

# Problems in the teaching of English as a second language

by R.J. Salmon

I quote here the 'guiding principles' which Mary Finocchiaro sets out in her book, *Teaching English as a Second Language*:

1. The aim of the English-teaching programme should be to develop in the learner the four basic aspects of communication – understanding, speaking, reading and writing – within the social and cultural situations normal to persons of his age level.
2. Long-range objectives should include (a) the gradual perfecting or shaping of the language skills needed for everyday communication and for the learning of other curriculum areas; and (b) the development of an increasing insight into the culture of the English-speaking community, including an appreciation of its art, music and literature.

She takes these principles further in her discussion of the teacher's objective of encouraging the pupil to understand, speak and write the language.

The problem is how to attain the above? It seems obvious from what I have read that second language teaching has not always been completely successful, and that the problems encountered are not easily surmounted. These are the usual, and obvious, problems (which I refer to later); I will begin, however, with a journal article by N. Bailey, C. Madden and S. Krashen (English Language Institute and Linguistics Department, Queens College, New York). They found 'that there is a highly consistent order of relative difficulty in the use of functors across different language backgrounds, indicating that learners are experiencing intra-language difficulties'; in other words, it seems that many

errors made by second language learners spring from their different mother tongues; consequently, second language learning involves to a large extent the natural sequence of acquisition. The specific difficulties analysed by them were:

1. plural (-s)
2. progressive (-ing)
3. contractible copula
4. contractible auxiliary
5. articles (a, the)
6. past irregular
7. third person singular (-s)
8. possessive ('s)

Mary Finocchiaro says that there should be an awareness of similarities and differences between English and the native language of the pupil, for then the teacher knows in advance what problems are likely to be encountered. It is beneficial, thus, to compare the learner's language with the target language, in order to isolate those features of the latter which can be predicted with a fair degree of accuracy, and which will trouble the learner. However, each language is uniquely structured, and bearing in mind the above journal article which indicates that adults and children use common strategies for second language learning (the adult processes the linguistic data in ways similar to younger learners, although he may require the isolation of linguistic structures and feedback in the classroom), we must note that, if students with *different* first languages performed similarly, 'the results are also consistent with findings that errors in second language learning are not all the result of interference from the first language'. (N. Bailey, C. Madden, S. Krashen: 'Is there a Natural Sequence in Adult Second Language Learning'.) Bailey, et al, state that 'while casual observation affirms that errors due to mother tongue interference do occur in second language learning in adults, our data are simply that a major source of errors is intra- rather than inter-lingual, and is due to the use of universal language processing strategies'.

The above does not help our case at all, for it means that we have to examine the 'universal language processing strategies', and not rely on statements of contrasts. We do know that students with certain linguistic backgrounds make predictable mistakes; for

example, the Spanish student fails to distinguish between the phonemes in 'beat' and 'bit', 'bait' and 'bet'; Japanese students cannot distinguish the phonemes /l/ and /r/; but these contrastive analyses prove and teach very little, and perhaps is one of the reasons for the 'halting and very awkward translation from the mother tongue' of second language learners. Mary Finocchiaro says that, where possible, a knowledge of the points of similarity and contrast in the English language and in the native language of the pupil should exist so that materials for teaching and reinforcing pronunciation, sentence patterns and vocabulary can be based on this knowledge. Dr P. McMagh's view in 'Crux' (August 1967) is that: 'The philosophy of foreign-language teaching calls for establishing what is different between the mother tongue and the target language, and then drilling that assiduously'. Languages, then, must be taught through repetition of some sort, for languages are habits, and habits are established by repetition. There are, however, varying opinions as to the use of contrastive analyses.

Mary Finocchiaro says: 'There are no good or bad methods; there are only good or bad teachers.' Now, while her thorough and knowledgeable book covers every aspect of language teaching – from pronunciation and intonation patterns of English to the cultural context and the social situations in which language is used, 'the philosophy and objectives of the programme', the use of the language for personal expression and self-realization, the function of language in everyday life, 'specific guidance in every facet of language cognition, imitation, reception and production ...', consolidation and integration of previously taught material, the sequence of learning, the rhythm of English, motivation, control of pronunciation, word form and word order, the 'aural acuity' required by students – her ideas mainly deal with selecting and *actively* teaching the pupil everything he can use in the greatest number of real situations. Ronald Wardhaugh in his article, 'Tesol: Current Problems and Classroom Practices', feels that the emphasis should be moved from teaching to learning, from the teacher to the student. In contrast to Mary Finocchiaro's idea of 'bad teachers', he feels that where a bad practice in teaching English exists, the weakness will lie in our understanding of language, or of psychology or pedagogy. The whole basis of classroom practice is providing a bridge between practice and theory; for if there is a problem in any one of the three

disciplines – linguistics, pedagogy and psychology – this will exert an influence on classroom practice. He refers to Prof. E.M. Anthony's sequence of 'approach, method and technique':

