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THE MODULAR MOUSETRAP.

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TEACHERS OF ENGLISH TO SPEAKERS OF OTHER LANGUAGES

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THE AUTHOR BASES HIS APPROACH TO TEACHING LANGUAGES ON THE PRINCIPLE THAT MOST PEOPLE LEARN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE BETTER WHEN IT IS PRESENTED AS ONE ASPECT OF COMMUNICATION, RATHER THAN AS AN ABSTRACT SYSTEM. THE AUTHOR SUGGESTS THAT THIS "MODULAR PRINCIPLE," WHICH HE HAS FOLLOWED IN FOUR FOREIGN SERVICE INSTITUTE BEGINNING SWAHILI COURSES, MAY ALSO BE APPLIED TO TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE. IN PLACE OF A COMPREHENSIVE REFERENCE GRAMMAR OF THE LANGUAGE, A SYNOPSIS OF THE BASIC STRUCTURES AND POINTS CONTAINED WITHIN THE TEXTS TO BE LEARNED IS PRESENTED. THESE POINTS ARE DRILLED IN PATTERN PRACTICES COORDINATED WITH TAPE RECORDINGS. THE SHORT, GRADED TEXTS, WHICH TOGETHER WITH THE SYNOPSIS FORM A "MODULE," ARE TAKEN FROM AN AREA OF SPECIAL INTEREST TO THE LEARNERS--AN AREA OF "REAL LIVE COMMUNICATION AMONG NATIVE SPEAKERS." THE STUDENT THUS LEARNS TO MASTER THE SOUNDS AND STRUCTURAL PATTERNS WITHIN A "LIMITED, RELEVANT VOCABULARY" AND MAY, AT THE COMPLETION OF ONE COURSE OR "MODULE," GO ON TO ANOTHER COURSE. THE AUTHOR STRESSES THAT LANGUAGE MUST BE TAUGHT AS PATTERNS IN CONNECTED DISCOURSE, WITH SYSTEMATICALLY ORGANIZED DRILL MATERIALS. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE TESOL CONVENTION, APRIL 1967, AND IS PUBLISHED IN THE "TESOL QUARTERLY," VOLUME 1, NUMBER 3, SEPTEMBER 1967, INSTITUTE OF LANGUAGES AND LINGUISTICS, GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY, WASHINGTON, D.C. 20007. (AMM)

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The Modular Mousetrap[*]

Earl W. Stevick

We used to say in college that every good course began with Plato or with the atom. But whenever I get up to talk about applied linguistics, I always seem to begin with C. C. Fries's famous definition of language learning. That's the one in which he said that a person has learned a foreign language when, within a limited vocabulary, he has mastered the sound patterns and made the structural devices matters of automatic habit.[1] This definition has fascinated me ever since I first heard it twenty years ago. Its great contribution at that time was, of course, its identification of the phonological and grammatical structures as the essence of the language, rather than the vocabulary. But for our purposes, I'd like to focus on the phrase "within *a* limited vocabulary." This could mean "within any limited vocabulary at all," or it could mean "within some particular limited vocabulary." The English language does not provide us with what Professor Fries would call the structural signals that are required to resolve this ambiguity in his definition. In practice, most writers of published textbooks have chosen the former, sticking to words that are of some use to almost everyone, at the same time avoiding those words that would be of intense interest to one group of students but of no use at all to the rest. These writers often choose their vocabulary by referring to word frequency tables. Those tables are based on a sampling of a wide range of printed materials, so that the words that show up well are precisely those lowest-common-denominator items that are of some interest to everyone, but of intense interest to very few. The economic side of the choice is obvious. This is what we might call the Publisher's Stumblingblock. Why try to teach a few people to say what is of keenest interest and what is most fully meaningful to them, when we could be teaching a lot of people—a lot of customers—to say things that don't mean much to any of them? And then we wonder why a student who has just gotten 100 percent on a test over tag questions turns to a fellow student and asks, "We're going to have another test next Friday, isn't it?" Or whose English word order goes to pot the minute he gets under a little pressure in real life. Speaking, without communicating, is a tale told by an idiot. How often do we ask adults to play structural games with toy information? How often do our students ask us for meat and drink, and we give them a grammatical vitamin pill? We are becoming more and more sophisticated in isolating delicate points of grammar and preparing them for student use, but when we get them ready for shipment, why must we pack them in communicational styrofoam? As Shakespeare might have enjoined the foreign language teachers of his day, "Let us now in the teaching of true speech

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[*] This paper was presented at the TESOL Convention, April 1967.

