Lathophobic Aphasia[1]

by Donald E. Bott

"Barefoot language doctors" (Noss 1979:14) daily deal with the dread disease of lathophobic aphasia, which cripples second language learners as cruelly as polio used to maim pre-Salk sufferers. Victims are shy and timid, afraid of being laughed at, worried about embarrassing corrections, and above all concerned with grades.

Unless treatment is prompt and effective, patients can never become effective second language communicators, though some might teach grammar.[2] If the "cure" is slow and inhibitive, lathophobic aphasia can become epidemic: nobody except the teacher will communicate in the second language classroom.

"Communication" here means the exchange of real information, not just the repetition of structures without regard for meaning, as in drills which don't develop into "spin-offs" for communication (Rivers 1964: 156). Using the second language to trade ideas as soon as a command is built of some structures and vocabulary is a strong motive for further language learning.

But errors must be corrected[3], and their correction should not interfere with communication unless the error is global. Then clarification is needed promptly.

Whether mistakes are global (confusing) or local (lapses that are bothersome but not important in understanding what the communicator means) is a practical field criteria for judging discourse. Kinds of, reasons for, and frequencies of errors are of academic interest; analysis could perhaps lead to more effective correction methods.

Qualitatively, the most effective error correction in the second language classroom seems to be the least obtrusive. The idea that students should not be allowed to make mistakes—a Direct Method precept—conflicts with the notion that errors are stepping-stones to progress.

Teacher repetition of corrected utterances—a D.M. technique—is also unsound. Such repetition, by calling attention to the

speaker, embarrasses him. This "negative reinforcement" is needless, for the error might be made later in the same discourse by the same or another student.

Repeating the student's mistake before correcting it (which some TEFLers have been trained not to do) is likewise neither helping nor hurting the error-maker by "activating" the error. It's just another waste of valuable classroom time.

At the opposite end of the gamut is the practice of not correcting errors at all, in "free conversation." This method (or rather, lack of one) is preferrable to inhibiting potential communication, but

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it allows many errors to slip into the students' phraseology.

Global errors are quickly caught up by fellow communicators because they block the flow of talk, and sometimes (particularly in elementary groups) the speaker resorts to his first language to explain what is meant. This explanation then becomes a class mini-project, with students and eventually the teacher helping to express the notion in acceptable English.

Many "free conversation" instructors wait until the end of a class session to correct local errors. The method (Marks 1977:45) of noting errors and their right expressions and giving the notes to the

offending student later has the advantage of not interrupting the flow of talk.

Like most teaching methods, however, it's not viable without adaptation. Depending on the teacher's personality (Mullins 1980:3) and the level of the individual student's understanding, a written note might be incomprehensible. The correction also fails to reach other class members who might benefit from it.

By reviewing his notes of local errors during the latter part of his demonstration class at a TEFL seminar at the Asian Institute of Technology in 1978, Ted Goldenberg provided a clearer exposition of errors than a written note and helped all class members to learn from a particular mistake. The large class of 20 or more students sat in a circle, and its instructor was at a desk outside the circle, during the "free conversation."

The more the teacher keeps "to the sidelines" in this way, the more free will be conversation. This change of roles from the directive facts factorum to a non-participating appreciator is at first difficult for students to accept or for the teacher to perform, yet it eventually leads to a "free-and-easy" informality which is conducive to student participation.

The teacher must refrain from disagreements, agreements, or even physical signs that indicate approval or disapproval, such as smiles or frowns. In the demonstration class, students in "free conversation" could not easily observe their instructor.

Large "conversation" classes are usual, but some institutes—in particular, those conducting intensive second language courses increase the effectiveness of instruction by limiting class enrollment to a dozen students or less. When this is possible, conversations can be taped.

Then the tape is replayed, with pauses after every utterance. In the pauses, the teacher might ask,

—What did he say?
—Could he have said it more clearly? How?
—What are some other ways he could have
   said it?

Most students can provide the answers to these and other leading questions while the teacher (as in the free conversation part of the lesson) is an unobtrusive guide, neither a participant nor a know-it-all.

Correction and modification of the conversation becomes a class project, with all students participating, some zestfully. Once a student has recovered from initial "mike fright", he sometimes becomes almost too talkative. Lathophobic aphasia disappears as fellow students bring those who have been mute into the conversation.

The nature of the conversation that is recorded varies with time-limits, largely. Topics like "movies" or "the weather" may be announced just before recording; others, like "duty" or "nationalism", could be prepared a week in advance with appropriate readings (Goldenberg 1978).

Role-playing in "playlets" (Bott 1979: 51) can be even more realistic than recording one of the usual conversation topics, if the students might someday find themselves involved in such situations as those the playlets revolve around. Classes of less than advanced students are more secure with these playlets than with "open-ended" topics because the situation has been structured for them.

Levels of discourse, registers of speech, patterns of politeness, or whatever one calls the subtle toning of utterances according to situation and/or status can be taught. Most "corrections" are usually shades of speech appropriateness important to second language learners.

British or American bias (caused by birth, education, or both) may lead the teacher to condemn "alien" but acceptable modes of expression. Condemnation is to be avoided; it confuses students who have previously learned "the right way to say it."

Some phrases that are not "strange" to American ears might be "queer" in British English, and vice-versa. The instructor should point out possible variant interpretations—as, for instance, with "strange" and "queer." Consultation with a colleague of another nationality is helpful when doing this.

More often, the teacher of taped free conversation is confronted with word-for-word translations from the students' first

language to the second language. These utterances are usually non-communicative outside of a group of other speakers of the same first language, and so are global errors to be corrected after the discourse has finished.

Taped conversations of topics previously discussed and of playlets yield other mistakes, but not the same ones made previously. Students remember errors and correct themselves.

Grades may be either "a goad to learning" (Bott 1978:45) or a hindrance in maintaining that "informal non-threatening atmosphere of group activity" (Khoo 1979: 110) which is helpful to communication. Though only a few students realize that such communication practice perfects language skills, all participate for a motive much stronger than self-improvement: it's fun. The second language teacher's main responsibility is to "keep it that way." Only secondarily is he responsible for the evaluation of individual students' language performance.

A one-to-one interview is the main technique for checking if students can communicate. Though an interview is ultimately subjective,[4] experienced interviewers usually set performance criteria (Holdrich and Pergola-Arrezo 1980:129).

An objective multiple-choice test can be constructed from items in recorded free conversations to provide a "discrete point" evaluation of what has been gained in an oral skills course. Items so derived are very similar to those more formally taught with a structural syllabus. However, it is felt that no written test can effectively measure the speaking abilities of an individual student.

[1] "An unwillingness to speak for fear of making a mistake," quoted from Rogers (1979:22) who got it from Alatis (1976: 267) who cited Dr. Earl Stevick.

[2] At least two English graduates of local universities now teaching grammar show that one can gain an advanced degree in English at a native institution without having much ability in English communication.

[3] Many directors of studies have emphasized that mistakes must be corrected immediately, and it is official policy in most insti-

tutes with "intensive" courses.

[4] According to students passing an interview in order to further their studies in America, the teacher's most valuable advice was to "smile a lot."

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