

Teaching and Learning Languages

Earl W. Stevick

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Cambridge University Press

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The School of Language Studies of the Foreign Service Institute has for twenty years been my professional home, and a continuing source of contact with the day-to-day realities of teaching and learning foreign languages.

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Preface

A book is one person telling something to another whom he or she has never seen. Let me begin therefore by saying who I am and who I'm writing for. Since 1948, I've worked full time in one way or another teaching languages – first in English classrooms, then in training and in supervising teachers, and writing and consulting on materials in numerous languages for speakers of English. I've been at least a temporary learner in over a dozen languages and have also had different kinds of exposure to others. All of the students with whom I've worked directly have been adults. Against this background – in some ways broad, in others narrow – I've looked to see which things have worked and which have not, and made some guesses about *why* some things work well but others don't. With this book, then, I put into your hands, in a few pages, my summary of what I've seen and what my guesses are. For reasons of convenience, most of the examples I give will be in English. Many of them originated, however, in the teaching or learning of other languages.

This started out to be a book for teachers who are just beginning, no matter what their language or the age and level of their students. It has become also, in my own mind at least, a book for experienced teachers who are ready to take a fresh look at some of the things they've been doing all along, and to relate these things to how memory works and how people work together. Since I myself have never taught some types of class, this book lays no claim to being comprehensive. It concentrates on speaking skills, but even for oral classes it's an introduction, a sampler, not an encyclopaedia.

I hope this is a practical book, yet I don't want it to be a 'how-to-do-it' book. That is to say, I'm not going to give you one particular method – one matched set of techniques – and recommend that you follow it. There are already excellent methods books that do that, a few of which I mention in

chapter 21. I cannot tell you what to read, partly because I cannot know which methods and which books you will be asked to use in the school or schools where you teach; partly also because I cannot know your personal preferences; most of all because I believe that whatever you do, you will do it better if you do it out of your own informed choices.

That is why this is not a 'how-to-do-it' book. Instead, I've tried to write a 'how-it-works' book. I've described a large number of techniques drawn from a wide range of methods – some old, some new, some widely used, some relatively unknown. It's only fair to warn you that you'll find highly competent experts in the field of language teaching who will tell you that certain of the techniques I've included here are outworn or at least outmoded. At the opposite extreme, other experts may call some of the techniques experimental or visionary. I hope, when they tell you this, that you will listen respectfully and learn from them. I can only assure you that the techniques I tell you about are ones that have worked in the past and will work again for teachers who see when, how and why they fit their students' needs. I've tried to make this an easy book to read, but one which will stay with you through much hard thinking.

PART 1 BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1 Between the people in the classroom

1.1 Introduction

Good morning, class!
Welcome to English 3!
I'm
First, I'll call the roll.

Here's a scene that repeats itself many hundreds of times a year in countries all over the world. This time though, it's different! *You* are the teacher! The course may be French 2, or Spanish 1, or Practical Portuguese, or Advanced Arabic instead of English 3, but the messages of these four lines are still there.

If you are reading this book, you probably haven't welcomed classes on many opening days. You may never have taught a language at all. In the following pages, I will pull together some of the things I have learned in 35 years, and set them out as clearly as I can for new language teachers. I hope you will find them useful. I also hope you will find them encouraging. Helping people to learn a new language is work, but it can be one of the most rewarding kinds of work there is. And it can be great fun!

The second part of this book will show you that you need never run out of classroom techniques. It will begin to answer your questions about 'How?' The third part will get you started on what you need to know concerning the workings of language – some of your questions about 'What?' The final chapter will steer you to a number of other books that will be of value to you as a new teacher. In this first part, though, let's take a few pages to look at the 'Who?' and the 'Where?' and the 'Why?' Unless you're fairly clear about these matters, your best techniques will be mere virtuosity, and your knowledge of linguistics may prove just so much excess baggage.

The words in the four sentences at the head of this chapter are

simple, and the sentences themselves make up a very common formula. Let's start by taking the formula apart. The assumptions that lie behind it are the framework within which you will probably be doing most of your teaching.

1.2 'Good morning, class!'

When you end the first sentence with the word 'class,' for example, you are recognizing your students as a very special kind of group. It is a group that has its meaning within a public school system, or a refugee program, or a university, or a commercial language school, or some other social institution. The members of the class, and the institution that they belong to, have their own goals for the course. Sometimes their principal goal is recreation or personal improvement. Sometimes it is simply the amassing of academic credits. Very often it is preparation for an external examination, or for a very specific type of employment. Some people have none of these 'instrumental' goals, but instead would merely like to identify themselves more closely with the culture that speaks German or Japanese or whatever the language is. This is what some people call 'integrative' motivation. But instrumental or integrative, the goal is never just 'to learn the language.' If this is true, then your own goal cannot be simply 'to teach the language.' Teaching a language is always a means toward other ends. When you called the people there in front of you 'class,' you accepted for yourself the role known as 'teacher,' and along with it an obligation to help your students to move toward the goals that they brought with them. This task may be made complex if the students' own goals are at variance with those of the institutions to which you and they are responsible, or if they differ among themselves as to goals, or if their goals are unrealistic. Complexity – even impossibility – does not detract from the priority of this task, however. Upon your success in dealing with it may depend much of your credibility, your acceptability and your professional existence.