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[1] C. C. Fries, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1945) p. 3.

perform experiment. French is not French which falters when it altercation finds, or ends with the subjunctive of the verb."

But Fries in his definition was telling us when a person *has* learned a foreign language. If we change the auxiliary in his verb phrase and talk about the circumstances under which a person *can* and *will* learn a foreign language, then the ambiguity decreases. Some few fortunate students can and will learn within any vocabulary at all. They are the ones who enjoy manipulating a language as an object, of interest in itself. But most people do better with language when it is presented as one aspect of communication, rather than as an abstract system. For these, the difference between a limited relevant vocabulary and a limited random or general vocabulary may mean the difference between success and failure.

If only it were possible to provide, for each area of intense interest, a course that presented the structures of the language within *the* limited vocabulary of that area! If only it were possible to find some way of taking materials that were originally spoken or written for the purpose of real communication with native speakers of the target language, and of using them in the instruction of beginners! Then indeed we should have discovered the Philosopher's Stone, enabling us to convert the dross of daily life into teaching instruments of purest gold! And with this Philosopher's Stone we should be able to crack the Publisher's Stumblingblock. Small wonder that every language teacher, at some time in his career, sets out to look for the Philosopher's Stone. What I'm telling you now is where this quest has been leading me.

We have a proverb that says that "if a man builds a better mousetrap, the world will beat a path to his door." That proverb tells us a lot about our culture—about what we live for and strive for. We want progress, we want excellence even in such a homely item as a mousetrap, and we reward those who give it to us.

Whatever value a language teacher places on the financial rewards of his profession, he cherishes even more the satisfaction that comes from craftsmanship and the recognition that he feels when his classes increase in size and effectiveness, or when others adopt and use some of his materials. What I would like to do is to share with you a principle—a concept—that I am finding useful in designing mousetraps for teaching languages other than English, and to invite you to experiment with it in your own work. I'll refer to it as "the modular principle."

We are familiar with the modular principle as it applies to furniture. The mail order catalog offers us four different units—a bookcase, a knick-knack shelf, a hi-fi cabinet and a small desk—which can be used singly or in any of two dozen attractive combinations, depending on the needs and tastes of the individual householder. The modular principle in rudimentary form is found also in curriculum, where it is known as the elective system. Or, to bring it into the area with which we are concerned, a group of specialists discussing short-term training for teachers of ESOL has suggested recently that one type of program

> "might be modular in organization; that is, each program would have a

> specialized goal and be so organized that [it] could serve as one element, or 'module' in a cumulative, long range pattern of teacher training. . . . This approach might be particularly useful in solving the problem of having [some of] the same trainees attend successive programs in such overseas seminar-workships as those offered by USIA.'"[2]

I have had some fun recently applying the modular principle to elementary Swahili. The Foreign Service Institute now has not one, but four beginning courses in Swahili. Each covers the rudiments of the language, and only the rudiments, but they differ from one another in format and in subject matter. The oldest of the four consists of dialogues for memorization, with grammar notes and systematic drills.[3] The second and third are in the so called microwave format,[4] in which the structures of the language are presented within the framework of very short conversational exchanges which the student can adapt almost immediately for real communication. Of these two microwave courses, one is a course in geography.[5] It is for people who don't know Kenya from Tanzania on a map of East Africa, and who also know nothing about the Swahili language. Geography and language are taught together, in closely integrated fashion. At the end of the course, which takes about seventy hours, the student knows the rudiments of East African geography. He also has met and practiced the fundamental structures of the language.

