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ABSTRACT

There is a difference between learning a second language and learning a second dialect; the English as a second language (ESL) program should be limited to teaching English to students who do not already know English. Although there are not enough ESL programs, there is also a problem that some students are receiving ESL instruction even though they may actually need some other type of program. The main objective of ESL instruction is to have the student internalize the generative rules or deep structure of English as soon as possible. Even though his English differs widely from cultivated usage or is heavily influenced by borrowing from another language, the student who already knows the underlying system of English will only have to learn to make changes in the surface structure, a different task from learning the generative rules. Teachers must exercise extreme caution in determining which type of language instruction a particular student needs; background, personality, and classroom situation must all be considered. (VM)

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ESL—WHO NEEDS IT?

R. H. Hendrickson

My title is not meant to be a rhetorical question (as in "another faculty meeting—who needs it?") but a real one, and one which has not, I think, been asked often enough. On the one hand, there are a lot of students who need instruction in English as a second language but aren't getting it. It's true that the thousands of young Americans who don't speak English (or at any rate don't speak it very well) are finally getting some of the attention they deserve, and that the growing interest in ESL and related matters may justify some cautious optimism. But it is also true that many schools which should have ESL programs still don't have them, and that many others have only token programs which recognize the need without going

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very far towards meeting it. On the other hand, as ESL programs become more widespread, increasing numbers of students are getting ESL instruction who don't need it, and it is this problem that chiefly concerns me here, both because it has gone largely unrecognized and because it seems likely to grow more prevalent.

Let me cite a few examples. In a small town with a large Mexican-American population, an ambitious elementary school ESL program was recently announced. Only after it was well launched, with considerable fanfare and a sizeable commitment of Title I money, was it discovered that just two children in the entire school could not speak reasonably fluent English. In another elementary school, a first grade girl of Portuguese descent was sent to the ESL class after several weeks of near-silence, acute embarrassment, and other apparent evidence of an inability to use English. Several days later, the ESL teacher (who knew no Portuguese) was still wondering how to attack the girl's language problem when a trivial incident in class suddenly started her talking volubly—in perfectly intelligible English. In an urban high school, the ESL teacher sought to involve a particularly sullen and uncooperative Mexican-American student in a class discussion by pressing him to explain the meaning of a common Spanish idiom. Finally the student snapped (quite truthfully, as it turned out) "How should I know? I can't speak Spanish!" Other teachers, it seems, were using referrals to ESL as the shortest way to get Mexican-American "troublemakers" out of their classes.

While these cases are hardly typical, neither are they especially uncommon. I can report several other, though less dramatic, instances where the wrong students have been placed in ESL classes for the wrong reasons, and I assume that such instances are not confined to schools and school districts I happen to know something about. Sometimes, as in the high school mentioned above, ESL programs are misused knowingly and cynically, a practice about which little needs to be said; no one, I hope, needs me to tell them that this kind of thing is irresponsible and unprofessional. For the most part, however, students are wrongly assigned to ESL classes with the best of intentions. It's not that they're the victims of prejudice or callous manipulation; it's just that a lot of educators seem to be rather vague about what ESL instruction is supposed to accomplish and how to distinguish the students who need it from the ones who don't.

It is easy to understand why many teachers and school administrators are confused about ESL. Much of what they need to know to get their heads straight is buried in the literature of emerging disciplines like psycholinguistics and sociolinguistics, whose very existence may come as news to them. Then, too, as a doctor I know once observed, teachers tend to be strong on remedies but weak on diagnosis. Confronted with the conflicting demands of a society that is increasingly unsure about what education ought to be and do but wants the results retroactive to last year, they have an understandable weakness for catch-all "solutions" to problems they haven't had time to analyze very carefully. And the temptation to oversimplify in educating students from minority sub-cultures is particularly strong, since the reasons for their difficulties in school are especially perplexing and many are beyond the teacher's control. In this context, ESL is an educator's dream. An ESL program provides tangible evidence of a concern for the needs of minority students without posing any threat to the middle-class majority. ESL materials are readily available, and their use involves no fundamental shift in existing school routines. And at a time when the educational establishment is obsessed with "accountability," ESL is one kind of English instruction whose results are immediately visible, meaningful, and measurable. Small wonder, then, that ESL programs have

sometimes been embraced with more enthusiasm than discretion. But the trouble is that when ESL is used as a cure-all, it may wind up not curing much of anything. Indiscriminate assignment of students to an ESL program not only wastes their time and obscures the real nature of their language learning needs but blurs the focus of the program and blunts its effectiveness.

