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ABSTRACT

A word of caution is needed about the tendency of language teachers to seize on simplistic and unproven solutions to complex problems. For example, the concept of individualization, when it is limited to having students work in isolation to fulfill mechanically-prescribed objectives, should be questioned. The so-called "systems approach" to foreign language learning simply attempts to do more efficiently the same depersonalizing things that caused the educational problems. If the learning experience is to have any permanent value for the student, he must perceive what he is learning as intimately involved with his own self-fulfillment. Student interest and motivation are the keys to success. Foreign language teachers have in the past made the mistake of introducing too much content at too fast a rate. Textbooks should be used as basic resources rather than as basic curricula, and undue emphasis must not be placed on the quantity of material a teacher covers. Students must be given a chance to do something with the language they are learning, to use it instead of simply memorizing it. Teachers must choose course content on the basis of the following three questions: (1) Is it a genuine sample of cultural and linguistic material? (2) Does it fit the student's level of maturity and intellectual development? (3) Will the student find it interesting and worthwhile? (PP)

STUDENT MOTIVATION, FOR ON LANGUAGE BANDWAGONS AND INSTRUCTIONAL REALITIES

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The following is an abridged version of an address delivered on April 27, 1974 at the UFLA Spring Conference.

I was asked to relate my remarks to your conference theme, "Secrets of Success." I like that theme with its emphasis on the positive. I also like the emphasis on student motivation and student participation which is reflected in the afternoon clinics. I believe in the practice of using successful programs as pedagogical models; I also believe that we need to do more with motivating students and involving them more actively in the instructional process. In fact, this is one of the threads which will run through my presentation today. Another theme of today's remarks is a word of caution regarding the tendency of people in our profession to seize upon simplistic, unproven and heavily ballyhooed solutions to complex problems (such as teaching a second language to American teenagers and young adults.)

At the outset, let us take a brief look at a few of the major bandwagons which are outside of the foreign language field, but which are affecting us. One of the first which comes to mind is individualization. The problem is that there are at least a dozen different versions of what that term means. Thus, it is necessary to define one's terms. To many people it means self-pacing; letting each student complete the same body of subject matter at his own rate. Research has shown that there are many limitations to this approach. One of the best summaries of the problems with it was done by James Taylor of B.Y.U. in the February issue of the Speaker. His conclusions reflect what seems to be happening with students of high school and college age around the country.

In this regard I would like to question seriously the concept of individualization which is limited to having students working in isolation to fulfill mechanically-prescribed objectives, but only at different rates of speed. This approach, no matter what you do, tends to reduce or eliminate social interaction among students. And students are, after all, social creatures. I would also like to go on record as opposing the curricular delivery system which certain advocates of "accountability" call the "systems approach." I'm not against the systems approach per se. It's just that its application to the instructional program is potentially destructive to genuine education. Among other things, the systems approach involves an assessment of alleged student needs, the writing of behavioral objectives in relation to those needs, the preparation of tests to measure whether or not the objectives have been met, and, of course an instructional system for getting the students to produce those behaviors which have been specified in advance. In fact, I'm personally appalled by the implication that--in their spare time--teachers are supposed to produce an individualized, personalized, cost accountable, relevant and career-oriented program which is to be finalized, written down and described in terms of 3,624 behavioral objectives by next Tuesday. And the tragedy is that, even if you could do all that, it

wouldn't solve a thing. For the answer to our problems is not to confront students with a more sophisticated knowledge-dispensing system; our problem is to get students to relate emotionally and with intellectual integrity to that part of the human cultural heritage which we call the foreign language field. And the trouble with administratively-oriented gimmicks like the systems approach is that they are simply trying to do more efficiently those depersonalizing things which caused the problem in the first place. And the record shows that behaviorally-oriented systems techniques have not had spectacular success in foreign language education. It should also be noted that the accountability-oriented programs in other subject areas have failed to produce better educational results.[1] (And here I'm referring to the performance contracting approach in which private learning corporations were paid in accordance to how well students did on objective tests.) In my opinion the reason why systems people do not get the promised results is that they have failed to grasp the principle which field psychologists refer to as "life space." According to this concept, whatever is in a person's life space in a given moment is important to him; everything else is irrelevant. Or, as the psychologist Jerome Bruner has expressed it, "You must get the perceptual field organized around your own person as center before you impose other less ego-centric axes upon it."[2] To apply this to the present discussion of personalized foreign language programs, it means simply that, if the learning experience is to have any permanent value to the student, he must perceive it as producing some important inward change in him or her as a person. Those who identify with this so-called "humanistic approach" to education refer to this phenomenon by such terms as "the need for self-actualization," or the need for any experience to become "a meaningful entity in one's life space." At a less sophisticated level, there are those who talk about education in terms of "relevance" or "doing your own thing." But whatever the jargon, the intention is the same. The student learns a particular thing because he personally perceives it to be intimately connected with his personal self-fulfillment in the present or near future. All other learning is, at best, irrelevant to him according to this humanistic view.