The other microwave course has to do with more general conversational topics such as travel, street directions, weather, and biography.[6] The fourth course takes it content from a series of newspaper stories which tell about meetings in East Africa. I want to talk in detail about the format of this fourth course in a minute. What has been interesting, from the point of view of the modular principle, is to see how different groups of trainees, with different needs and interests, have shown definite preference for one or another combination of these sets of materials. I should say that ninety percent of the people who have used them have been Peace Corps trainees, and most of the rest have been in the Foreign Service.

The fourth of the Swahili courses is an extreme application of the modular principle. I'll describe it in some detail. The course in its present form consists of only one pair of modules. They are intimately related to one another, as you will see, but either of them can be used by itself. Instead of one pair of modules, there could be two pairs, or six pairs, or twenty pairs.

The first member of each pair of

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[2] *Conference on Short-Term Training for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966), p. 7.

[3] *Swahili Basic Course,* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1963).

[4] For discussion of this term in language teaching see this writer's "Microwaves and UHF in Transmitting Language Skills," in *Language Learning: The Individual and the Process,* ed. E. Najam (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966), pp. 84–94, and Clifford H. Prator, "Guidelines for Planning Classes and Teaching Materials," in *Selected Conference Papers of the Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language,* ed., R. B. Kaplan (University of Southern California Press, 1966), pp. 58–62.

[5] *An Active Introduction to Swahili: Geography* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1966).

[6] *An Active Introduction to Swahili: General Conversation* (Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, 1966).

modules is what I have called a "learner's synopsis" of Swahili structure. The second member of each pair is a series of short texts in Swahili.

The so-called "learner's synopsis" is built around some fifty short paragraphs, totalling under 2500 words. These are printed on the left-hand pages only. If these paragraphs are read consecutively, without any Swahili examples, they form a connected essay which summarizes for the student most of the points of Swahili structure that he as a learner needs to know. This summary is complete enough so that when he gets to the texts, he will find that 95 percent of the grammar he encounters will have been covered in the synopsis. There is no attempt to cover 100 percent of the grammar he will meet, or even 99 percent of it. To do so would multiply the length of the summary, and change it from a synopsis into a reference grammar, and that would be contrary to my intention.

Since few human beings can read 2500 words of undiluted grammatical exposition, each paragraph is provided with a number of illustrative examples, of the kinds usually found in grammar books. Exposition and examples together cover twenty-two left-hand pages.

So far, as you are trying to visualize this, I hope you have kept the right-hand pages blank. Now we're going to fill them in. Here we find opposite each of those fifty expository paragraphs, a set of questions—multiple choice, completion, or true-false questions. These questions require the student to demonstrate his mastery of what he has just read on the left-hand page. The correct answers appear in a separate column at the extreme right of the right hand page. For example, paragraph 10 on the left-hand page talks about the prefix /u-/, which is used in the formation of abstract nouns. The adjective /kubwa/ means "big," and /ukubwa/ means "size." /Raia/ means "citizen," and /uraia/ means "citizenship." On the right-hand page, he is asked to decide whether the noun /uongozi/, which he has never seen before, probably means "leader," "leadership," or "leaders," and so forth.

The learner's synopsis is thus brief. I hope it is readable. But the student must do more than read it. He must react to it in his answers to the questions on the right-hand page, and it reacts to him by allowing him to check his own responses against the correct ones.

The modular aspect of the synopsis lies in the fact that all of the illustrative materials—all of the examples—are drawn from newspaper stories about meetings. One could easily unplug these examples, so to speak, and plug in another whole set of examples, the new set having been taken from a cookbook. A third set of examples might be extracted from a handbook on the by-laws of cooperative societies, and so on. If we had a dozen such courses, grammatically and pedogogically equivalent to one another, then each group of students could select the one version, or the two or three versions, that tied in most closely with their own interests, and they could begin their study there. The first synopsis might require twenty to thirty hours. Each successive version after the first would *ipso facto* provide a full review of the entire range of structures, and the time required would of course be less. And that's all I'm going to say about the synopses.