In defining the aims and limitations of ESL, it is well to begin with the obvious: regardless of whether or not a student comes from a "foreign language" background—that is, from a sub-culture where some language other than English is widely used—he only needs ESL instruction if he doesn't know English. And many such students do, in fact, know English, as demonstrated by their ability to use the language more or less freely in communicating with other people; that the kind of English they know may not be acceptable in school is beside the point. Some are natively bilingual. Others, especially among second and third generation Americans, have only a passive and fragmentary acquaintance with the language of their parents and grandparents, and thus for practical purposes speak only English. Even students who do not know English natively have often learned some form of the language by the time they get to school, though they may be more at home in their native tongue. And self-evident though it may seem, the difference between knowing some kind of English and not knowing any is worth insisting on, for its significance has not always been fully understood.

Implicit in the methods commonly employed by language teachers (including many teachers of ESL) is the idea that languages are learned gradually, bit by bit. If a student is trying to master French, for instance, his task is assumed to be essentially the same whether he knows only a little French or quite a lot: to increase the inventory of French words and forms he is able to use and understand. In fact, as the transformationalists have conclusively shown, this is very far from being the case. Someone who may be able to produce on cue even a very large repertoire of French utterances still cannot be said to know French so long as his use of the language is limited to the list of words and phrases he has learned. To know a language is to have the capacity for spontaneously combining its elements in an infinite variety of different (and often novel) ways. To gain this capacity is to internalize its underlying system, its grammar—in transformational terms, its generative rules.[1] And while control over the system of a language does not come instantaneously, in a kind of miraculous vision, neither is it merely a matter of degree. Rather, the shift from knowing a language as an inventory of forms, the way beginning students usually do, to knowing it as a generative system constitutes a kind of quantum leap forward in the student's progress toward competence in the language.

This fact about the nature of language acquisition has an important bearing on the design and administration of ESL programs. For it follows that the language learning needs of someone who has not internalized the generative system of English are very different from those of someone who has, regardless of how limited the latter's stylistic range may be. The primary need of those who have yet to gain control over the generative rules is to do so as soon as possible, and promoting this process should be

[1] Since teachers have sometimes confused knowing the grammar of a language with knowing how to talk about it, perhaps it should be stressed that the one is not dependent on the other. The key word here is **internalized**; while every speaker of a language knows its rules, relatively few can even begin to explain what they are, transformationally or in any other way. And even the most sophisticated grammars fall far short of accounting for all the details of the system.

the main objective of ESL instruction.[2] By contrast, the task of students who already know the underlying system of English is to refine and extend their control over the details of the system, and this is true (though in greatly varying degree) regardless of their native language, the dialect they happen to speak, or the social and situational variants they happen to know. If their English differs widely from cultivated usage or is heavily influenced by borrowing from another language, the generative rules they know may be somewhat different from those known to their teachers, say, or to members of the local bar association. But except in the most extreme cases, the differences will be confined to what transformationalists call the surface structure rather than the deep structure of the language, which is to say that they will be relatively trivial. For these students, then, learning to speak more like teachers or lawyers will very seldom involve major alterations in the generative system of the language as they know it, though it may mean learning the details of a markedly different dialect.

