strives toward continued self-improvement can hope to derive the benefit and satisfaction of the new directions in his profession.

NOTES

1. Edmond Mèras, A Language Teacher's Guide, 2nd ed., New York, 1962.
   Peter Hagboldt, "The Teaching of Languages from the Middle Ages to the Present," in The Teaching of German, Boston, 1940.
   William Moulton, Linguistics and Language Teaching in the United States: 1940-1960, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1963.

2. See also William Moulton, "Trends in American Linguistics: 1930-1960," in C. Mohrmann, et al., eds., Trends in European and American Linguistics: 1930-1960, Utrecht, 1961.

3. Donald D. Walsh has suggested the term FSM, the acronym for "Fundamental Skills Method," as a preferable substitute for the term "audio-lingual." He maintains, "We prefer it to 'audio-lingual' because this phrase can be misinterpreted as an approach of restriction to two of the four skills (listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing). It can also be confused with official approval of one set of teaching materials (Harcourt, Brace, and World's A-LM series)." In "The MLA Foreign Language Program," Hispania XLVIII (1965) 895.