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ABSTRACT

This article comments on Gilbert A. Jarvis' "Teacher Education Goals: They're Tearing Up the Street Where I Was Born" in the December 1972 issue of "Foreign Language Annals." Remarks concerning teacher education, methods courses, teaching strategies, the audiolingual method of language instruction, and the Modern Language Association "Guidelines" for teacher preparation prepared in 1966 concentrate on areas of solid accomplishment in language program development while recognizing the changing attitudes towards language instruction in the 1970's. (RL)

EVEN IF THEY'RE TEARING UP THE STREET WHERE YOU WERE BORN, DON'T THROW OUT THE BABY WITH THE WASH

Gilbert Jarvis' recent editorial in Foreign Language Annals makes a number of points that represent as eloquent a summing-up of current feelings in foreign language education as I have recently heard. At the same time, and perhaps for the same reasons, it is symptomatic of the selfsame "future shock" that its author mentions in passing. As any good editorial statement should, Jarvis' paper evokes thoughts and stimulates reactions. The following are mine.

Jarvis maintains in his opening statements that the new plurality in learning trends brings us away from a fruitless search for the technique, the approach, or the strategy. Not too long ago we were still bent on discovering the sovereign remedy that would solve all problems and cure all ills, and in our zeal and innocence we put our money down for many a magic snake-oil elixir that turned out to be only a mild stimulant. Lately, in our new-found caution, we have begun to recognize that pat answers will not do; that each teacher or teacher-to-be should be equipped with a multiplicity of possible answers so that the resultant flexibility will make possible the rational decisions in the place where they most matter: the classroom, where they can be evaluated in terms

of actual student performance. Some may think that, since we have no single methodological panacea to offer, we have nothing to teach, that there is no point in so-called "methods" courses. Quite the contrary. I should rather say that our professional training and methods courses should widen to include as many alternative approaches and strategies as possible, in all their contradicting glory. In fact, to the degree that these courses have not always given choices and presented alternatives, shame on us all, for forgetting that theory consists of closed systems of logic to which the real world around us only rarely subscribes.

Another trend that Professor Jarvis points out is the undeniable shift that has taken place in goal-determining. During the sixties we spoke of goals in teacher education as though the teacher were the end product of our labors. The 1966 "Guidelines" focus heavily upon desirable skills and knowledge that the teacher that we train should possess, upon what the teacher should do in the classroom, and what the college should do to train him or her to so perform. The MLA-CAL film series, to offer one more well-known example, concentrates upon the teacher's procedures and performance at stage center in the classroom. In these films the students are shown as what we thought them to ideally be, a passive and receptive (albeit enthusiastic) audience.

Lately, in our newly-acquired wisdom, we have come to recognize the student as a generator of educational goals. There is talk that we should look to "learning outcomes" or "output" and then work "backward" as we seek to determine, observe, measure, and influence that output. Consonant with this shift, it is no longer the teacher-training college which solely determines what should take place in the high school, but rather, the learner's own goals and performance that should ultimately mold the college teacher-training curriculum. The implications of this shift are far-reaching; so far-reaching, in fact, that none of us know where this about-face may lead us if, as I have heard advocated, the high school learner becomes our one and only touch-stone to curricular wisdom.

Jarvis himself says that we must be responsive to "felt needs" of the student. What does this really mean? Are the students' "felt needs" measurable by stated desires on an attitude questionnaire, or observed desires as shown by beaming faces, enthusiasm and good grades? We cannot blithely assume so. Further, does the adolescent always need what he wants or want what he needs? Try this at the dinner-table. Feed him only what he wants. The result will be beri-beri.

Personally, I like the food analogy because in this day of importance given to observed phenomena you can observe malnutrition, but intellectual underfeeding is far more insidious, though no less present. I like the analogy

too because the high school curriculum is like a vast smorgasbord, and so we must make our dish attractive to the eye and the palate, along with the vitamins of cultural enrichment, the minerals of genuine communication skills, and, I trust, the carbohydrate of some good, honest work. But if we go too far and allow the student, in his aggregate wisdom, to be the sole determiner of our menu, I fear we shall wallow in marshmallows.'

Another aspect of Jarvis' paper which caught my eye was in his looking back on the pomposity of the sixties, that sanctimonious sort of swagger found among those who felt themselves possessed of the True Word. Among those were whole groups who spoke of "retreading" the oldsters at NDEA Institutes and those who spelled out, in word and in print, rules and commandments to the nth degree. Both the "Monster" and the 1966 "Guidelines," as well as Brooks et al, contain solemn pronouncements at which we are now permitted to smirk. Nevertheless there persists a secret and unconfessed suspicion in quieter and more contemplative corners of our profession, that the audio-lingual movement (if a movement it truly was) shared briefly with Christianity the misfortune of having not been tried and found wanting. Often, the purveyers of the audio-lingual method were not so dogmatic as we made them out to be. Here is what Brooks said at the height of the sixties:

> Since the days of Comenius, and especially in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there has been much discussion, and at times controversy, about methods. Much of this debate has been beside the point. By definition, a method is a procedure for arriving at a destination. Almost any method is justifiable if it is humane, is not too costly in time and effort, and remains faithful to the desired objective.

In fact, if my memory serves me, it was not so much the leaders of the movement who debased the instruction of foreign languages, it was the followers, among them both authors, professors, and teachers, who directed that massive, dehumanized, mindless stimulus-and-response flea-circus that we called audio-lingual instruction and which we are still trying to live down.