Step 1. Find out what your students and their sponsors expect from the course.

1.3 'Welcome to English 3!'

When you 'welcome' your students to English 3, you are using the same word that you say to a guest who has come to your home. Using this word means first of all that you are speaking for the family that lives there. More important, though, it means that you intend to help your guest to feel comfortable. So we often follow 'Welcome!' with 'Make yourself at home!'

By watching a guest, we can get a pretty good idea of how well we have succeeded in making him¹ feel at home. Does he lean back on the sofa, or does he sit cautiously upright on the edge of it? Does he nibble politely just the minimum of food that custom requires him to eat, or does he eat heartily? Does he stay on the outskirts of the conversation, or does he seem to enjoy putting himself into it? Does he glance frequently at his watch, or does he seem to have lost track of the time?

The word 'welcome,' then, stands for one of the two essential sides to your role as teacher. You hope that by the end of the course your students will feel more at home with your language than they do now. You hope they will prefer to concentrate on the work at hand rather than on the clock. Most of all, you hope that they will throw intellect and imagination into the lesson, and not just go through the motions with their voices and their pencils.

This last point is particularly important. In the long run, the quantity of your students' learning will depend on the quality of the attention that they give to it. The quality of their attention will depend, in turn, on the degree to which they are able and willing to throw themselves into what is going on. And they will throw themselves in only to the extent that they feel secure in doing so. In this respect they're something like a turtle, which moves ahead on its own power only when it's willing to stick its neck out a little.

We all know that it's *nice* to make one's guests feel comfortable. But when you make your student-guests feel welcome and safe, you have done much more than just be nice to them. You have achieved a very practical end in opening the way for them

¹ The exclusive use of he, his, him in contexts like this perpetuates a tradition which is no longer acceptable. To use he or she (or she or he) and the corresponding double pronouns for possessive and objective forms is prohibitively awkward. No solution is likely to please everyone. My practice in this book will be to use the masculine forms in some chapters, feminine ones in others, and to envy the Turks, Japanese, and speakers of all other languages in which this issue does not arise.

to participate more freely in the course and to profit more fully from it.

We'll come back to this SECURITY → ASSERTION → ATTENTION formula when we look at what lies behind the fourth line of your opening words to your students. Meantime here's my next recommendation to you: *Step 2. Find out what will make your students feel welcome in your class and secure with you.* This will vary from one culture to another. For example, a very strict and heavy-handed style may frighten or offend students in one country, while in another country students may feel that a teacher who does not behave in that way is not a real teacher. Other examples come from body language: the way you use your eyes, the distance you stand from your students, the way you touch or refrain from touching them – all of these carry signals which will have a profound effect on your students' feelings of welcome and comfort with you. Such features of non-verbal communication are often subtle – so subtle that neither you nor your students are consciously aware of them. But aware or not, your students will be affected by them. In fact, the things we do that people don't consciously notice are often the very things that mold most deeply and firmly their attitudes toward us.

If you and your students are from different cultures, you may have quite a bit to learn about how they see teaching styles and nonverbal communication. Even if you and they share the same home culture, however, what I've just said still applies. Within any culture there is a vast range of effectiveness from one teacher to another, and much of the difference rests on just such matters as these.

This is not to say that your students' culture and the culture that you are representing to them are totally unlike each other, of course. Nor does it mean that all members of a particular culture are exactly the same in what makes them feel comfortable or uncomfortable. It goes without saying that you'll want to be sensitive to individual differences, but you're likely to misinterpret individuals unless you have a reasonably good picture of the culture out of which the individuals have come. So I repeat: your second step is to find out what means what in the culture(s) of your students. This will be a never-ending journey, of course. You certainly won't be able to complete it during your first few months as their teacher. You can make a significant start on it though, and that's what will be most important to you and to them.

All of this is part of treating your students as human beings with human needs. But they're not the only human beings in the classroom. You're one too, so it will be worth your while to notice what it is that makes you feel welcome or unwelcome, what would make you feel more secure so that you can put yourself more fully into your work with the class. Depending on your students' culture and your own, you may find it helpful to tell your students a bit about yourself, how you came to be their teacher, why you are doing things as you are, and so on.

