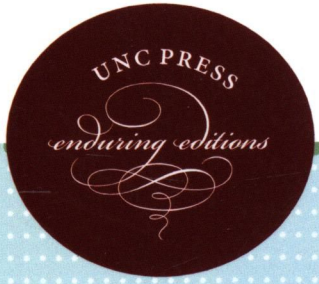
THE PSYCHOLOGY OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE STUDY

H. R. HUSE



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PREFACE

The title of this work is intended to differentiate the present investigation from numerous essays on methodology and from manuals that give advice on a wide variety of topics based on personal, rather than scientific, induction.

The subject is the learning (memorizing) process, and what has been established on this point experimentally rather than rationally. Problems of curriculum, administration, classroom organization, and, generally, the art of teaching, are in no way concerned. The psychology of language, in an absolute sense, is not involved. Moreover, to use the valuable distinction made by Palmer, learning is considered only in its "studial aspect" and not in its "natural aspect." The problem that remains, namely the learning process, is, however, the one that concerns most vitally thousands of teachers and hundreds of thousands of students in the public schools.

Certain omissions in the list of the language experiments reviewed are explained by the restriction to studial learning of foreign languages, and by a necessary distinction between general statistical compilations and experiments in a more precise and particular sense.

Among many debts incurred, the author must mention particularly the report of the Canadian

Committee of the Modern Foreign Language Study, which has furnished much indispensable material, and both the published work and advice of Professor Coleman.

H. R. Huse

Chapel Hill
April, 1931

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INTRODUCTION

Few school subjects involve the interests of more individuals, are more written about, and with less agreement, than the subject of language study. Theories and methods for learning languages follow each other in almost endless succession, most of which claim some universal validity. Yet, in spite of the effort and discussion, teachers are divided into many camps, and even among members of a group, there is seldom an entire agreement.

The attempt here is to summarize the present knowledge concerning economical methods of language learning. This aim involves, first of all, a distinction between convictions based on general experience or on purely logical processes, and facts that have been established experimentally. Only experimental results offer a basis for assurance.

But in considering the experiments, a further limitation is necessary. In drawing conclusions from the evidence, there is room for subjective influences, and experiments cannot always be accepted at their face value. This is particularly so in the case of language experiments, which often are undertaken, not by disinterested parties, but by partisans of certain causes. The goal-idea may determine, if not the conclusions drawn, at least the particular results that reach the stage of publication. It has been necessary, therefore, to review these experiments in

some detail, and to adopt a more critical attitude toward them than is found, for instance, in the similar work of Professor Handschin.

Professor Handschin's generous estimate of present experimental knowledge appears hardly confirmed by a close examination of the facts. The number of strictly language experiments has been very limited, the results often conflicting or uncertain, and the necessary conclusions largely negative. In the larger field of educational psychology, the situation is only slightly different. Although most experiments in that field have been performed under laboratory conditions and with adequate controls, on several of the most vital topics the results vary according to particular circumstances, and the total contribution that can be considered of immediate use to language teachers is, therefore, relatively slight.

The first part of this study is concerned with the experimental evidence. A second part examines current pedagogical doctrines to discover the unanimity or diversity of opinion. A third part considers aims and methods, but only in relation to their bearing on the learning process.

Several curious facts appear to be established by the evidence presented: (1) that the experimental study of language problems has hardly begun; (2) that opinions concerning grammar, paradigms, the language unit, word lists, etc., depend largely upon the varying connotations or implications of the terms

used; and (3) that the aims of language study, with which methods and procedures are intimately bound up, are extremely diverse. These aims, estimates of values, or degrees of emphasis vary subjectively in each individual and provide almost numberless viewpoints from which the few facts and many theories may be regarded. The result is a certain anarchy both in doctrines and in practice.

Although the primary object here is to present the evidence concerning what is known, the question arises immediately as to whether it is possible to give scientific objectivity to the subject of language methodology, to eliminate the endless theorizing that may depend, in last analysis, upon the ambiguity of terms or on varying estimates of values. With this intent, a suggestion is hazarded which, if generally accepted, would afford a basis for a new applied science.

The possibility of such a reform would seem remote when one considers the antiquity of the problem. But certain recent developments are worth noting. The experimental approach to language problems dates back hardly twenty years. The first word counts, which involve a fundamental question, namely, what to teach, are very recent. Moreover, the Modern Language Study has marked a new development by redirecting the attention of leaders in the universities (whose sense of responsibility

had somewhat wandered), to problems of a vital, immediate, and practical nature.

Apart from the present ambiguity of terms, the greatest difficulty in reaching a common basic understanding is the multiplicity of aims, nearly all of which may, in certain situations, be entirely legitimate. This variation in purposes affects both the kind of material to be presented and the way of presenting it, so that nearly any method may be good or bad according to the knowledge or discipline it is intended to impart. The attempt, as in the past, to find a universal panacea, a "new method" or formula, for accomplishing any and every aim, seems doomed to failure. Moreover, no general agreement can ever be reached as to single *ultimate* objective for all students, whose future careers and interests are obviously almost as varied as their faces. The hope is not in ultimate aspirations, but in finding, if possible, a common denominator, a minimum aim that will afford a beginning. If this is done, a simplification of the problem is at once possible. The task to be accomplished can be defined, not in the form of vague aspirations, but in terms of a concrete list of units of expression, established objectively by frequency of occurrence. In presenting this fixed amount of work, the criterion of economy of effort, which is a measurable quantity, offers a basis for experimental evaluations. With what to teach known and agreed upon, and