

HOCUS-POCUS OR TPR?

by Gary R. Oddous

Often ESL teachers, especially those young and inexperienced, are attracted to the most current language-teaching method; and, this language-teaching method may tend to be the one the graduate student's methodology teacher favored in class. All teachers, however, inexperienced and experienced, must learn to analyze each language-teaching method upon the merits of the teacher-subject-learner relationships involved.

The relationship of the teacher-learner is extremely complex upon examination of the intellectual, social, and emotional aspects of such a relationship. This paper does not pretend to exhaust the possible ideas in examining the teacher-learner relationship; it does presume to interpret such a relationship as basic and relevant to ESL, according to the author's experience and observation.

We all know that within the fundamental ingredients of the language teaching setting the teacher, the medium of instruction, and the learner "secret" to a successful teacher-student relationship can be found. Upon examining these three criteria, it often appears that a single teacher can use several different methods of language-teaching, all with fairly equal success; conversely, some teachers, regardless of their teaching method, fail equally so. Assuming that these are general assumptions which can be accepted, we are led to believe that more important, perhaps far more important, is the teacher-learner relationship involved in the language-learning situation.

However, the language-teaching method becomes extremely important, because it is *through* that method that the teacher expresses his understanding of the individual needs of his students, with their differing personalities, motivations, and goals. It is also through this medium that the learner interprets the teacher's understanding of the learner's own perception of his individual needs.

A brief analogy might serve to illustrate the complexity of such a relationship. People are said to show their feelings toward another person in many different

ways. Some show their feelings through words, others through kindnesses and gestures, still others through a physical display of affection, and most use varying combinations of all these methods. Three or four important points can be extracted from this example. First, there are different ways two people can show their feelings for each other. Second, each person, characteristically, has a tendency to show his feelings for others in ways that are comfortable, natural to him. Third, each person has certain expectations of how he would like to be informed of another's feelings for him. Fourth, if an extension can be made, if either person showing or being shown feelings is frustrated, it is probably for one of two reasons: either the mode of transmission of feelings by the sender is not fully understood and accepted by the receiver, or else the feelings aren't transmitted to the

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other person so that the receiver feels his own individual needs and expectations are understood. Further, another consideration in such a relationship is that not only does each person involved act comfortably and naturally according to his own personality, but each acts, also, according to his perception of the other's expectations. An incorrect perception is a potential source for great frustration: a correct perception is a potential source for great satisfaction.

In this example, it is evident that the medium of information-transformation is extremely important. It serves as the measure of understanding that the teacher and student have for each other's role.

The analogy can be made, then, of the teacher-learner relationship to the above example. First, just as there are different

ways of showing feelings, there are different ways of teaching language. Second, as each person shows his feelings in ways comfortable to him, each teacher teaches through methods that are comfortable and more natural to him. Third, just as each person has certain expectations of how he wants to be loved or cared about, he also has expectations of how he wants to be taught and what he wants to learn (It might be appropriate here to add that often the individual isn't fully cognizant of his expectations; yet, expectations are there.). Likewise, extending the analogy as in the previous example, if either the teacher or student is frustrated, this frustration is probably for one of two reasons: either the teacher feels his chosen language-teaching method is not understood for its validity and benefits, and thus it is rejected by the students; or, from the student's point of view, he feels that his expectations and individual needs are not understood by the teacher and thus he is not being fulfilled by his language-learning experience.

To illustrate the above ideas, let's apply them to a hypothetical, yet familiar situation to many of us. Let's say that a teacher has chosen the audio-lingual approach to teach English to a group of Cambodian students. First, let's review the basic tenets of the audio-lingual method:¹

- 1) Language is the formation of habits, of conditioned responses taught through dialogs and patterned drills. It is the acquisition of nonthoughtful responses.
- 2) Language should be taught without reference to the student's native language. It should be taught as it occurs in real context.
- 3) Students practice drills before the structure is explained. Knowledge of the rule only impedes the student's progress in learning to give conditioned responses.
- 4) Students first learn to listen, then to speak, later to read, and finally to write. Of the four skills, the oral and aural skills are the most important.

The teacher enthusiastically begins his class by teaching a beginning dialog. The

teacher soon learns that his Cambodian students, mostly because of their cultural personality—the teacher may or may not realize this, are extremely hesitant to speak out loud, and particularly when the teacher asks them to perform before the class. Nervous and somewhat bored by the amount and type of oral drills, the students speak softly and embarrassingly. The teacher recognizes, what seems to him, a lack of interest on the part of the students. He judges that they are not interested in learning English this way, or that they don't care for him as their teacher, or maybe even that the students don't really want to learn English at all. He becomes frustrated, somewhat disillusioned, as he is not an experienced teacher. Further, the students want to know why the structure of the language is the way it is; the teacher tries to avoid the explanation and offers some "around the bush" explanation instead -- all this, because the audio-lingual method dictates that knowledge of the rule or principle of the structure impedes the student's progress in learning to respond conditionally. Well, not to belabor the point, the overall experience for everyone involved, the students and the teacher, is a very frustrating one. So what can a teacher do?

Most importantly, a teacher must realize the underlying assumptions a particular language-teaching method has about language learning. In other words, he must not accept, face value, the worthiness of a particular method on the personal preference of a teacher he/she reveres or on the particular language-teaching method that seems to be in vogue. The teacher must learn several methods and be flexible in his approach to teaching. He must consider the students, their cultural background, their language background, their motives for learning English, and if possible, their expectations of how they think they want to be taught. Because each teacher is different, personality-wise, than another teacher, he must also consider his personal sentiments concerning teaching, language acquisition, motives for teaching, and many other things. He must be ready to delete certain practices of one method, if they aren't working, and be ready to preserve others; he needs not totally abandon a method, but be sensitive to modifying it, combining two or several of

¹ Kenneth Chastain, *Developing Second-Language Skills: Theory to Practice*, 2nd ed. (Chicago, 1976), pp. 111-112.

the basic language-learning methods.

There are methods of eliciting from students their preferred language learning exercises, enabling the teacher to emphasize those types of exercises. At Brigham Young University in Provo, for example, a survey was administered to the foreign students in the service courses (ESL 101, 102, 201, and 103) and to many of the students in the Intensive English Program, a total of 92 students. The survey asked for an indication of the language-learning practices they most preferred. Some practice exercises were listed on the survey for the students to choose from; for other items there was space provided to fill in any additional types of exercises. The results of the survey follow, ranked from most popular to least popular:

IN-CLASS ACTIVITIES

1. Conversation practice
2. Learning vocabulary
3. Pronunciation practice
4. Dictation
5. Grammar activities
6. Use of dialogs

ASSIGNMENTS

1. Conversation assignments
2. Workbook exercises
3. Reading assignments
4. Writing assignments
5. Dialog memorization

Such an index can prove useful to a teacher, though the teacher must be careful to keep the balance of language skills he desires to teach and the students desire to learn. Such a survey is easily administered and can be adapted to virtually any class.

In conclusion, nothing in this paper will be beneficial to the learning, experienced teacher; he/she has long since realized all this. However, to the teacher less experienced, some pitfalls can be avoided by being wary of the language-learning process as described in this paper. The teacher is largely the success or failure of the student's language-learning experience. Sensitivity to and thoughtfulness (in the true sense of the word) of students and of language-learning methods can build a successful student-teacher-language relationship.