However, I think the point should also be made that terms like "relevance," "self-actualization" and "doing your own thing" are rather dangerous half-truths unless they are put in a suitable context. And where education is concerned, that context is the curriculum. One does not self-actualize in a vacuum; one does not run around scattering relevance upon the world if his only equipment consists of gut-level feelings combined with ignorance and youthful self-righteousness. All of this is not new, of course. In fact, way back in 1762 Rousseau made an eloquent case against doctrinaire teaching methods and in favor of the student learning according to his own natural bent. Rousseau might have been speaking directly to those contemporary federal education officials who wonder why all the billions of dollars spent to improve reading programs in American schools have brought little in the way of perceptible results. Over 200 years ago Rousseau said,

> "Reading by some strange perversity has become a torment for childhood. Why should this be? Because the children have been compelled to learn it against their will and made to put it to purposes which mean nothing for them. Great stress was laid on finding better methods of teaching children to read. Reading cases and cards have been invented and the child's room has been turned into a printer's shop. Fancy all this elaborate contrivance! A surer way that nobody thinks of is to create the desire to read. Give the child this desire and have done with gadgets and any method will be good."[3]

With a few changes in wording, Rousseau could also have been talking to the contemporary researchers in foreign language education who can find no perceptible improvement in student achievement despite all the millions of dollars spent on electronic gadgetry and upon crash inservice programs based upon what was supposed to have been a methodological breakthrough. Why didn't all this effort during the last decade make some measurable difference? I suspect that at least part of the answer lies in Rousseau's idea that, if we give the student the desire, any method will work. In other words, student interest is the key. Without it, methods and gadgets are irrelevant, including the language lab (which somebody has recently referred to as education's Edsel). To apply contemporary jargon to the instance cited above, Rousseau's method for teaching reading was to get the student to see reading as a means of self-actualization. And unlike generations of Rousseauian romantics (who mis-applied his theories), Rousseau saw "well-regulated liberty" as a necessary part of instruction.[4] And the regulation in education comes from the standards inherent in the materials to be learned. That is, the integrity of any discipline is built in. It is, therefore, beside the point, for example, for a student to declare that the subjunctive is bad for his mental health! The subjunctive is simply there as a documented fact relating to the speech patterns of the target culture. It is not a product of authoritarian adult behavior. Educational theorists from Rousseau to John Dewey and beyond have generally noted this relationship between pupil and subject matter. Where the pupil is concerned the role of the teacher is not to merely satisfy individual wants or needs. In fact, to attempt to base a curriculum entirely on the confused and transitory gropings of youth is for the adult world to declare intellectual bankruptcy. Even Jonathon Kozol, an outspoken critic of public schools and an advocate of free schools, has noted the tendency of the contemporary free school movement to do precisely that. In a recent article he condemned both permissive and authoritarian extremes of teacher behavior. As he put it,

> "In an effort to avoid the standard brand of classroom tyranny that is identified so often with the domineering figure in the .... public (school) system, innovative free school teachers often make the grave mistake of reducing themselves to ethical and pedagogical neuters. It is just not true that the best teacher is the one who most successfully pretends that he knows nothing."[5]

So the real danger of interest-centered programs is that they tend to sacrifice the integrity of the discipline. Student gratification tends to become an end in itself, without regard for what is learned. For some reason that has been the fate of major educational reforms throughout history. Dewey saw it happening in the progressive education movement as easly as 1902, and he warned that such excesses in the "new" progressive education would only lead to the re-implementation of an extreme form of the old authoritarianism (which, historically, is precisely what happened). As he expressed it a half century ago,

