

The Teaching of Foreign Languages
for Adult Beginners in their Native Country

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The problem of how to approach the teaching of foreign languages has always concerned educators all over the world. A long time ago, to know a foreign language was almost a luxury, a privilege to the wealthy, an indicative of social and educational status. Parents would spend fortunes to send their children abroad, or to bring a foreign governess into their homes to initiate their children in the acquisition of a foreign language. Along with progress, however, what used to be an optional extravagance turned out to be a necessity. The teaching of foreign languages was introduced in the schools, as the world became "smaller" through the development of modes of communication. People now learn foreign languages for several different reasons, and in many different ways. As the number of learners increased, the number of teachers also raised significantly, as well as the interest in the field. A new science emerged — Linguistics — with the specific purpose of studying the phenomenon language, namely, what language is and how it is acquired.

The hypotheses and theories concerning the process of language acquisition inspired the creation of various methods and techniques with the purpose of helping people learn a foreign language. However, the significant number of people who have not succeeded in acquiring a foreign language, especially adults in a classroom situation in their own country, is an indication that either the methods and techniques used are inefficient, or that they have not been used adequately. It is a most controversial subject which, nevertheless, has raised more questions than pointed solutions. On examining a considerable amount of the vast literature about approaches to second language teaching, and theories of second language acquisition, one gets rather discouraged with the results presented. It is common for authors to report that their conclusions cannot be

generalized because their samples are never representative enough. The results of the experiments done are directly related to, and influenced by, the specific groups of teachers and learners involved in each experiment, the specific learning environment, the time devoted to the learning, as well as the specific goals and expectations in mind. Still, following the behaviouristic theory of "trial and error", the search persists — new methods are introduced and modified, an incredible amount of money, time, and energy is spent, frustrations are overcome, and hopes are constantly renewed.

It is about time to stop and face the obvious reality of the situation. No matter how much people investigate and invest on research, they will never find the ideal, "miraculous", universally applied formula to teach people how to actually acquire a foreign language. Success or failure depends on a number of different reasons, but one thing is certain — there ought to be a realistic consideration of the fact that people have individual capacities and abilities; that an adult learns what he wants to learn and what he is taught, not what he is expected to learn; that the best motivation is necessity; and that one should be taught what he wants and needs to learn. Therefore, it is essential to match the material to be taught with the necessity and ability of the learner, so that his expectations can be met. It is equally essential that expectations of learners, teachers, methods, and school systems be coherent and realistic. The adult foreign language student is a mature individual who knows why he needs to learn a second language. He has already succeeded in acquiring one language — his own — but he has neither the potentiality nor the means he used to have when he acquired his first language.

Several studies of the human speech and brain mechanism, among them that of Penfield and Roberts (1959), have already proved that there is a physiological reason for the difficulties encountered by adults attempting to acquire a second language. One has only to look around and observe the facility and ease with which a child acquires a language; not only his

first, but also a second, and sometimes even a third language at the same time. One factor is crucial — the more a person knows his native language, the more it will interfere in the acquisition of a second. This is directly related to the fact that the adult, besides being much more self-conscious than a child, requires of himself a performance beyond his competence. Moreover, the adult belongs to a generation that has been trained in function of the printed word. He is word-oriented, as opposed to the child, who has been raised and educated after the development of communication media, such as television, and videotape, thus being visually-oriented. When a child listens to a word, he associates it directly to the object which it symbolizes, or which he understands as being representative of the concept it conveys, in case it is an abstract word. The adult, on the other hand, associates the sound of a word with its graphic representation — the written symbol. Therefore, it should be taken into account that the process by which an adult acquires a second language differs from that of a child.

Roberto Lado (1977) gives evidence to this fact, with the well known example of the adult foreign language student who is constantly asking for the spelling of a word he cannot understand. The adult's ear is not very receptive for foreign sounds, which seem just meaningless noise to him. He needs to visualize the written symbol in order to connect the word with some meaning. Frequently, he feels even more confident when he sees the word printed, and many times he realizes that the word was not totally unfamiliar as he had thought. Mainly in the first stages of his learning, he will always make sure to check the graphic representation of the words before they become a part of his automatized vocabulary. Carroll (1965) stated that

