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ABSTRACT

Language students at the intermediate level can often read and write but cannot speak the target language. This hinders the student from developing what is usually the most sought-after skill: the ability to speak a foreign language. Students in the third and fourth years of language study are capable of speaking as well as they read and write. However, because articulation involves almost simultaneous retrieval of various linguistic elements, students often feel frustrated as they attempt to speak. By analyzing the causes of the frustration, a teacher can enable his or her students to master an exciting new skill. Among the ways in which teachers can induce a class to speak are by: (1) using the foreign language more themselves in order to familiarize a class with the sounds of the spoken language; (2) emphasizing aspects of pronunciation which are problematic; (3) encouraging the formation of individually constructed sentences through imaginative oral drill sessions which also serve to alleviate fear of grammatical errors; and (4) offering students a variety of programmed exercises according to their abilities so that no student feels that he or she has nothing to say. Examples of several such exercises are included in the text. (Author/CLK)

Verbalization Motivation with Intermediate Students

One of the most frustrating experiences imaginable for a foreign language teacher is to be faced with a class of third or fourth year students who have an adequate grasp of the grammar and vocabulary of the target language yet will not speak. They can speak in the sense that they have, during their two or three years of language study, acquired the raw materials for articulation; still there is a breakdown of seemingly monumental proportions between the cognitive center in the brain and the organs of articulation. The teacher vents his frustration by asking, "Why won't they speak?"; but the student also experiences a degree of frustration that cannot be dismissed lightly as he queries, "Why can't I speak?" The anxieties on the part of both teacher and student can be alleviated through systematic work toward achieving a level of articulation consonant with the student's over-all linguistic abilities.

Let us begin by answering both the teacher's and the student's questions. Certainly the problem is not one of ignorance since any student capable of third or fourth year work in a foreign language has progressed beyond the elementary level of study. Neither can the absence of a speaking component among the student's foreign language skills be attributed to a lack of motivation since he or she is cognizant of the deficit and appears frustrated by it.

The problem, then, is somewhat more complex than one involving ignorance or a lack of motivation and can be divided into four parts. First, most students lack familiarity with hearing the foreign language spoken. Even the best-intentioned teacher finds himself slipping into using too much English in the classroom simply because explanations can be expedited with its use. When called upon to speak, students find that they are uncomfortable with the sounds of a foreign language.

Second, most students experience an overwhelming fear of committing grammatical errors while speaking. Foreign languages are learned at the high school or college level through systematic study of written grammar. All errors on homework assignments and written examinations are corrected, and the student understands from such a pattern of corrections that mistakes are always to be avoided. However, while the student may have several minutes to contemplate a verb form, adjective ending, or direct versus indirect object while writing an answer, such judgments must be made within seconds when the answer is to be given orally. Thus the comforting component of "time to think" is absent when a student is asked to speak. He or she must almost simultaneously recall the correct vocabulary, establish the proper endings for verbs, adjectives, etc., and arrange all of the components into an appropriate word order in order to form a correct sentence in the target language. Although the split-second nature of the task is awesome, the third problem is more difficult.

Even students who can manage to articulate a sentence in the

foreign language find that they quite literally have nothing to say. Indeed, many people who are bi-lingual find themselves unable to utter a phrase when asked to "say something, anything" in the foreign language. And finally, many students feel they are incapable of articulating their thoughts. Somehow, a gap emerges between the cognitive process of formulating a foreign language utterance and the actual mechanical process of producing it to be heard.

None of the four problems indicated above is insurmountable. Each must be faced as an individual difficulty within a larger context, and when each is confronted as a separate and distinct learning problem, the student will be able to master each and achieve the goal to which both he and his teacher aspire: the ability to speak a foreign language. Of course, this is not to suggest that a language class's regular work with grammar or reading be abandoned in favor of oral work. Rather, emphasis upon speaking the language can be incorporated into the class's regular course of study. Such integration presents articulation of the target language as a normal part of language learning rather than as an awesome new skill to be feared. No special emphasis need be placed upon this aspect of the language. Students at the intermediate level want to speak and are capable of speaking, but they must be enticed.

The teacher can induce his or her students to speak by eliminating each of the four problems previously discussed. As always in any classroom situation, the teacher sets the stage for