> "The student is expected to develop this or that fact out of his own mind; he is told to think things out, or work things out for himself . . . Yet nothing can be developed from nothing, nothing but the crude can be developed out of the crude. It is certainly as futile to expect a child to evolve a universe out of his own mere mind as it is for a philosopher to attempt that task."[6]

Now, in considering the extremes of bad pedagogy, it is my feeling that we in foreign languages have tended to move in the direction of introducing too much content at too fast a rate. In fact, one of the major obstacles to the implementation of interest-centered foreign language programs is the obsession which we seem to have in this country to covering all the pages in any given textbook between September and June. I mention "this country" because during my visits to schools in Germany, I was surprised to note that, even with a longer school year, there was much less content in their foreign language texts. They were using thin little volumes to cover an entire school year. The emphasis was on doing fewer things and doing them well. Now, I doubt that we will see shorter American textbooks in the near future. I know people who have tried to write them. The publishers simply wouldn't go along, on the grounds of marketability. Therefore, one of the necessary co-learning tasks for students and teachers will involve learning how to use existing textbooks as basic resources rather than as basic curricula. That is, instead of trying to get students to memorize by rote an entire corpus of dialog and pattern drill material, just as it is presented in the text, the role of the teacher is to help students learn how to create their own memory mediators using that corpus of textbook material for reference. There is some research to support this approach. In a carefully controlled study one investigator found that students who created their own memory mediators were able to recall up to 95% of new learning material. Within the same time period, students who were given the same material in precooked form retained less than 50%, at best. Unfortunately this latter approach, involving the rote learning of specific utterances, is what I find all too many language teachers attempting to do under the name of audio-lingualism. Ironically, even when we succeed in implanting specific utterances in the student's mind, we may have done him more harm than good insofar as genuine communication is concerned.

As to the use of a basic text series, I agree for the most part with the Committee of Canadian Language Teachers who stated,

> "The textbook is still needed to introduce students in an orderly progression to the structural concepts of the language. It should serve as a ready reference, but it must be expanded and reinforced by a rich variety of supplementary materials through the inventions of the imaginative teacher. It is particularly important to provide supplementary material for active communication. That is, material which will relate directly to one's immediate environment so that the student can express himself in terms of his multi-faceted surroundings."[7]

There is, by the way, some pretty devastating evidence to indicate that we have been neglecting this area of active personal communication. A few years ago a researcher in Iowa did an analysis of 54 different tapes of third-year language instruction submitted voluntarily by teachers in three midwestern states. His findings suggest that less than two hours out of an entire school year are devoted to having individual students express any of their own ideas by means of the foreign language. Almost all of the classroom interaction involved teacher talk or else it was a sort of ventriloquist-and-dummy relationship with students responding only to stimuli originated by the teacher.[8] And I think that, in part, this is a direct result of the teacher, with the best of intentions, trying to cover an impossible amount of material. In this regard, we also have the problem of some college people who make believe that they are covering twice as much material in a year as the high school teacher makes believe he or she is covering in the same time span. Imagine this approach being applied to English literature where we would end up saying, for example, that if it requires two hours of a high school audience to view a presentation of Shakespeare's

H let, then by simple logic, we ought to require the actors to deliver their lines in twice that speed when they are playing for a college audience. And imagine drawling out the "to be or not to be" soliloquy at one-fourth the rate when confronting a junior high school audience!.. Now, the moral of all this nonsense is, that we somehow have to break out of this cycle of events which causes us to place undue emphasis upon the quantity of material which a teacher covers. (And actually, if we're really honest about it, it's only the teacher who covers the material.) Instead, we have to emphasize the quality of the experience which the student undergoes within the language program. Failure to do so in this day and age can be catastrophic. There are several high schools in my state, with enrollments as high as 500, which have totally dropped their remaining one foreign language for next year. That's the kind of cutback that's taking place in many schools. This case is somewhat typical. . . The teacher had "standards"--what he didn't have was students. And the school board would no longer allocate funds for a program with an enrollment of 12 pupils--less than 3% of the student body.

So let's face it. The rat race of the college-oriented curriculum is viewed as irrelevant by an increasing number of young people. Let's also face the fact that, at the high school level, we in foreign languages are increasingly in competition with a lot of interesting electives and hobbytype courses in other subject areas. For example, creative-writing and filmmaking in English, simulation and game theory in the social studies, and many other courses which I don't have time to discuss here. However, I'm not suggesting that we try to compete by converting the language classroom into a teenage day-care center. On the contrary, I feel strongly that in building interest-centered programs, great care must be taken to maintain standards. So what are standards?