This brings me to the next point in Jarvis' paper, and the one which gives me greatest concern. He declares that we should throw out the experience we have gained in order to seek entirely new answers to what he perceives as entirely new questions. "We are precluded from applying the responses of the past to the phenomena of today," he says, and so, he goes on, "we must learn to look less to our past, even our recent past." Personally, I worry about such an attitude, not only because it calls to mind Ron Zeigler's historically unfortunate assertion that "all previous statements on Watergate are 'inoperable,'" but primarily because it should be abundantly clear by now that if the past decade's experience carries any mes-

sage at all, it is that professional amnesia leads to all sorts of foolishness. Jarvis implies, I fear, that there is no idea worth passing on, no approach worth teaching, no technique worth dusting off and trying out. Such an attitude would submit teacher and teacher-trainer alike to the mercy of the moment, to wave upon wave of puffed-up novelty and faddism under the guise of innovation. We shall end up reinventing the wheel every few years. As though to give flesh to my fears, Jarvis touts up a "new emphasis," as he puts it, a concentration upon the behavioral skills, in predicting and analyzing learner behavior with the view that the teacher alone is responsible for his decisions.

To me, the behavioral analysis skills must be surely useful as an addition to the teacher's panoply of capacities, but we might remember that sensitive teachers have intuitively observed and measured behaviors for milennia, whereas it is unproven that a teacher insensitive to the consequences of classroom interaction can be helped by behavioral analysis skills. Even were this not so, however, it would be rash, probably foolish, to put such great faith in a "new emphasis," another snake-oil elixir, to the abandonment of what we have learned at great cost and no little effort in past years.

I'm certain that many of us feel with Jarvis that

"they're tearing up the street where we were born," particularly after the smugness of the sixties and our confidence that the enrollments would rise forever, that the federal monies would always roll in, and that technological salvation was just over the horizon. But even though we must recognize and even do penance for past excesses, I cannot agree that we should cleanse ourselves of all former thought and experience. Consider the 1966 Teacher Education "Guidelines," which Jarvis unfortunately considers irrelevant. In case you have not recently reread the "Guidelines," I shall reiterate some of their key points. Basing themselves on the "Good" level of the "Qualifications for Secondary School Teachers of Modern Foreign Languages," the "Guidelines'" "Minimal Objectives for a Teacher Education Program in Modern Foreign Languages" spell out such well-known criteria as "Ability to understand conversation at normal tempo, lectures, and professional areas, these "Minimal Objectives" specify a "Knowledge of the present-day objectives of modern foreign language teaching as communication, and an understanding of the methods and techniques for attaining these objectives. Knowledge of the use of specialized techniques, such as educational media, and of the relation of modern foreign language teaching." The "Guidelines'" "Features of a Teacher Education Program . . ." recommend that the

teacher-training institution formulate and publish a statement regarding "admission to, retention in, and completion of the program," in terms of minimal achievements and clearly stated criteria; that placement, progress, and final certification should involve language tests in the four skills; and that its methods offerings provide "A study of approaches to, methods of, and techniques to be used in teaching a modern foreign language." In short, the "Guidelines" are reasonable, realistic, and highly undoctrinaire. As recommendations (a term much repeated in the document) they are still useful and valid. As gospel, they never were, and for this I am grateful.

I wish to make no impassioned defense of the 1966 "Guidelines," but rather to make a point. The "Guidelines" seek to describe a rounded, humane and humanistic concept within which any number of specific programs could be built. They would hope to provide the teacher trainee with the broad range of demonstrated competences that flexibility, pluralism, and the halting advance of human technology demand. I might also add that we still, after nearly a decade, fall far short of the excellence of the "Guidelines'" spirit.

Unfortunately, the stylish "mod" tunnel-vision that would, at the first sight of crisis, turn away from experience and recognize only the here and now, loses its sense of perspective. It reasons, childishly, that since we don't know every-

thing, we must therefore know nothing. In this field of view every difficulty becomes a crisis, and every crisis appears cataclysmic. Those who choose to view their profession through a knot-hole become "future shock" incarnate. Many are right now overreacting ludicrously to present difficulties; in their frenzy they are prone to grasp at simplistic solutions to a complex and far-reaching problem, and they are swayed to and fro by the breast-beaters and snake-oil peddlers. In the very recent past we have had salvation offered up in the form of computer-assisted instruction, systems analysis, behavioral manipulation, and others, to say nothing of a score of grammar systems. There is potential benefit in many of these but salvation is not at hand, either through curricular or technological reform.

At the root of this frenzy is not, I fear, the uncertain state of our art anyway; it is the current decline in enrollments. If an upturn were to occur this next year through an event or events totally alien to us, the rush to take credit would be seismic. Self-congratulation would reign, until the next dip, during which we would all hear once again how dreadfully incompetent we are. Those sufferers of future-shock do not know or care not to remember that foreign language education in the United States is traditionally embattled. Listen to this statement--taken

from the 1966 "Guidelines"--to see if it sounds familiar:

> During the decade of the thirties, modern language teaching was on the defensive, discouraged, characterized by a defeatist attitude. Enrollments were shrinking, high schools and colleges were removing foreign languages from the required list, and replacing them with social studies. . . . Because of declining language enrollments, young language teachers met a buyer's market, and often had to teach other subjects.

Jarvis holds that our prosperous sixties were a "plastic" blessing and in some vague way he holds the profession responsible for current stresses. While we could have done everything better than we did, it does not follow that we did everything wrong. While I might hope that enrollments would skyrocket if we were to improve dramatically foreign language instruction in the United States, I am not persuaded it would be so. What I do believe is that neither cause is to be served by breast-beating. If we simply realize than in America, foreign language studies are considered peripheral by just about everyone but us, that the U.S. populace will not be struck language-conscious by devices ranging from systems analysis to piñata parties, and that we are, in the foreseeable future practically certain to continue pushing our Sisyphan rock ever uphill, then we can lay aside our hairshirts and get on with our work, and do it better.

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