Unfortunately, the fundamental difference between learning a second language and learning alternative forms of the same language has tended to be obscured by certain developments in the teaching of standard English as a second dialect. In the early sixties, it was found that techniques borrowed from second-language teaching, notably pattern drills, produced striking results when used in teaching standard English to speakers of nonstandard dialects.[3] This discovery has led many educators to conclude that, for practical purposes, nonstandard dialects are the same as foreign languages and present the same kinds of pedagogical problems. This notion has seemed especially credible when the nonstandard dialects are associated with and influenced by foreign language communities. Thus, I have heard school administrators argue in all seriousness that whether a student speaks Spanish or a Spanish-influenced dialect of English, it amounts to the same thing and the same "remediation" is called for. Lately, such gross oversimplifications have prompted strong dissent from some of the most vigorous advocates of second-language methods in second-dialect instruction. For example, Virginia French Allen has recently written that "to anyone who uses English of any sort for everyday communication, English is not a foreign language" and that "teachers in second-dialect programs had better remember that."[4] To which it may be added that ESL teachers had better remember it, too.

Ironically, part of the confusion probably arises from the fact that such devices as pattern drills are generally much better suited to teaching second dialects than second languages. Where the aim is to replace a limited number of nonstandard forms with standard ones, exercises in the standard patterns, though depressingly mechanical, may do the trick (always provided, of course, that the students want to learn standard English in the first place). But such exercises, while they continue to be widely used in second-language instruction, are too narrow in focus to be of much value in learning the underlying system of an unfamiliar language unless they are sequenced to impart such knowledge inductively, and this has not often

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[2] How to go about doing this is not part of my subject, but readers who are interested in the application of transformational theory to language teaching methods and materials will find it discussed in several essays by Leonard Newmark, David A. Reibel, and Leon Jakobovits which are reprinted in Mark Lester's **Readings in Applied Transformational Grammar** (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970).

[3] The most significant experiments along this line are described in San-su C. Lin. **Pattern Practice in the Teaching of Standard English to Students with a Nonstandard Dialect** (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 1965).

[4] "A Second Dialect Is Not a Foreign Language," in **Report of the Twentieth Annual Roundtable Meeting on Linguistics and Language Studies**, ed. James E. Alatis (Washington, D. C.: Georgetown University Press, 1970), p. 191.

been the case. In any event, learning a second language and learning a second dialect are emphatically not the same thing, regardless of how many teaching techniques may usefully apply to both. And there is certainly no reason to think both can be taught in the same class at the same time. Hence it is a matter of some importance that ESL programs be limited to teaching students English who don't already know it. Other students from foreign language backgrounds who do know English but don't know as much of it as they need should not be ignored, of course. But they should be able to get help with standard English as an alternative dialect or with reading or with written composition somewhere else.

The problem remains of determining whether students who come from non-English-speaking sub-cultures do in fact know English, and what kind of English they know, and how well they know it. Teachers often seem rather naive about the difficulties of assessing their students' language capability, tending to confuse knowledge of English with the ability to use standard English in school situations. Thus, if Puerto-Rican or Mexican-American students say little or nothing in class, their silence is often taken as prima-facie evidence that they know little or no English.[5] Conversely, if they do talk, any conspicuous use of nonstandard forms is likely to be regarded as showing how little English they really know, rather than how much. Either way, their command of the language is apt to be seriously underestimated. So I would like to conclude by emphasizing the difference between what linguists call *competence* and *performance* and the significance of that difference in deciding what kind of language instruction students need.

Without getting technical about it, a person's linguistic competence is roughly equivalent to his language-making potential, to what he is capable of doing with the language when all systems are go. Performance obviously depends on competence, but because the human language-making faculty seldom operates at 100% efficiency, performance usually falls short of competence in some degree. How far short depends on a great many extralinguistic variables. For example, a speaker's performance may be noticeably affected if he is sick, drunk, stoned, tired, angry, frightened, euphoric, or any one of a number of other things, singly or in combination. it may also be influenced in various ways by unfamiliar or uncomfortable or threatening social situations. In the extreme case—stage fright, for instance—otherwise highly articulate people may literally be struck dumb. Now, the ultimate aim of language instruction is to improve competence rather than performance. For while performance varies widely, competence determines the upper limits of its effectiveness, and improvement in competence usually leads to overall improvement in performance. The trouble is that competence can be measured only indirectly, through actual performance, the unpredictability of which makes it an unreliable index at best.