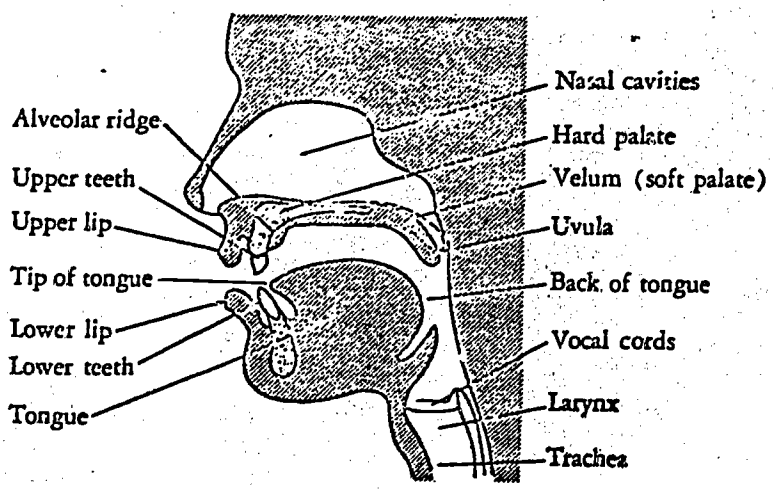
whatever action will ensue. By speaking, not reading, aloud more in the target language the teacher can gradually familiarize her students with the sounds of the new language in a very natural way. He or she may build upon vocabulary or cultural items currently being studied or may choose to explore other subjects with new vocabulary by employing pictures, slides or even pantomime for clarification. The topic of discussion matters little. What is important is that the students be exposed to the teacher's familiar voice speaking over a sustained period of time in the foreign language. Gradually, taped or recorded voices speaking about a variety of subjects may be introduced. The teacher should always follow-up the use of such recorded materials with questions and answers in order to verify the students' comprehension. Then the same recording may be re-played so that the student experiences a measure of control over the material.

At the same time that the student is hearing the foreign language spoken more, he or she will become more aware of pronunciation. It is ironic but easily observable that a student's pronunciation is quite good during the first few days of language learning. During that initial phase, he or she is concerned only with mimicking the sounds uttered by the teacher and, consequently, the mimicry produces an excellent facsimile of the spoken foreign language. However, emphasis upon correct grammar soon overshadows the exact repetition of sounds; and the student becomes more concerned with the placement of pronouns than with the production of a trilled "r" or a nasal. Not until the intermediate stage

of language learning when the student has a working knowledge of grammatical structures can he or she re-focus on pronunciation.

Most students would be overwhelmed and quite possibly discouraged if the instructor were to point out all of their pronunciation problems. A more sound instructional approach would seem to incorporate isolating the most serious errors committed by the class as a whole and dedicating one week at a time to discussion and practice of individual vowels and consonants that have proved troublesome.

In addition to choral drills emphasizing the week's problem, a technical discussion of the articulators employed in the production of a particular sound prove immensely helpful especially for those students who experience difficulty in mimicking sounds. Simple diagrams such as the one below indicate all of the organs of speech with the mouth as rest.



A student who cannot master Spanish's soft inter-vocalic "d" might better understand what he must do to produce that sound if he can see diagrams contrasting the alveolar English "d" with the dental Spanish "d."

Feedback is vitally important to students working on correct pronunciation, and one of the best ways to indicate a student's improvement over a period of months or even weeks is to employ a controlled taping system. Select a short paragraph that a student can easily record in one or two minutes. Then, at one month intervals have the student re-record the same selection and play back the earliest and the latest recordings for what usually proves to be an astounding contrast. Intermediate recordings may also be played back in order to evaluate work done on specific pronunciation problems.

Pronunciation need not be worked on in a vacuum, of course. The suggestions made above will help a student to gain familiarity and a sense of control over a spoken foreign language. However, such mastery is not helpful in and of itself since the student must come to formulate his own sentences in the new language as well as to pronounce them correctly. Work with the production of correct sounds can and should be incorporated into oral grammar review drills so that the student begins to attack the second problem which inhibits speaking: fear of grammatical errors. For the benefit of both students and teachers of foreign languages let it be known that oral substitution drills ought to be and can be fun.

With an intermediate class, the dry formula of conjugating verbs can be varied to include modifications in subjects, objects and modifiers as well so that the student is actually forming short, whole sentences rather than performing an exercise. In order to eliminate the element of "mindlessness" which too often creeps into pattern drills, add as many variables as possible and go through the exercises quickly so that a student has a sense of accomplishment when he or she formulates and delivers an individual sentence. Not only does this sort of work serve as an excellent reviewing device both for grammar and vocabulary but it also affords the student an opportunity to speak in complete sentences which he or she has constructed. Thus the student is able to develop a sense of confidence in his pronunciation and knowledge of grammar.

When students have arrived at this point in their language learning careers--they are capable of producing the sounds of the foreign language with a reasonable degree of accuracy and can put together grammatically correct sentences--they approach the most difficult barrier of all. The tools of communication are theirs; but they have nothing to communicate. They have nothing to say. It is at this point that the teacher can offer helpful suggestions. Some of my own are listed below, but the possibilities are endless. Inducements used in my classes have come to be called "verbalization motivators" and they serve a dual purpose. First of all, they offer students something to say. The list below ranges from the very simplest of response-type

techniques to some fairly sophisticated prompters for conversation. Some may be too elementary for a given class while others may not appeal to teachers and/or students. They are only suggestions.

Second, because the list below makes distinctions between easier and more difficult responses, the fourth problem in the student's hesitancy to speak is also solved. Because a class begins with a level of oral activity with which it can deal, there is no need for any student to feel that he cannot articulate what he or she wishes to say. Students should be encouraged to add as many variables as possible to a response, and many of the ideas which follow can be used simultaneously.