The other member of the pair of modules is a series of short items taken from Swahili newspapers. Each of the first twenty-five newspaper stories is about some meeting, and the average length is about thirty words. There is thus considerable recurrence of vocabulary, but also of structures. Each of these stories is supported by two pages of rather ordinary pedagogical apparatus, the nature of which is not of interest to us here. Each story has a grammatical index which refers the student to the appropriate paragraphs in the synopsis. The newspaper stories may be used immediately after the synopsis, or after any other introduction to Swahili.

In writing the next pair of modules, I will first choose a well defined area which is of special interest to the people who are likely to use my materials, in this case the Peace Corps. Then, I must find a set of short texts, either written or oral, that relate to that area and which overlap one another in subject matter and vocabulary. Drawing on these texts, I will prepare a new set of examples for the synopsis. Finally, I will put the short texts into order of increasing difficulty, and provide grammatical reference back to the synopsis, and write the supporting pedagogical apparatus.

But what has all this to do with you? You don't teach Swahili, and you don't teach American college graduates, and your students aren't going to use their new language in Africa. There are, however, some important similarities between your students and mine. Just as any beginning student of Swahili must learn to cope with the fixed inventory of Swahili structural devices, no matter what his age or general educational level, so any student of English must master the fixed inventory of English structural devices. In the second place, each student, beginning or advanced, has his own special interests. Each group of students have their own areas of shared interest and common experience. And finally, your students like mine are actually going to use their new language, in the country where it is spoken.

Let me make clear that I do think that the system I have described for Swahili would work equally well for English. Those few of you who are engaged in developing new materials may want to give it a try. Let me make equally clear I do not think that most of you will want to adopt this experimental format lock, stock, and barrel. For most of you, the applications of what I have said will be partial and indirect. In the time that remains, I would like to suggest a few examples.

First of all the synopsis. You do not need a brand new 2500 word synopsis of English structure, specially prepared for this purpose. Such a synopsis could be written, but it is not necessary. All you need is a fairly compact inventory of things to be taught—complete enough so that ninety-five percent of what the student meets in the short overlapping texts can be referred back to it. For example, a recent survey reported by Katherine Aston in the February issue of the *NAFSA Newsletter*[7] shows that of all the materials available to teachers of EFL among the members of NAFSA, the most widely used is *English Sentence Patterns*, from the Michigan course.[8] I remember that back in 1960 I was given three delegates from Angola and Congo, who were being sent to the quadrennial General Conference of the Methodist Church in Denver. My task was to prepare them for participation in that English-speaking conference. What I did was to get hold of the proceedings of the 1956 General Conference, and extract from it vocabulary which I then fitted into the frames of *Patterns of English Sentences*, which was the predecessor of *English Sentence Patterns. Patterns of English Sentences* was thus fulfilling the role of learner's synopsis. I could as easily have filled in the frames with vocabulary taken from a chess manual, or the sports page, or an introductory text in nuclear physics.

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[7] Katherine Aston, "ATESL Report," NAFSA *Newsletter* (February, 1967) p. 67.

So much then, for the synopsis part of the system. The other part, you will remember, consists of short, overlapping texts. We have just seen that these texts can serve as the source for the vocabulary which illustrates the synopsis. They may also serve as objects of direct study. Mind you, these are texts, either spoken or written, which originated in real live communication among native speakers. The idea of using such texts unedited, unmitigated and unembalmed sounds a bit revolutionary. Won't it lead to chaos? Until recently, I had always assumed that it would. But it need not. Natural texts can be used very early if they are short, and if they conform to the three R's of *relevance* (to the interests of the class), *realism*, and *recurrence* (of vocabulary). But where are these texts to come from?

Short, genuine texts with a high rate of vocabulary recurrence can be found for almost any special interest, if you look in the right place. For the housewife, there are recipes; for the chemist, there are dictionary definitions of the elements; and there are always bubblegum cards for the small boy who is interested in baseball.

