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ABSTRACT

Exploring psycholinguistic factors which bear directly on student achievement in language instruction in college, this article concludes that programmed language instruction has no negative influence on student attitudes. The author directly links learning rate to the learner's attitudes while focusing discussion on results of an attitudinal questionnaire given to some 150 college students. Suggestions of methods to improve student performance include an enumeration of proposals which encourage the development of positive attitudes in the classroom. (RL)

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A STUDY OF STUDENT ATTITUDES AND MOTIVATION IN A
COLLEGIATE FRENCH COURSE USING PROGRAMMED LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION*

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Numerous studies have investigated current foreign language teaching methods. The results showed only small differences in one skill or another, even when the quality of teaching was taken into account. These studies, however, have not measured and weighed the students' attitudes and motivation toward the language, the people whose language is studied, or toward the method used.

It is posited that a foreign language can be learned well enough to communicate in it by anyone who has mastered his native tongue,¹ to wit the bi-lingual or tri-lingual countries or regions in Europe or the American continent. It has been noted, though, that the degree of excellence in speaking a foreign language for many of these people correlates well with certain attitudes. Alsations, for instance who had strong political leanings for Germany spoke French with a heavy accent, while others who had strong preferences for the French refused to speak German. Could attitudes impede or favor the learning of a foreign language?

This study investigates the hypothesis that various attitudes of the learner influence his learning rate regardless of the amount of time spent at the task.

It asks questions such as:

1. Is success related to feelings that the foreign language is valuable and useful?
2. To what extent does the pleasantness and easiness dimensions affect the the learning rate?
3. Does the prestige value of knowing the foreign language influence the results?
4. Does the attitude the student holds towards the people whose language he is studying affect the outcome?
5. Is learning related to the student's interest in other people and cultures, i.e., is an open-minded and empathetic student more likely to succeed?
6. Is the student's confidence of success and feeling of satisfaction with the course related to the outcome?

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7. What are the student's feelings towards the various aspects of the programmed course?
8. What kind of student holds favorable or unfavorable attitudes toward programmed language instruction (PLI)?
9. What dimension of PLI might influence his attitude?

If such attitudes significantly correlate with results, this fact would explain why many studies show little differences between methodologies. The good results, for instance, one of the authors obtained years ago and attributed to the so-called "audio-visual method" may well have been determined by the change of attitudes which the use of slides and films caused.² Therefore, ways and means of changing attitudes need to be studied.

One hundred and forty-nine students enrolled in French courses at the University of Kentucky responded on an extensive questionnaire as to their views on various aspects of the course, their attitudes towards the French people and their knowing the language, and their reactions towards aspects of programmed learning. The following report describes, analyzes, interprets, and draws conclusions from this effort.

CONCLUSIONS

The student body.

It seems reasonable to conclude that the students in this sample are not strongly motivated toward learning a foreign language and that they tend to see in the study of a foreign language, educational value only in so far as it will provide them an opportunity for job advancement. This conclusion is based on the fact that only 32 percent consider the knowledge of a foreign language necessary in order to be an educated person, 26 percent give this accomplishment as the primary reason for studying French, 21 percent consider a foreign language a useful means to learn more about other people and their culture, and about 50 percent take a foreign language because it is required in their curriculum.

This study suggests that students at the University of Kentucky have strong ethnocentric feelings and are inclined to harbor negative stereotypes about foreign people, already pointed out by Lambert.²⁰ It is conceivable, and probable, that such attitudes are fostered in our educational system.

The programmed course has received significant student acceptance, which is also underlined by the fact that over 60 percent of the original enrollment completed the course second semester, while only 40 percent of the original enrollment completed the second semester of the traditional audio-lingual course, as shown in another unpublished statistical study.

Our study confirms the opinion expressed by Jacobovits, that "foreign language study is not perceived by the student as relevant to their educational needs and aspirations."²¹ Another view expressed by Jacobovits also seems to be consistent with our findings, namely, "serious study of a foreign language, of the type from which intrinsic benefits can be derived, entangles the student in a psychological involvement that may lead him to invidious comparisons between the foreign culture and his own. To some individuals, this involvement may be threatening, especially when he feels that it is being 'forced down his throat'."²²

The more positive the student's feelings in the following nine categories, the better are his results in French, the more time he spends on his preparation, the greater his desire to learn, and the higher the acceptance of the course and of programmed language instruction:

