

Vital Role of Language Requires Best TESL Methods, Knowledge

By Elizabeth Lund

In our times when the need for understanding between nations is greater than ever before it is most important that communication between ordinary people should be clear enough to lead to sympathy and coordination of strengths to fight international evils. For this reason alone the teaching of languages becomes of primary importance. With the growing spread of American influence throughout the world the increased use of English makes it imperative that the most effective methods be used for teaching this as a second language. If present trends continue our native tongue could supersede all others as the international medium for communication.

The learning of second language presents to both pupil and teacher several basic

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problems. These arise from differences in sounds used; differences of sequence and sentence structure; the natural tendency to retain familiar patterns and translate word by word. When basics are mastered there still remains the difficult task of understanding the cultural carry over into the new language, its mannerisms, humour, allusions, double-meanings, and the social themes that are significant in the lives of the native speakers of that language.

E. A. Nida in *Learning a Foreign Language* describes five progressive stages in the learning of a new language. The first of these requires a vocabulary of 200-300 words which are sufficient for the expressing of elemental needs, also all the basic adjustments for the production of unfamiliar sounds and the elements of intonation and stress.

The second stage develops the language to the point of practical usage in immediate life situations. The third is reached when there is understanding of speeches, films, conversations when the topic is known. By stage four there should be understanding of normal conversation on any level or subject with reasonable but not quite expert fluency. The student who has reached stage five should be able to use his new language with sufficient understanding to be able to joke and make puns.

The learning of any language depends upon four processes. Two of these are natural to all normal people: - the ability to listen and the ability to speak. The other two, the ability to read and the ability to write must be developed by education. Past approaches to the teaching of languages, even native ones, tended to concentrate on the skills that had to be learned and largely ignored those that are natural. Students were taught about languages without learning how to speak them. The clumsy sentences of examples quoted in the "grammar" books hardly equated the living language they were meant to illustrate and instead of "grammar" being a short cut to language it became a stumbling block for hundreds of pupils and effectively robbed them of any joy in learning. In many places the old methods still persist and it takes abnormal need or motivation for students to persist until a language thus taught becomes an effective means of communication.

In England and Europe at the beginning of the 20th century the most progressive schools began to use a new method proved effective in intensive programs used in language institutes. This was the "Direct Method" which was language learning by direct contact with native speakers of the target language. The learning of phonetics and phonetic transcription was part of this method. There was also interchange of students between Continental and English schools which helped to make language learning more than a prerequisite for entrance to University. However, in most

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schools lack of teachers trained to work in this way meant a continued persistence of old methods. The great advantage of this "Direct Method" was that it substituted for text book grammar real language contact and the use of the language in speech and writing superseded "translation and dictation". Students began to "think" in the new language without translating each word. Provided that high motivation could be maintained this method was very effective particularly when visits to the country of origin could be arranged.

Linguist Needs Grew

After World War Two there was a growing need in America for trained linguists to assist occupying forces in many parts of the world. This led to the development of new courses for the effective and speedy learning of languages for the training of service personnel. Need provided high motivation. The course was intensive and there was no competition during the learning period from any other courses of instruction. Native language speakers were employed as informants and the success of the scheme roused interest in educators in general.

Several years passed before Leonard Bloomfield's theory as it was developed in the Army Language Schools, The Language Training Mission, and The Peace Corps Training School was applied in the normal school classroom situation. The basis of Bloomfield's learning model is that the command of language is a matter of practice until new habits of speech are formed. He stresses "memorization" rather than "utilisation", and developed practice dialogues using basic sentences in varied combinations to ensure an automatic response to a given "clue".

This "audio-lingual" method also uses "pattern practice" which is manipulation of sentences to bring out the grammatical structure of the language. This is intended to simulate the natural way in which a child learns the structure of his native language and in this phase as well as in the "mimicry-memorization" process over-learning has to take place for the establishing of firm habits. Lado quotes

Bloomfield as saying "The command of a language is a matter of practice ... language learning is over-learning; anything else is of no use".

Learning in the way described is a non-intellectual, mechanical activity in which responses are geared to certain stimuli. Drill through a series of patterns with immediate reinforcement through correct responses and practice to the point of over-learning certainly enables a student to achieve automatic response. Such response, however, is non-thoughtful and new ideas now challenge this behaviourist approach.

Critics of Bloomfield state that there is certainly not enough time to be able to learn enough patterns to be able to produce the completed and original utterances of a native speaker of a language. Language is not just a motor skill and psychologists agree that repetition plays an insignificant role in the formation of associations of the type needed to enable a student to be creative in a new language. Since language is part of living educationalists have for some time been using the "environmental" or "situational" approach. This method makes language meaningful and is used in the teaching of a native language as well as in the teaching of a second language. In the Rudolf Steiner Schools languages are taught in situations that encourage students to generalize, form intuitions and reason about their studies. Other educational organisations are now training teachers for the use of this situational approach and it is possible to obtain excellent texts and work-books for classroom use. All four of the processes of learning are used simultaneously in this very effective method and motivation can be kept very high as the situations used are stimulating and interesting. It is possible to use this method in the newest of integrated learning approaches as well as in the normal "separate subject" curriculum.

New Dimension' Given

There is now a "new dimension" in language learning as John P. Hughes says in his book *Linguistics and Language Teaching*. This is the development of structural

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understanding. He quotes Chomsky's description of language as "a finite set or infinite set of sentences, each finite in length and each constructed from a finite set of elements". Also his concept of the fundamental task of grammar is "to provide a description that will apply to all the sentences possible in that language and to none that could not occur in that language." Transformational Grammar is a new tool for the language teacher which can be used particularly well with the "situational" approach which encourages students to be inquisitive about the language they learn. It makes possible an intelligent investigation of the linguistic structure of English, which can be defined. Those definitions, however, can be used according to the rules of transformation in such a way as to produce an indefinite number of arrangements to form an unending variety of sentences each one of which is correct. This is the newest tool but language is a living subject and there may be other tools emerging for its future growth and change is unpredictable.

Needs of Teacher

Whatever methods are employed and whatever tools are used there are two other elements in any language teaching program which must be considered--the pupils and the teachers. Students learn for a variety of reasons, but, unless they are living in a country where a second language has to be adopted for trade or communication purposes, or unless they are adult and learning a language for a specific need, motivation for learning has to be artificially stimulated and maintained. The specific needs of the students must be recognized and the teachers must be trained so that they can make the most effective use of whatever methods they may employ.

Concept Vital

The trained teacher needs general professional expertise as well as the special knowledge peculiar to language teaching. This latter may vary according to where the teacher is to work. For example

in the Berlitz Language Institute a teacher needs only to be proficient in the language to be taught and has no great need to know much about methods other than the "Direct Method". Others, however, need to be aware of the advantages and disadvantages of the various methods; need to be knowledgeable about modern teaching tools; know the resources available; be aware of the special needs of their pupils. They must have the linguistic background that will enable them to understand what language is and maintain their awareness of significant developments. Teachers need also to be familiar with new methods of assessment designed to test the mastery of units and patterns that are different from the student's native language and which constitute the learning problems. In order that they may appreciate and teach to mitigate these differences they must have some knowledge of the student's native language. Above all they must be aware that their task is to help their students to understand and be understood in a different language by enabling them to use the structural units of that language in valid situations.