- (a) The Approach is almost like the basic theory or basic viewpoint, and understanding of certain axioms. This is the first priority to be considered by the teacher;
- (b) The Method is the overall plan for the orderly presentation of language material – which is based on the selected approach. An approach is axiomatic and the method is procedural;
- (c) Technique is what actually takes place in the classroom, it is that which is implementational. 'It is a particular trick, stratagem used to accomplish an immediate objective.' *Technique depends on the teacher, his individual artistry and the composition of the class.* Perhaps it is significant to note that the view held today is that the more hardware there is in the classroom, like language laboratories and visual aids and the right books, the greater the success of language teaching there should be.

R. Wardhaugh discusses the three disciplines in their relationship towards language problems; that is, problems in second language teaching. It seems that as far as *linguistics* is concerned, 'most linguists admit that they really do not know much at all about exactly what must be learned in the area of second language learning'. But they do feel that linguistics constitute the basic building blocks for students to distinguish, for example, between 'bit' and 'bait', 'bet' and 'bat', and for students to realise that, in English, adjectives do not agree, in number, with nouns. The problem here is that many linguists are not in agreement as to what grammar is. Also, is language a skill which is largely habitual (like learning to type) or is it an ability which is largely creative (as N. Bailey, C. Madden and S. Krashen state)? What must be learned? Sentences, patterns, rules, habits, general principles? However, Wardhaugh adds that students cannot have only an abstract, or theoretical knowledge – they require drills and practice in learning to speak; this applies especially to substitution drills, where they have to deal with the problems of substituting words like 'it', 'one', and other difficult pronominals. Even if we accept the 'creativity theory', there is the need for such good 'stimuli' as mimicry, expansion, substitution and transformation.

We have to create these 'stimuli' for the children to react to, but the problem is that some teachers are filling children with rote habits that are completely unproductive. Again, we cannot ignore actual language use and the context in which language is used. We have to combine

- (a) the use of the natural contexts of language to prompt language use – pupils have to be helped to learn, to fit an entire sentence or utterance into an *actual* communication situation;
- (b) together with an awareness of the language structures which have to be mastered – pupils have to be helped to gain insight through varied practice into the types of words or expressions which fit into various slots of an utterance or sentence.

Mary Finocchiaro puts it in another way: 'Increased ability in any language skill will be in direct proportion to the amount of meaningful practice given in that skill'. She carries her assertion a little too far, however, when she advises that 'the same sentence may have to be practised over and over again for months before progress is obvious'.

In discussing the *psychological* aspect of teaching, Wardhaugh asks how anyone can teach a second language when so little is known about 'any one language, never mind two'; and when so little is known about almost every aspect of the learning process? Here he feels that the learner makes a great contribution. Here, also, equipment, materials, the time of day the class is held, the teacher's personality, the sex (race) of students in the class, awareness of individual differences in relation to the mastery of English, and the social role which the language plays in the student's life, profoundly affect the learning process. The learner should be stimulated and encouraged by examples, variety and context – orientated work. But the teacher must respond to the different needs of the students, and perceive their gradual development as people who 'control' a second language; he must notice, too, those who exhibit different learning patterns, inclinations and motives, instead of worrying incessantly over their apparent mastery of a particular pattern. 'Linguistic interference' he says 'is linguistic ignorance'. If this is so, do we remedy the situation through drill or explanation? Explanation, unfortunately, does not guarantee learning. Bearing in mind age, motivation and different levels of response, we should try to integrate drill and

explanation as we can never be sure which will work. Furthermore, we cannot ignore the fact that the ingrained language habits of the native speaker must interfere or conflict with the learning of a second language.

Finally, Wardhaugh maintains that, in the *pedagogical* situation, the teacher is extremely important, for it is impossible to teach children in a sterile and inactive environment, in that language deals with reality. Good techniques do not emanate from the fancy, nor do they owe their success to intricate machinery and equipment; good techniques involve the students in worthwhile activity with a good theoretical basis. As Mary Finocchiaro says, movement, involvement, drama, laughter, games and stories play an important role in stimulating the students to *participate* in the language. The basic questions and insights implicit in these three vital disciplines should continually be sought after and rephrased, rather than be overlooked in the search for a new tape recorder or book. 'There is indeed nothing so practical as a good theory'; it is the *approach*, thus, that is of extreme importance.