Some people seem to think they've taken care of the standards question by playing cute little word games with a few hundred behavioral objectives, to the effect that "given certain conditions the students will do thus and so at the 80% level." Well, that approach bothers me. And one thing I don't like about it is the arbitrary percentage figure. And I also don't like the treatment of learning as a series of discrete, measurable output behaviors... It happens that I do a lot of air travel. And, on a recent flight, it occurred to me, what if the pilot had been trained on a behavioral objective which read: "Given Boeing 727, the pilot will take off and land the aircraft successfully, eight out of ten times. . ."

The point is, I don't want either pilots or language students who have been trained to think that they have succeeded when they have achieved a minimum level of performance which is checked off as a finished product at some discrete-point in time. As an educator, what I am looking for is students in any field who care enough about what they are doing to aim at disciplining themselves toward optimum, sustained performance.

Thus, the basic function of interest in foreign language education is to induce students to care about optimum standards of performance, and to work toward that complex synthesis of skills, emotions, and areas of knowledge which is characteristic of any worthwhile learning. In this process, interest and standards are inseparable.

I think this is a crucial point. So, let me draw from another field of study to further clarify what I mean. . . . I know a guitar teacher who has a waiting list of students, some of whom want to play classical music, others folk music, others country-western, etc. Whatever the student is interested in doing becomes the starting point. However--although the content is oriented to outcomes which the students perceive to be relevant--this teacher also has very rigid standards. For example, students must drill on the correct use of the right and left hand, and they must get it right. They must learn to read music, insofar as that reading pertains to what they're trying to do. However, there is always a direct perceptible line between what the student drills upon, and where all that practice leads. That is, there is an emotional pay-off. Hours and hours of tedious struggle with frets and strings produce an outcome which has personal meaning to the student. We must create comparable situations in the foreign language classroom. Furthermore, satisfying outcomes cannot be postponed until advanced levels of instruction. With today's students--the so-called "now generation"--it is obvious that the curriculum must consist of much more than one series of dialogs and pattern drills to be followed by another series of dialogs and pattern drills, all labeled with exciting titles like French I, German II, Spanish III, and Russian IV. Instead, there must be a visible personal outcome for each practice session. Unfortunately, many foreign language classrooms resemble that old sadistic joke where the child says, "Mommy, when do we get to Europe?" And the mother answers by saying, "Shut up and keep swimming." In many so-called audio-lingual classrooms students are saying, in effect, "When do I get to do something with the language?" And too often the answer they get is, "Shut up and keep memorizing!"

Instead of this we've got to give them a chance to do something with the foreign language. However, the problem is that--in contrast to learning vocal or instrumental music--audio language production requires a vehicle beyond itself. . . A person singing and playing a guitar can enjoy the experience almost anywhere, alone or in groups. However, after the novelty has worn off, there is not much satisfaction merely in hearing one's own voice even in a second language. (Hence, the ultimate idiocy of total individualization; neither human beings nor languages have any real meaning outside of a social context.) So, what is required is the creation of situations in which it makes sense for a student to use the foreign language in a non-threatening social situation. Ultimately, this must refer to something which the student is interested in. For without positive feelings toward language study, whatever skills the student acquires are quite transitory. Worse yet, the results can actually be negative. Within the profession we have a classic example of negative results. I am referring here to the relatively large number of school administrators who are actively hostile to languages largely because they had been compelled to pass the doctoral reading exam. In many cases the main learning outcome was a deepseated distaste for anything that had to do with foreign languages in any form. And this is merely one dramatic example of the simple fact that our salvation as a profession does not lie in standards and requirements which are imposed on us from above. On the contrary, it lies in the standards which the student chooses to internalize because he feels deeply that the language course contains something which is worth his time and effort. Foreign language requirements can get students into the program physically. But in this day and age, the problem is to keep them there mentally and emotionally (as well as physically). Thus, at the beginning instructional levels we must not look to the university graduate school or any other olympian source for guidance regarding course content. Instead, we must seek out instructional content which answers the following questions affirmatively:

"Is it a genuine sample of cultural or linguistic material?"

"Does it fit the student's level of maturity and intellectual development?"

And, "Is it appealing to the student?"

That is, does he perceive it to be interesting and worthwhile?