Even though the objective of teaching may be the attainment of mastery over the auditory and spoken components of language learning, an adequate theory of language learning should take account of how the student handles visual counterparts of the auditory elements he is learning, and help to prescribe the optimal utilization of these counterparts, such as printed words, phonetic transcriptions, and other

visual symbol systems.¹

Lado (1977) suggests that the written form be presented to the adult beginner concurrently with the spoken form, at the initial stage of instruction, as an aid to listening-comprehension. His suggestion is not only valid as it is a true statement based on what actually happens with the adult foreign language student, inside and outside the classroom. One of the most difficult tasks for teachers, when following the instructions of production-oriented methodology, is to convince their students that the written symbols will prevent them from understanding the spoken language, and from acquiring an intelligible pronunciation. Even if the students avoid it in the classroom, they will do it at home. According to Davies (1976), adult learners undergo three major stages in the process of acquiring a foreign language — first, they acquire the "receptive reading skills, especially those related to one's professional field or scientific discipline;" next, the "receptive aural skills, i.e., the ability to understand the spoken language, which generally implies a certain level of reading skill;" and, finally, "the productive skills which will enable them to communicate actively through speaking and writing."² And no matter how hard teachers try, they will never succeed in imposing their beliefs on a student, since he will learn only what he wants to learn, and according to his individual abilities and characteristics.

Experiments done by Lado (1968, 1972), Fink (1971), Hawkins (1971), and Coutts (1972), among others, have proved that the combined presentation of listening and reading contributes to assimilation of the foreign language and does not affect pronunciation to the extent that it is proclaimed. What is wrong is to let the student rely too much on the written language, to the point where he will recur to translation and connect the foreign word with the corresponding term in his native language. Words have different connotations, and the danger of translation is that it often leads to misinterpretation. The meaning of a word is the meaning it has in the context it is used. Students should recur to the written language as a means

that will help them acquire the foreign language, not as an end in itself. This leads us to another problem that usually arises with some methods for teaching a foreign language — an exaggerated emphasis on speech production disregarding comprehension which is a prerequisite for conveying meaning in the communicative interaction. Oller (1969) accuses the theories of second language teaching of failing to give adequate attention to the use of language to convey information, and many other researchers agree with him.

Indeed, it is widely known that many of the current methods for teaching a foreign language insist on oral production at the initial phase of instruction. The Audio-Lingual approach, so commonly used, is a representative illustration. The learner is expected to be vocally active through constant repetition of pattern drills he listens to, but of which he often fails to grasp the meaning. The goal is to make the learner unconsciously automatize the basic patterns of the target language which would supposedly enable him to speak. Nevertheless, the experience using such approach has not corresponded to the expectations. In fact, the results are quite discouraging, especially for the adult learner, who gets bored and tired of over-listening and over-repeating as if he were a parrot. Belasco (1965) stated that "despite the ease with which students manipulate drills and memorize dialogues to a very high degree of proficiency, not many students can understand and speak the language outside the ordinary classroom situation."³ Besides, how can a learner be expected to speak when he has been trained in listening to and repeating something which he often does not understand? As Rivers (1969) said,

It is through recoding that the listener clarifies interpretatively relationships between what is being attended to and what it has already been assimilated, and this establishing of meaningful associations is essential to storage and later recall."

Automatization and assimilation cannot be imposed to an adult

that way, as Carroll (1965), Rivers (1966, 1969), Mueller (1969), Postovsky (1974, 1975, 1977), and Lado (1977), among many others, have tried to prove. Likewise, many researchers have pointed to the necessity of giving more emphasis to aural-comprehension in the foreign language classroom, such as Belasco (1965, 1969), Rivers (1966, 1969), Mear (1969), Asher (1974), Postovsky (1974, 1975, 1977), and Pimsleur, Hancock, and Furey (1977). After listening, to the extent that what is heard is related to meaning, and being allowed to count on the help of reading, the student will be able to recognize the sounds of the target language. The productive skills will result naturally, rather than pushing the adult learner and leaving him with a frustrating sense of failure.

Let us consider the case of the "typical" adult foreign language student who wants to acquire the target language in his own country. (I have the Brazilian foreign language student in mind). He is attracted by all kinds of propaganda of the innumerable institutions which offer courses intended to teach that language. A great number of these institutions, however, is commercially-oriented, and the student cannot afford the prices usually charged. Time does not represent a problem, because such institutions often have schedules to fit most conveniences. The student manages to budget his money and registers. He is willing to learn, he needs to learn, and he believes that he will acquire the target language in thirty days, in ninety days, in a year or three, depending on what he is told by the administration staff, by the teachers, or simply by the slogan of the institution. He soon realizes that the task is not as easy as he had predicted, and he either gives up or persists, in the same place or elsewhere.