But the texts need not be in printed form. Any statistical table, any timetable, or any genealogical table provides the authentic information from which a large number of short texts can be improvised. Texts need not come from a written source. Two or three dozen assorted weather forecasts taken from the radio would do very well, or an equal number of "community service" announcements. For that matter, you can elicit texts to order from native speakers of English. All you need is a tape recorder and a little patience. I've done quite a bit of this in three different African languages, and it has come out very nicely each time. But just to be sure I wasn't kidding myself, and in order to have an English example, I tried this out only last week with four randomly selected English-speaking informants.

First, I asked an informant to tell me—notice I said *tell* me—communicate to *me*—and not just talk—about the store where his or her family buys most of its groceries; where the store is located, what the store is like, and why they shop there. This was done on tape, impromptu, with no rehearsal or preparation. After thirty seconds, I stopped the machine and asked the informant to tell me the same thing again, and then a third time. There were of course small differences among the three versions provided by any one informant, and there were great differences among the informants themselves, but many words turned up in two or more texts: *located, cuts of meat, selection, vegetables,* and others. About fifty content words plus a few proper names account for the essential parts of 625 running words of text. The question that I have to answer for you is, how might material such as this be fitted into an English course?

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[8] Robert Lado, Charles C. Fries, *et al., An Intensive Course in English* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1953). The same points made here about *English Sentence Patterns* apply also to Jean Praninskas' *Rapid Review of English Grammar* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1959) and to many other widely used books.

Well, assuming a class that has had a little English but not a lot, and a class in which all of the members have to do grocery shopping in an English speaking milieu, and assuming one has the use of a tape playback, one might begin by letting the class listen to the texts a time or two. Total playing time for the whole batch is six minutes. I'd see how much the students could get from it—probably not very much. For example, the third version given by the second informant was as follows:

> The grocery store we buy groceries from is located about two blocks from our house. It has a well stocked dairy counter and a well stocked delicatessen counter. The food is well displayed, it's a nice bright light store, it has a very large parking lot, there's no trouble finding parking; it's located near other shops so that it makes —ah— general shopping easier. It's located in Bailey's Crossroads near the E. J. Korvette store there.[6]

From there, I'd switch fairly quickly to pattern practice, using materials taken from these texts. Most of what is in them can be located within four frames. One frame is for answers to the question *Where is the store located?* It contains such sentences as *It's in Bailey's Crossroads, It's located near my work,* or *It's close to other shops.* The largest frame accommodates most of the reasons given for shopping at a particular store: *It has a nice display of meat, It has a nice selection of vegetables, It has a large parking lot,* etc. A third frame is for sentences like *The store is small,* and a fourth for *We shop there out of habit* and other reasons that don't fit into the second frame. After practice with these frames, the students are ready for the tapes again, this time as directed listening.

After pattern practice with the first frame, for example, one might give such directions as these:

> Listen and try to find out where the store is located. Is the store one block from his house, or two blocks? What street is the store on, or doesn't he say?

After the second frame, one might ask:

> Listen and try to find out which part of the store he mentions first. Does he mention the dairy counter, or the meat counter? Is the dairy counter large, or doesn't he say? What does he say about the dairy counter?

Finally, one might do questions and answers, including questions about the tape and questions that allow the students to talk about their own shopping habits. Note that there's no attempt to get the students to understand or reproduce one hundred percent of any of these texts. But they are hearing and reacting to something that is real, and relevant, and recurrent. And there, very roughly, is an English example.

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[6] Among the texts that I have elicited in this way, this set is at the upper extreme as far as difficulty is concerned.

I have affirmed with you, both in this English example and in the Swahili example, that language must be taught as patterns—as structures—with systematically organized drill materials. I have also affirmed with you that language must be taught as connected discourse. What I have suggested is that in both kinds of teaching we try to get rid of the musty content—and any content that is general enough to get into a published text is at least a little musty—and that we draw our content from what is true and relevant for our own students, and that we do this almost from the beginning. In this way we will get maximum mileage from the issues and interest that are live for them. I have suggested a format of short, modular courses. But whatever the format, again in the words of the bard, "Let us now in the teaching of true speech perform experiment."