There has been a tendency to define standards--almost from the beginning--in terms of literary or philological material. However, from the standpoint of general education--which is the basic function of the elementary and secondary school--this pre-occupation with belletristic content is suicidal in today's world. Or to put it positively, the language of each of the various target cultures represents a wide spectrum of potentially stimulating content. Literature provides a small, (albeit brilliant), ray of light in the cultural spectrum of any given nation. However, the appreciation of works of literature in the foreign language is a culminating experience, one which is best realized in the context of a broad cultural awareness by a student who has achieved a considerable degree of sophistication in the use of the regular, everyday language. To introduce foreign language literature to students who are culturally and linguistically naive is to invite them to regard foreign language study as confusing, elitist and basically irrelevant. After all, the most basic aspect of humanistic studies, however you define humanism, must be a feeling of satisfaction in what one is doing. This applies not only to the scholar who is engrossed in his research, but also to students at the earliest levels of instruction. Most of all, it applies to literary pursuits. As Robert Stockwell so aptly expressed it over ten years ago,

> "Surely for literature to convey any other value whatever, it must first give pleasure. And to enjoy it one has to handle the language with a measure of ease. For the benefit of literary studies the student must have the ability to handle the ordinary non-literary language comfortably."[9]

If this reasoning is correct, then the interest-centered approach would be of benefit to that small number of students who will some day pursue literary studies in higher education. However, for the secondary school teacher, an interest-centered curriculum could well mean the difference between having and not having a language program by the end of this decade. For if present trends toward electives and away from requirements continue, the college prep rationale for high school study of languages will lose what little force it may still retain. In any case, in my opinion, it has always been a highly questionable procedure to suggest that high school language study exists primarily as an entrance ticket to or an exit ticket from higher education. The unavoidable counter implication is that it has no inherent value of its own.

I'm also convinced that the most romanticized extrinsic rewards, which we have been inclined to give, carry very little weight with today's students as a primary motivator. It will be increasingly futile to claim, for example, that students need German for science, French for tourism, Spanish for commerce or Russian for national defense. Maria Alter has commented on this in her booklet entitled A Modern Case for German (which would apply to other languages equally, I think). She says,

> "However valid these reasons are, offering them today for public consumption is like urging rich food on a man who is dying of thirst. Instead of praising virtues that seem of little relevance, . . . let us find out what needs our clients have . . . and pitch ourself in that direction. Self-understanding, for example, is as valid today as it was 15 years ago."[10]

And she concludes her Modern Case for German with these words:

> "Replace the old image of an austere and difficult subject, reserved for the mature, motivated, intelligent student who knows what he wants and where he is going . . . . (Replace it) with a more frivilous, but much more attractive image of a 'fun' subject for everybody, taken at least partly for enjoyment. A subject, furthermore, which has not fossilized in splendid isolation from the changing world, . . . a subject which does not limit its relevance to past culture or current pragmatism, but wants to be and is relevant to life. A young subject, dynamic subject, a modern subject."[11]

Now, obviously, there is no simple formula for implementing this sort of thing. In fact, I'm convinced that it is impossible to transplant any given set of conditions and instructional techniques in toto from one school district to another (or from one college to another, for that matter). Despite all our efforts to standardize methods, we still end up with a particular teacher, who has a particular personality and professional background, teaching in a particular community on a particular day to a particular group of young people who are in a particular mood (sometimes homicidal). It is, therefore, sheer folly to attempt to provide a teacher, in advance, with a set of specific behaviors which can be conveniently "plugged in" to fit the demands of all possible future situations.[12] Only the people who are closest to the situation have a chance of coping with it. And, basically, that means the teacher and the students. So, instead of a prescribed methodology, what is needed is a myriad of approaches; we all thrive on variety and non-predictability. Thus, part of the new teacher role for the seventies is to experiment with many techniques and to obtain feedback from students to find out what works and what does not. In some cases a student project or field trip may get good results. . . . If overdone, however, such activities can become wasteful and demotivating. Similarly, independent study may prove satisfying to some students for some aspects of language acquisition. However, if individualization falls into a standardized pattern with students working in isolation on pre-stated objectives, then the results will ultimately be quite deadly.*

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*For a more comprehensive treatment of this topic I refer the reader to the nine-chapters of the 1973 Central States Report entitled, Student Motivation and the Foreign Language Teacher, ed., Frank Grittner, published by National Textbook Company, Skokie, 1973.

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