TERMINAL BEHAVIOR AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

by Don Bowen

This still pertinent article on language teaching first appeared in the second issue of the *TESL Reporter* (Winter 1968) and is reprinted as a special bonus to our readers. It has been widely quoted and appears in Kenneth Croft's *Readings on English as a Second Language* (Winthrop Publishers, 1972).

In modern education one often hears of the concept 'terminal behavior.' This is a term supplied from the field of psychology, a term which reflects the belief that the measure of any successful educational activity is the degree to which the student's behavior is modified. To what extent does he do or can he do things he did not or could not before the lessons were presented.

The term fits comfortably in second-language teaching, where we wish to influence the behavior of students by enabling them to communicate effectively in a medium other than their native language. The extent to which they can do this can be measured and evaluated as a reflection of the effectiveness of the teaching (plus whatever aptitude and motivation the student brings to the classroom).

Knowing what terminal behavior we seek should be useful in the design of our teaching. We should select and arrange activities that lead directly to the acquisition of the required behavior. The trouble is we do not know explicitly what sequence of activities does lead to the skill of communicating effectively in a new language.

We observe that all normal human infants in a socially typical environment do learn their mother tongue, but we also know that this experience cannot be recreated for a teenager or an adult. Natural language learning seems to be possible only with the optimum combination of age and circumstance.

The desired terminal behavior in a second language is communication within a relevant range of experience, ideally the same range the student commands in his first language. But obviously for a non-infant this is a highly developed and complex pattern of behavior involving physiological and neurological coordinations that can be controlled only with extensive practice. It is an activity never yet successfully described in all its specific detail, nor yet imitated by any machine.

We know as teachers that we can't ask beginning students to practice by simply imitating what we desire as their terminal behavior. They are not capable of doing so.

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Rather we substitute various types of intermediate behavior which we hope will lead to the desired terminal behavior. We cannot, in other words, ask them to communicate in a language they have just begun to study, so we employ various repetition exercises, substitution drills, etc., postponing communication for the more advanced levels of training.

This is necessary; we have no choice. But teachers must assume two important responsibilities: (1) to understand how intermediate-type activities can be meaningfully related (in pedagogical terms) to terminal behavior and (2) to move steadily toward communication in the selection and design of activities in the classroom.

Teachers will usually accept this view, especially on an intellectual plane, as a reasonable picture of what they must accomplish. But how is it implemented in the classroom? How do we move from manipulation to communication? How do we get students to a point where they can

operate in the realm of the desired terminal behavior?

Manipulative activities are characterized by predicatability—the teacher knows all the answers and his corrections are based on this knowledge. But communicative activities presume that the listener does not know all the answers—only the limitations within which the answers must fall. Choices are left to the speaker—otherwise there is no point to the communication, and it would never normally occur.

The application to language teaching, then, seems to be the use of activities (questions, answers, rejoinders, reactions, etc.) which are not predictable. The skill with which a teacher can direct such activities is a measure of his professional competence and, incidentally, the teachers's best guarantee that his job will not soon be taken over by a machine.

Every teacher should ask himself whether he is using all the communication activities his students are capable of participating in. He should be able to analyze each classroom activity (usually each drill or exercise) to know whether it involves communication and to what extent. He should utilize communication-type activities as early as possible and increase the percentage of their use as his students increase their capability.

A consideration of terminal behavior is the touchstone to identify the elements of communication that are available in the classroom. For each activity a teacher should ask two questions: (1) Does the response to this stimulus represent a skill the student will need when he is on his own? and (2) Does this activity stretch the student's capacity by requiring that he express a thought of his own, one that the teacher cannot fully predict? Then, of course, the teacher must know if he is offering enough of these activities that require independent student action, enough so that the student can operate effectively when eventually he is left to his own resources.

In short, manipulation activities such as repetition, substitution, and transformation are useful, even necessary, to the beginner. But he must go beyond these if he is ever to achieve a useful control of his second language in situations that demand real and authentic communication. And it is the teacher's responsibility to see that he does.