

Tonga II: A Peace Corps Program

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Peace Corps Language Training is always an exciting, frantic, wonderfully productive affair. The Tonga II language program conducted last fall under the direction of the University of Hawaii on the lush east end of Mokolai was typically successful.

At seven o'clock in the morning of October 22 five Peace Corps volunteers sat yawning and fidgeting in each the twenty-four language huts in camp Pukoo. This was their first morning after their arrival at the site. Suddenly, there burst in upon them a handsome, vivacious native Tongan who greeted them warmly with a malo e lelei! (Thanks for being well!), gesturing to them to listen carefully and repeat after him. Startled but determined the volunteers began their first core drill session of observation, imitation, and repetition. Within the hour they could produce in Tongan with almost flawless pronunciation: Hello! How are you?, Fine, thank you!, What is your name?, My name is _____, Thanks for coming!, Good-bye!, Good-bye!. And the only English heard at all during the entire class was spoken by the native instructor as it was being drilled.

A theory for language acquisition had already been outlined for volunteers in a short bulletin prepared by Dale P. Crowley, senior linguist for the University of Hawaii Peace Corps.

The acquisition and use of language is not a problem solving activity. (Language may be used to solve problems, but the stream of speech itself very rarely displays problem solving.) The acquisition and use of language is not the study

and memorization of generalizations of language phenomena (grammar rules), nor is it a deductive kind of reasoning based on a knowledge of generalizations of language phenomena. Most high school and college courses in foreign language are based on these premises. Language is a system of structured behavior, the acquisition of which depends upon observation, perception (of both forms and meanings), imitation, and repeated practice. . . . Except for the higher level of abstraction and meaning characteristic of language, we clas-



Sinaukofe Pula models the Samoan language as Peace Corps Trainees strain to hear the exact pronunciation. Their classroom is a simply constructed booth with space for eight students and an instructor.

sify it as a complex skill performance along with athletic, instrumental music, and other manual skills. A complex skill performance is one which requires the coordination of the muscular and neurological systems.

The pedagogical procedures followed in Tonga II grew out of the above view of language and language learning. This means that the approach

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was principally audio-lingual, that no English was spoken during the drill sessions, that all grammatical features and vocabulary were heard, understood, and pronounced dozens of times before they were ever seen on the printed page. It also means that classes were small (no more than six volunteers per instructor), that well-trained native speakers of Tongan were the models and immediate correctors of speech patterns, and that native Tongan pronunciation and accent were the goal of every Peace Corp volunteer. The theory was confirmed by the progress of the volunteers. Many volunteers had already studied several languages in universities and were dubious about this "new" theory and approach. But their doubts soon disappeared in the remarkable fluency and understanding they acquired in a few short weeks.

Specialization Offered

Since Peace Corps training in Tonga II involved intensive study and "specializing" in many different areas (culture and history of Tonga, island science, agriculture, health and hygiene, science instruction in Tongan public schools, and TESL methods), only five hours were devoted to language study a day. Four of these hours were spent in core drill sessions as described above. In the evening, however, all volunteers sat in groups of fifteen and simply listened to two or more Tongan instructors converse in their own language. In these conversations the Tongans would talk naturally and freely and at normal speed about anything pertinent to Tonga, using grammatical patterns already familiar to the volunteers. Thus the volunteers became more acquainted with the reality of the Tongan language, the intonation and accent of native speakers, their facial expressions and body gestures. This evening conversation hour was a refreshment from the drill session as well as valuable reinforcement to it.

Although the volunteers "absorbed" most of the grammar of the Tongan language through imitation and practice, a weekly one hour grammar

session was held in English with the author of the language text. Here the volunteers were finally allowed to ask questions in English about the Tongan language. It was somewhat surprising and gratifying to see how few questions there really were and how few volunteers were having serious difficulty mastering Tongan grammar. These sessions usually ended up in a discussion of the author's experiences in Tonga.

Volunteer competence in reading and writing was an important secondary goal of Tonga II. Since Tonga is a phonemic language the volunteers were assured that each meaningful sound in the language was represented by only one spelling symbol. This one to one correspondence proved very convenient, for they could spell a word as soon as they could pronounce it. Also each lesson from the text included a page or two of reading and comprehension exercises.

Weekly oral and written examinations were conducted by the instructors. These examinations were more measures than motivators since the volunteers were already highly motivated. Daily evaluations were also made of each volunteer and his mastery of the material covered each day.

Progress was rapid in Tonga II. The volunteers could usually "internalize" a lesson in 10 hours of intensive drill and conversation. Most lessons introduced four or five major grammatical features. In five weeks all announcements and bulletins from the language office were written in the target language, and volunteers were conversing in Tongan at the dining tables.

A fitting conclusion to the ten weeks of learning on Molokai was the two week in-country language training conducted at 'Atele school' in Tonga. Here the number of drill sessions were reduced and the amount of conversation practice increased. We were fortunate indeed to find dozens of willing Tongan citizens, men, women, and many children who came every day to spend hours in conversation with the volunteers. Kava circles in the huts of villagers