1. The value dimension, that is, the perception of the various aspects of the course as valuable and useful towards the attainment of mastery in the foreign language;
2. The easiness dimension, that is, the perception of course as rather easy than difficult;
3. The pleasantness dimension, that is, his perception of the various aspects

of the course as exciting rather than boring, pleasant, rather than unpleasant;

4. His feeling of satisfaction with the course;
5. His feeling of confidence that he is succeeding and will continue to do so in subsequent courses;
6. The prestige value he attaches to knowing a foreign language, particularly in so far as he sees it as necessary to an educated person;
7. The expectation the student holds concerning the knowledge he is to acquire in the course;
8. An integrative orientation, that is, his desire to meet and to know people from different cultures;
9. His attitudes towards foreigners, particularly speakers of the language he is learning, that is, the image of moral goodness or physical qualities he holds about them.

These data indicate that the academically superior and the integratively oriented student has the greatest liking for programmed language instruction.

These data, and for this situation, refute the allegations that programmed courses are boring to the better student and drive them away. On the contrary, the opposite was found to be the case--sentiments further substantiated by the course completion rate as compared to the more traditional audio-lingual courses.

In the classroom.

Attitudinal factors can be changed through education, although the process is more difficult and complex than most people realize. The language learning process can be improved by changing students' orientation toward the particular cultural group and thereby modifying their motivation to learn the second language. Harrison and MacLean suggest that "these (attitudinal) dimensions may be influenced by the use of the new media. Seeing films of France and situations where French can be used might, for instance, be expected to increase the perceived value and

potential usefulness of the French language. Films might also have pleasant arousal effects. Finally, some of the new media may make learning easier or at least appear easier."²³ Their research indicates that "students exposed to a French language course become significantly more favorable in their attitudes toward French people and institutions."²⁴

Programmed language instruction is an effective means for individualizing instruction for the various language aptitudes as well as for different learning patterns. The talented student saves time, and the average and below average student increases his chances of success. Programmed instruction, however, should be accompanied by other media such as audio-visual devices and, if possible, face-to-face meeting with individuals who are indigenous to the country. Slides and films should be added, particularly since drilling language patterns is no longer the primary function of classwork, but is the sole responsibility of the student outside of class.

Self-instructional materials give the class a new dimension. Class time can give greater attention to helping students develop a more cosmopolitan attitude. Instead of being concerned with language practice for the purpose of further strengthening language habits, the instructor can spend more time developing a positive image of the people whose language he is studying. The class can be more of a cultural experience designed to foster favorable attitudes towards the speaker of the language studied. Bringing to class residents of the country is more conducive to learning French than an hour spent with pattern drills.

The cultural-sociological materials need to be presented from a point of view that avoids the invidious comparison with one's own culture. If the French people and their achievements are only praised and presented as the model, the student will feel threatened. If, on the other hand, some French behavior which is different from ours is explained and presented neither as good or bad, it might influence their attitude towards these people and lead to more effective learning.

Our study also points out the importance of the student perceiving that a foreign language is part of the education he needs in his professional future, that an educated person is one who understands people from other lands and behavior that differs from his, and that a future doctor, or dentist, needs to understand the people with whom he is dealing. Properly taught, a foreign language can contribute to this end.

Class time should be as pleasant as possible rather than an hour of strenuous drills. Bringing a pot of coffee and turning an occasional period into a French chatting session may also be conducive to learning. Besides relaxation, it provides the student with feelings of success and confidence in future learning and demonstrates how much he has accomplished. If he can use the language in meaningful situations, his perception of the usefulness of home preparation is also strengthened and the time he spends outside of class will be more effective.

Our findings place a greater role and more important responsibilities on the instructor. He now becomes a teacher of values, often called intangibles, rather than the task master who through much repetition strengthens new language habits. He assumes the duty to change old attitudes and stereotypes to motivate the student, and in this manner he influences student learning. He only can transmit the desire to learn; he only can show the learner where he is and where he is going. It is not "teaching" in the sense of presenting the knowledge which the student must absorb like a sponge, but it is learning which is the all important thing, and only the student who wants to master the new language will gain anything of lasting value.

Who remembers a teacher for his performance as a drillmaster or for his perfect French accent? Those we do remember are the ones who made learning exciting and pleasant, and who changed our attitudes by effectively demonstrating values contained in what was to be learned. This age-old lesson of humanistic teaching must now become a major objective for foreign language teaching.