

FROM LANGUAGE TEACHING TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

by **John F. Haskell**

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Each decade seems to produce its own terminology, a result, generally, of the need to reflect in concrete terms the growth, the changes in thinking, the, hopefully, advancements made in how we think about and how we act in our profession. The change in emphasis on papers and book titles from language teaching to language acquisition reflects the growing humanism of our ESL materials, texts, methods, syllabuses, programs and teacher training. Certainly, Chomsky's challenge of structural linguistics and behaviorial psychology began or at least reinforced the growing view that language learning/teaching needed to take a healthy look at itself and its clientele. The growing number of teachers who told us we needed to reevaluate the learning task and the learner, as well as the teaching method and the teacher, were certainly pushed to prominence by the reappearance of bilingual education in our public schools and its criticism of ESL as not being affective—i.e. meeting the emotional and cultural needs of the individual student.

As Escobar and Bright have recently pointed out, the research and thrust of the 70's has brought us to the dawn of the 80's with what they see as important and major trends in the areas of methodology, materials, and programs, all of which reflect the growing humanism in education. Emphasis on language acquisition, communicative competence, language appropriateness, the "limited English speaker", functional syllabuses, and English for special purposes are the current fruits or foci of this trend.

Methodology is now acceptably eclectic. The teacher first evaluates the needs, capabilities, and learning strategies of

her students before selecting the kinds of materials and techniques for presenting, encouraging, and involving the students in a language experience. Clearly such approaches to language learning as Counseling-Learning, with its emphasis on the positive, non-threatening learning environment and the teacher as facilitator rather than instructor, and the Language Experience Approach, with its recognition of the learner as the source of experience and knowledge from which and through which language and life growth can be nurtured, are present evidence of our focus on the learner. Studies in motivation have convinced us that the willing, conscious participation of the student, his personal commitment, and his own recognition of his needs and wants are essential to his successful learning of a second language.

Our materials, too, reflect this growth toward viewing the learner's need to deal with communication skills rather than just abstract language. We long ago recognized

John Haskell, Associate Professor of Linguistics at Northeastern Illinois University in Chicago and Editor of the *TESOL Newsletter*, has taught ESL/EFL in Japan, Micronesia, New York, San Francisco, Puerto Rico and Chicago and held ESL teacher training positions at Teacher's College, Columbia University, San Francisco State University, the University of Puerto Rico and in a number of Peace Corps Training Programs.

that our adult students, having less time for formal classroom instruction, wanted instant language usage rather than mechanical pattern building. Situational materials provided first the adult learner and increasingly the elementary and secondary school learner with immediate access to functional, useful language. Demand for competence in language and the use of appropriate

rather than just syntactically correct language has resulted in another look at language as a notional tool, that is, a tool which has, in addition to its syntactic or linguistic elements (sound, word and sentence systems) and its situational usefulness, a set of definable/teachable parts that have to do with how one uses language to meet certain communicative/discourse needs, such as beginning a conversation, changing the subject, expressing disagreement or anger or curiosity, being polite, or understanding when someone else isn't, etc. The Spanish student, for example, who says "OK! OK!" even though he may be translating, is using real enough English. But how does the native English listener view this response? In English, the repetition of such a short response, generally signals a feeling of exasperation on the part of the speaker, rather than the polite assent generally expected. If what I have seen this past year is any indication, granting that texts will continue to be overwhelmingly audio-lingual/structural/linguistic in approach, there will also be an increasing attempt to provide material with a notional-functional (i.e., language as communication) emphasis.

A third trend, long overdue, and into which I may be reading more than is yet happening, is towards English for Special Purposes (ESP) programs. There seems to be an increasing recognition in the United States for the kind of language class that has long been taught overseas, classes that not only teach general English but also take into account the specialized vocabulary and communication needs of the student, whether he be the potential scientist, nurse, mechanic, tourism specialist, engineer, or

college student. True, many university programs in the U.S. have long recognized the need to prepare their ESL students to deal with the skills required of American college education such as listening to lectures, taking notes, and writing papers, as well as mastering basic language communication skills, but the trend today is clearly beyond even that to what I see as the recognition that student success may also require certain technical or specialized content area skills as well. What I hope this means is that elementary and secondary school ESL teachers will recognize these same needs for their students. In ESL and bilingual programs, teachers must not only teach English and supply first language education but prepare the student for eventual movement into content area classes taught in English, often by teachers less than sensitive to the individual needs of the limited English speaker. This means that the ESL teacher must supply needed vocabulary while both the ESL teacher and the bilingual teacher, together, supply the knowledge of and experience in dealing with points of view, testing procedures, discussion techniques, panel and individual presentation formats, math and science procedures, etc., so that the limited English speaker can enter his content area classes taught in English with not only adequate language content knowledge but with appropriate and useful skills—ways of thinking and performing—that are expected in those classes.

I think it is hopeful to see the audio-lingual dictum to take the student from mechanical to meaningful language become instead begin and stick with what is meaningful.