According to Mary Finocchiaro, students have to be taught to control pronunciation, word form and word order; they have also to be shown how the entire utterance fits into an actual *communication* situation. She also states that the sequence of development of language skills, if it is to conform to natural language development, will proceed 'from the listening, to the speaking, to the reading and, lastly, to the writing steps'. She feels that reading and writing go naturally together and that the writing activities should be designed to reinforce listening, speaking and reading abilities.

Nancy Arapoff in 'Writing: A Thinking Process' states that: 'Teaching students to write is different in a very important way from teaching them to speak, for writing is not translating vocal symbols into orthographic ones but a purposeful selection and organization of experience. The process of learning to write is largely a process of learning to *think* more clearly'. Here, indeed, is a good reason why 'written English is barely understandable'; she says further, that 'learning to speak and learning grammar essentially involve learning *not* to think', and therefore the habit-forming process whereby students learn to speak English and grammar will interfere with the process of learning to write well. The students must undergo intense mental activity to work out

problems of selection and organization if they are really to learn to write. One of the biggest problems in teaching writing is that students must have facts and ideas in order to write. She says that free composition and the copybook method are unsatisfactory, for students will use facts and ideas gained from their first-hand experiences and they will consequently formulate these in their own language and translate them word-for-word into ungrammatical English. Consequently, in *her* method she controls the purpose of the writing, and teaches children to think more and more actively in the course of their work.

Donald Bowen in 'Linguistic Variation as a Problem in Second-Language Teaching' agrees that speech and writing are quite different skills and that the need to know which words are archaic and which literary is quite a handicap, especially where a foreign-language student has to depend entirely on the classroom for his experience of the new language.

Robert Lado in 'Patterns of Difficulty in Vocabulary', states that 'the meanings into which we classify our experience are culturally determined or modified and they vary considerably from culture to culture'. Mary Finocchiaro feels that too much emphasis is placed on the acquisition of vocabulary, and that it should not be taught as an end in itself. Word lists, which most schools eagerly and conscientiously distribute are 'detrimental' as they prevent the teacher from supplying the language his pupils need; a word out of context has no distinctive meaning.

Here is a short list of specific problems encountered in second-language teaching:

- (1) Teaching reading (even to native speakers) is difficult, for the same written letter or letters can represent various sounds e.g. 'go', 'hot', 'boat', 'off', 'room'. The recognition of letters, therefore, does not always accompany the sound correspondence;
- (2) Difficulty in teaching children to say and write long vowels as against short vowels;
- (3) The reading process is extremely complex and demands the knowledge of many related word recognition and comprehension skills;
- (4) The plural is irregular in pronunciation; for example, 'books', 'boys' and 'boxes';
- (5) The past is also irregular in pronunciation: 'walked', 'combed', 'wanted';

- (6) Stress may be phonemic (cónvert, convert);
- (7) Pause may be phonemic ('I scream', 'Ice cream');
- (8) Contractions are extremely difficult: 'He's', 'I'd';
- (9) Negation presents a problem;
- (10) Reflexive – reciprocal: 'We wash ourselves';
- (11) Possession;
- (12) Inflection of pronouns: I, my, mine, me;
- (13) Is there a word similar to 'do' for questions or negations? Do we make this sort of comparison in teaching?
- (14) How are 'tag' questions expressed? In English we say: 'He's going, isn't he? They're rich, aren't they?' Other languages use a set formula; for example, Spanish '¿verdad?', French 'n'est-ce pas?', Italian 'vero?'.

Finally, I refer to B. Spolsky's article, 'Attitudinal Aspects of Second Language Learning', in which he says that '... the social role of language cannot be overlooked in the development of a theory of second language acquisition'. Significant factors, which he mentions, are method, age, aptitude and attitude. He considers teaching method as the most easily controllable and feels, thus, that it should not occupy the elevated position that it does (this is Prof. Anthony's 'technique'). Spolsky maintains, furthermore, that the adult and the child acquire a language more quickly in a natural environment than in the classroom. Age and aptitude are important, but attitudinal factors (especially the attitude of the learner to the language and to its speakers) are extremely relevant in motivating a student to learn English successfully. A person usually learns a language when he wants to be a member of the group speaking that language.