The picture is further complicated by the difference between what Rudolph Troike has called *receptive competence* and *productive competence.*[6]

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[5] Some educators, unable to elicit much more than monosyllables from Negro children, have even reached the astonishing conclusion that they scarcely know any language at all. For an instructive account of the reasons for the childrens' unresponsiveness and the educators' misinterpretation of it, see William Labov, "The Logic of Non-Standard English," in Alatis, Op. Cit., pp. 1-43 and also in Alfred C. Aarons, et. al., Linguistic-Cultural Differences and American Education, a special anthology issue of the Florida FL Reporter, Vol. 7 (1969), pp. 60 ff. Though Labov's account is confined to the language of the black ghetto, much of what he says applies equally well to the dialects of other racial and ethnic minorities.

[6] "Receptive Competence, Productive Competence, and Performance," in Alatis, Op. Cit., pp. 63-73.

At the simplest level, this distinction is a commonplace of everyone's linguistic experience. We all understand the meanings of utterances we can't produce ourselves. To cite only one example, we comprehend without much difficulty the speech of people whose dialects are quite different from our own and whose pronunciation we can't begin to duplicate. Yet the myth persists in educational circles that a student who can't speak standard English can't read it, and that if he is unable to talk back he doesn't understand what he's hearing. Should he read a written text aloud in his own nonstandard dialect, his teacher may well assume that he has read it "incorrectly," whereas his ability to translate into his own brand of English, rather than merely parroting the forms on the page, is in fact the clearest kind of evidence that he knows what he's reading. Unfortunately, receptive competence not only can't be measured directly but is often exceedingly difficult to assess indirectly. Still, it is a salient part of what it means to "know" a language, and shouldn't be disregarded. Most of us, after all, have—and need—vastly more receptive than productive competence, whatever our linguistic background may be, and language would be a far more limited and less effective means of communication if this were not so. Then, too, receptive competence is the first step towards acquiring productive competence; without it, language instruction is unlikely to get very far.

Having pointed out some of the difficulties teachers face in evaluating the linguistic competence of their students, I wish I could offer some easy way around them. Regrettably, I don't know any. All I can do is to suggest extreme caution and an acute awareness of the many influences that may inhibit language performance in the classroom, particularly if the speaker comes from a minority sub-culture. For many such students, school is an alien and hostile environment where they are made to feel uncomfortable and insecure, and teachers are strange beings whose language and behavior are frequently quite unaccountable. Furthermore, the school is an agency of a majority culture which constantly puts them down for being who they are and for acting and speaking the way they do. And most of them are well aware that there is a special variety of English appropriate to the classroom but that little in their experience prepares them to use it with anything approaching ease and confidence.[7] Is it any wonder that their language performance in class commonly reveals more about their alienation and intimidation than about their English? In many cases, it is only in unguarded moments in the hall or on the playground, or even away from school entirely, that such students will begin to reveal the real extent of their ability to use English.

As happens with discouraging frequency when language scholars address educators, the main burden of my argument seems to be that the subject is a lot more complicated than has generally been recognized. Indeed, there are many complications I haven't touched on at all. I wish it were otherwise, but the complexity is there and must somehow be dealt with. Just knowing about it and trying to deal honestly with it is bound to help in making ESL programs more successful. And perhaps my remarks will at least discourage some teacher somewhere from packing a student off to the ESL class just because his name is Pedro and he stares at the floor and scuffs his toe every time he's called on to speak in class.

[7] On this point, see Susan B. Houston, "A Sociolinguistic Consideration of the Black English of Children in Northern Florida," **Language**, Vol. 45 (1969), pp. 599-606. Though her work is, like Labov's cited earlier, confined to the language of Negro students, it seems obvious that the distinction she observes between what she terms the school and child "registers" of English is not restricted to the black community.