After years of struggle, the adult student still has not acquired the language. He might have learned many words, many structures, and quite a lot about the language. He might have learned most of the material presented in class; but the fact that he has learned what he was taught in class is not an indication that he has acquired the language, because most of the time he has not been taught what he is interested in and what he needs to learn. He might even be able to use the language

in the classroom, or in some simple situations outside the classroom. But, still, he has not acquired the language as he should and could. What is worse, he is often disillusioned when he cannot understand or make himself understood by a native speaker, either in his own country or, and principally, in the target country.

The situation is even worse if the student cannot count on the additional reinforcement of a private language institution, which, although unrealistic and often deficient, still represents some help. The foreign language courses offered by academic schools are far from being satisfactory. It is an endless vicious circle. In order to charge less from the students (if the school is not public), and also because there is never extra money to hire enough teachers, the foreign language classes are usually larger than they should be. Because there is an academic curriculum to be fulfilled, composed by all other courses which are required by the educational laws of the country, there are never enough class-hours for the foreign language courses. Because more sophisticated language course materials are too expensive, or because previous experiences with language laboratories and/or several audio-visual materials have failed, further investment is generally discouraged. On top of all that, there is the foreign language teacher who, in most cases, is the prototype of the idealist. Being faced with students, school systems and all kinds of methods and materials which, in addition to his salary, are far from being satisfactory, he persists on his struggle, overcoming one frustration after the other. In many cases, there are deficiencies on teachers themselves, but, frequently, these deficiencies are a consequence of other factors.

A number of similar situations could be presented to illustrate the real conditions under which foreign language courses are given. One might even be inclined to conclude that there is no way of avoiding deficiencies and frustrations of learners, teachers, and schools. In 1969, Belasco stated that, as of date, it was still unanswered whether a foreign language

can really be acquired in a "unicultural, artificial situation", and that "those who do manage to learn a foreign language do so not because of the system but in spite of it - and they make up less than five per cent of the students enrolled in foreign language courses."⁵ It seems that the point is exactly that, unlike native speakers, teachers expect too much from foreign language learners. As Davies (1976) pointed out, "the level of competence needed for minimal communication acceptable to native speakers is much lower than that supposed by teachers."⁶ The solution does not seem so difficult to be depicted. What is really lacking is a realistic consideration of the adult's ability and need to acquire a foreign language in his own country.

The adult student does not have the facility of a child to learn a foreign language. The classroom situation in the adult's native country can never be transformed into the real milieu of the target country. The adult cannot be expected to produce a foreign language in terms of speaking and writing without understanding it orally and being acquainted with its written symbols. A significant number of foreign language students in their native environment may not need to speak the target language as much as they need to read and comprehend the meaning of written and spoken forms, the former more than the latter. Many will even need to write more often than they will have a chance to practice the spoken language with a native speaker, and most of them will hardly have a chance to travel abroad. Therefore, if the adult wants to acquire a foreign language for instrumental purposes in his native country, he should be trained according to his ability and need to learn the foreign language in order to achieve the target.

NOTES

- ¹John B. Carroll, "The Contributions of Psychological Theory and Educational Research to The Teaching of Foreign Languages", *Modern Language Journal*, XLIX, No. 5 (May 1965), 273-281.
- ²Norman F. Davies, "Receptive Versus Productive Skills in Foreign Language Learning", *Modern Language Journal*, LX, No. 8 (December 1976), 440-.
- ³Simon Belasco, "Nucleation and The Audio-Lingual Approach", *Modern Language Journal*, XLIX, No. 8 (December 1965), 482-491.
- ⁴Wilga M. Rivers, "Linguistic and Psychological Factors in Speech Perception and Their Implication for Teaching Materials", in *The Psychology of Second Language Learning: Papers from The Second International Congress of Applied Linguistics, 8-12 September, 1969*, ed. Paul Pimsleur and Terence Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971)
- ⁵Simon Belasco, "The Feasibility of Learning a Second Language in an Artificial Unicultural Situation", in *The Psychology of Second Language Learning: Papers from The Second International Congress of Applied Linguistics, 8-12 September, 1969*, ed. Paul Pimsleur and Terence Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971)
- ⁶Norman F. Davies, "Receptive Versus Productive Skills in Foreign Language Learning," *Modern Language Journal*, LX, No. 8 (December 1976), 440-.

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