

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES - THE SILENT WAY

The idea that a foreign language could be learned by memorising lists of vocabulary and grammar rules and by continual reference to one's native tongue has been rejected by most teachers of foreign languages today. Of the many alternative methods in use now, most have common basic elements: the learning of phrases and sentences instead of single words, the infrequent use of the native tongue, the emphasis on the spoken language, etc., but all still rely on memory as the key to mastery and include a variety of tools to aid memory, including video and audio tapes, drills and exercises. At the same time many of these new methods claim to teach the foreign language in imitation or simulation of the way a baby learns his native tongue.

These approaches overlook some very basic truths. If one considers speaking one's native tongue it becomes immediately clear that one does not remember it, one uses it. Situations trigger verbal responses. It is also evident that memory is one of our weakest faculties and therefore makes a poor basis for learning.

In all languages there are two kinds of words; those which can be simply substituted one for another from one language to the next, and those which cannot be dealt with in this way. The first group includes all names of objects that belong to the environments of the people using the language in question. Most nouns are in this category. These words can be matched in a one-to-one correspondence and we could conceive of them as being in vocabularies only requiring either to be recalled or looked-up.

The second category of words is the one that generates the problems in language learning. Since it is not possible to resort to a one-to-one correspondence, the only way open is to reach the area of meaning that the words cover, and find in oneself whether this is a new experience which yields something of the spirit of the language, or whether there is an equivalent experience in one's own language but expressed differently. To make sense of an original text written by a native, one needs much more than a morphological knowledge of the language and the possession of a set of equivalents.

If we consider the problems met in the acquisition of the second group of words mentioned above, it seems obvious that recourse to one's native tongue is not helpful, and the language ought to be blocked. But the acquisition of the mother tongue brings with it an awareness of what language is and it is this that must be retained; it is by keeping in touch with this awareness that a student who has already mastered his first language (at an average age of four or five years old) is in an appreciably stronger position when it comes to tackling a second.

Awareness of what language is includes the use of non-verbal components of language: melody, rhythm, intonation, breathing, inflection, etc. We could add to this awareness connected to the reading of a language: the conventions of writing, the combinations of letters to form the signs of different sounds and the possibility of one sound being represented by more than one combination.

Thus there is no chance to present to a learner of a foreign language any situation comparable to that which he has faced as a baby. The presentation of a foreign language in a classroom is far from natural and it can only be learned in school by artificial methods constructed for the purpose. In a classroom a teacher is there to present what is to be learned in a highly controlled way, which is quite unlike the situation for babies, who are subjected to a flow of words knitted together by the sustaining meaning, and coming from the source as a whole. People in contact with babies do not take special care when addressing them: they use the language which is available to them to say all they wish to say as completely as when talking among themselves.

Our proposal is to apply an artificial and for some purposes a strictly controlled approach, using materials constructed for this purpose. We will meet our students as people who already own much of what is needed to acquire a language and who have shown by the acquisition of their native tongue that they are endowed with mental powers that are, to say the least, sizeable.

The materials:

	a set of coloured wooden rods
	a set of wall pictures and accompanying worksheets
Wall charts	a set of word charts
	a set of fidel charts
	a sound/colour fidel
A pointer	
Mini charts	a set of miniature word charts and fidel charts plus fidel key, sound colour fidel key, exercises.
Three texts	a book of 1000 sentences; a book of short passages; a book of stories.

We make a start with the vocabulary of the second group of words, which we call the functional vocabulary. By using a number of small coloured rods, the teacher creates simple linguistic situations which are totally under her control. The situations can be very simple. They can be gradually made more complex as progress is made. The rods are used here to provide the support of perception and action to the intellectual guess of what the noises mean, thus bringing in the arsenal of criteria already developed and automatic in one's use of one's native tongue

From simple expressions and directions (take a red rod and put it here; give it to me; give it to her, etc.) it is only a matter of hours before a very precise and complex set of instructions can be given or written by the student:

There are seven rods on the table, a blue one, two red ones, a yellow one, a black one, a white one and a dark green one. All the rods are vertical except for one red one. This red one is lying on top of the blue rod which is standing on top of the white rod. The yellow rod is behind the blue rod and the other red rod is in front of the blue rod. The blue rod is between the green rod and the black rod. The black rod is on the right of the blue rod and the green is on the left. The yellow rod is bigger than the white rod and the red rods, but smaller than the blue, green and black rods. The blue rod is the biggest and the white rod is the smallest.

The structure used above can be transformed immediately into any description involving spatial relations and comparisons by the substitution of other nouns and adjectives. The rods are portable and easy to manipulate. They have qualities of colour, size and number. They can be used to build houses, furniture, clocks, etc., to represent people, family trees and with the help of imagination, anything else needed and not available in a classroom. Unlike pictures, they create situations which are not static, allowing for a sequence of events to take place and thus be spoken about, respecting the place of time in language.

Once some vocabulary has been met, reading is introduced through the wall charts. These present in a clear, logical and simple form what is in fact a highly complex analysis of the structure of words and their pronunciation. The vocabulary provided on the word charts is adequate for a multitude of different situations because the charts give a large proportion of the most common and useful words in each of the languages concerned. This enables a wide range of different sentences to be produced by selecting with a pointer particular words in appropriate sentences. The colouring principle, once discovered or explained, practically ensures correct pronunciation without need for memorising the code. Students do not ever write in colour. The correct use of the pointer with the charts will indicate phrasing, stress, speed, rhythm and intonation.

The various language fidels (or phonic code charts) are comprehensive sound-sign analyses. Divided horizontally into two sections, the upper part concerned with vowels, the lower with consonants, these tables list in columns the different ways of spelling the various sounds in a particular language. Once the functional vocabulary has been mastered the fidels provide the opportunity for numerous games which allow the study of the complete set of signs and sounds of the language.

The wall pictures present drawings of everyday life and are for the expansion of vocabulary. They stimulate the introduction of nouns and new verbs which form part of the day-to-day vocabulary of the people speaking the language. This vocabulary which we call semi-luxury, includes food, travel, family life, outings, etc.,. There are accompanying worksheets which require a variety of sensitivities from the learner.

The three texts provide graded reading material for individual study by students. The 1000 sentences are grouped roughly by subject. They contain a wealth of information about the geography, customs and social organisation of the land whose tongue is being studied. In the book of short passages, the passages are concerned with human situations or natural incidents, many revealing a deeper meaning than the purely linguistic. Written in a variety of tenses and forms, the separate accounts introduce new vocabulary and idioms. Short Passages will serve as a reader, for providing focal points for discussion as well as starting points for composition. The Eight Tales are enchanting stories written in simple terms, but without restriction on vocabulary.

Caleb Gattegno 1962

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