Verbalization Motivators

1. Yes/No questions plus a statement.

   The standard "Do you have a book?" "Yes, I have a book." can be modified to include changes in verb conjugations, prepositions, etc. A good way to induce a more original student response is to allow only negative responses and suggest that as many elements as possible in the question be altered in the response. "Do you study in the library after class?" "No, I play in the park before dinner."

2. Either/Or questions.

   Add as many variable elements as possible.

3. Why/Because questions.

   Once again, variety eliminates any sense of repetitiveness, and even a student at the elementary level knows enough

vocabulary so that there should be no shortage of model sentences.

4. Flannel Board

Cut-outs provide the student with an opportunity to articulate several short, simple sentences about a familiar object.

5. Cue cards with simple stick figures depicting activities.

As with the flannel board, a student has the opportunity to speak several simple sentences at a time instead of merely responding to a question. The stick figures prove particularly valuable when working with tenses. Student A may be asked to describe the activity on a cue card using the present and future tenses while student B is asked to describe the same card using the past and conditional tenses.

6. Use of props for questioning.

Any item, familiar or totally strange will do. Indeed, even the most reticent of students enjoy speculating about an extraordinary looking object. The teacher should be only an observer so as to allow maximum speaking time for the students.

7. Changing direct to indirect dialogue.

This exercise affords the student an excellent opportunity to build more complex sentences from simpler ones and to vary tenses.

8. Varying direct and indirect objects.

Both this exercise and the one which follows can have physical manifestations as students pass small objects to each other and describe their actions or as they give commands which other students obey.

9. Students give commands to others.

   This drill can even turn into a "Simon Says" episode now and then.

10. Independent-Dependent Clause formation.

    By combining two simple sentences into a complex sentence with an independent and a dependent clause, the student can begin to create more complex sentence structures. For example, the student may be asked to combine: "He left. Then she studied." Two possible combinations are: "After he left she studied." or "She studied after he left." It is through an exercise such as this one that the student begins to appreciate that there can be more than one grammatically correct answer to any given problem.

11. Personal questions.

    Questions about appearance, family, study habits, interests, etc. allow the student to focus the discussion on the topic he knows best.

12. Directed dialogues (mini-conversations).

    Two students are asked to carry on a short conversation of at least four responses by each in which they cover a given topic. For example, the starting point for the dialogue may be a comment by Student A that she must study for an examination. The closing comment by Student B might be that she is going to a movie. The dialogue in-between is up to the students. More or less structure may be given.

13. Role-Playing.

    The teacher or students create a situation which two or more students act out.

14. Oral descriptions of magazine cut-outs.

    This familiar standby allows students to do some individual preparation and affords those students who still feel uneasy with the foreign language a comfortable approach to speaking. The teacher may suggest that students do commercials of well-known products.

15. Descriptions.

    A student describes an object in six sentences and the rest of the class must guess what it is.

16. Who am I?

    Each student in turn pretends that he or she is a well-known person, living or dead. The class asks questions in order to ascertain who the student "is." The student may answer with "yes" or "no."

17. Twenty questions.

    The familiar party game is quite adaptable to the language classroom.

18. What's my line?

    Each student in turn poses as a worker of a different sort. He or she may answer the class's questions with "yes" or "no" responses.

19. Story telling.

    The teacher begins to create a tale and each student adds on.

It is helpful to tape these impromptu literary creations both for the fun of re-hearing them and to listen for errors.

20. Directed topics.

The teacher places several slips of paper with open-ended sentences on them in a bowl and allows students to choose. The student must complete the sentence he has picked and expand on it. Topics which foster enthusiasm include incomplete sentences such as "If I were rich, . . ." (which also offers an excellent lesson in subjunctive usage); "The worst thing about my school is . . .;" and "If I had to live alone on a deserted planet for the rest of my life, the five inanimate objects I would take along are . . . ."

The twenty suggestions given above offer the student something to say and a context in which to speak. Once students have mastered speaking in the framework offered above, the teacher may suggest moving to free conversations involving discussion groups, debates and panel discussions. Many of the verbalization motivators have an almost game-like quality inherent in them, and perhaps that is why they are successful in inducing verbalization. A pressure-filled atmosphere can only inhibit in the classroom. The absence of immediate correction and the presence of easy laughter can help to allay the students' fears and enable them to feel that they are indeed on the threshold of mastering an exciting new skill. Often it is difficult for the teacher to refrain from interjecting a correction, but such behavior must

be restrained or the students will speak slowly, hesitantly and with an eye on the instructor at all times. Oral work can occupy only a fraction of a language class's time; and a review of errors afterwards can ease a class back into its work with reading, writing, or grammar.

The ability to speak a foreign language is easily within the grasp of intermediate students. By evaluating the reticence to speak and eliminating each of the four basic problems inhibiting oral development, the teacher can enable his or her students to develop speaking skills at the same pace as other linguistic skills.