There's another point to be made in connection with the second sentence of your opening monolog. In that sentence you are not merely making your students feel 'at home.' You are welcoming them to a very definite activity known as *English 3*. By enrolling in this course, your students are making a public commitment of themselves: of their time and money, most obviously, but also of mental effort and emotional resources. They want to feel that they are investing their minds and their emotions, their time and money, in a way that will bring them a satisfying return.

If you have followed steps 1 and 2, you have begun to find out what your students want, and something of what it takes to make them feel personally comfortable. But if they are seldom sure what kind of activity is coming next, they will have to divert a large part of their energy to figuring out what to try to do and when to try to do it. (Remember how much more tired you are after the first day on a new job than you are after you have learned the ropes and know what to expect.) Worse yet, if they sense that you the teacher aren't clear about what to do next, most groups will become uneasy and even demoralized.

Step 3, therefore: Work out some basic techniques, and establish a simple, clear routine for using them. You don't have to be inflexible either in the routine or in the techniques themselves. The important thing, though, is to keep from improvising too much – from looking as though you are making up your method as you go along. When the students sense that they are in firm hands, they can relax and turn their full attention to the task before them. If 'control' means establishing the rules for an activity and providing options among which students may choose, then you can maintain complete control in your classroom even while you allow your students to exercise a great deal of initiative. Think of a jungle gym – lengths of steel pipe joined together at right angles to make a rigid three-dimensional space within which children can climb about as

they wish. Igor Stravinsky once remarked, 'My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and . . . surround myself with obstacles . . . The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit.'

Frequent and significant 'initiative' within clear and dependable 'control,' as I have used these two terms, builds further the sense of security that is basic to the best kind of learning. An added advantage is that you as teacher will also feel more competent and therefore more confident when you are working in a familiar routine with tools that you know how to handle. This competence and confidence will come across to your students, increasing their security still further. (For this reason, most of the second part of this book is devoted to the devising of techniques and the establishing of routines.) Once they feel this confidence, you may find it profitable to sound them out from time to time about their reactions and their suggestions.

1.4 'I'm

When you begin your third sentence with 'I'm,' you will really be saying, 'I, the teacher, am'. Though details may vary from culture to culture and from school to school, a teacher is usually a person who directs what students are to do, who exercises power over them, and who evaluates what they have done. So you will say, in effect, 'I, the person into whose hands you are putting yourself to dominate you and direct you and judge you, am

Watching myself over the years, as well as a number of other beginning teachers, I have seen at least five ideas of what a teacher's most basic function is. I began, I suppose, with a picture of a teacher who leaves people knowing more than they had known before. I remember several sessions in the class taught by one person who seemed to think that her essential duty was to correct mistakes; whenever the lesson was going so well that there were no errors, she did whatever was necessary to produce errors! Another teacher I knew acted as though her most important duty was to answer her students' questions. Others are certain that, above all, they must get their students through the textbook by the end of the course. Some are less concerned with subject matter, questions and errors, and more concerned with helping their students to become more capable

and independent in dealing with the language on their own. My purpose here is not to say that some of these views are right and others are wrong, or even that one is better than another. But you may want to run this list through your mind, add to it if you can, and think about yourself and other teachers you have known.

Next in your opening words to your class, you complete that heavily loaded third sentence by giving the students your name. You may want to stop here for a moment and go back and read that sentence quietly, but aloud, to yourself. Insert your own name, in the form that your class will use in speaking to you. Pause for a few seconds to let the sound of the sentence echo a time or two through your mind. Then ask yourself, 'What is the person like who goes by this name? What brought her (or him) into the classroom, and what does she (or he) hope to get out of it?'

Let's look at just a few of the fringe benefits that go along with being a teacher, aside from the salary. For one thing, there's a certain amount of infallibility. Within your classroom and within the subject matter that you were hired to teach, you are always right. Even if you aren't always right, you know so much more than your students that it's very nearly the same thing. How important will that be to you the next time you step into a classroom?

Another fringe benefit is power: the right to tell people what to do and then tell them how well or how poorly they have done it. In this sense you will be standing in the shoes of your parents and your own teachers – of figures, that is, toward whom you felt love or fear or respect or perhaps some combination of emotions. As a teacher, you will feel that these emotions are being directed toward you. What does this status mean to you? How will you feel if people don't give it to you?

A third benefit that we teachers occasionally receive is gratitude. Are you able to enjoy your students' successes without demanding that they act grateful toward you?

Some artists use wood as their medium. Others use paint or musical instruments or dance. The medium for your creativity as a teacher will be the minds of other human beings. Books and curricula and visual aids are often called 'media,' but they are not the medium; they are only tools for working that medium. How do you feel about the pleasures, the responsibilities and the frustrations of working with other people's minds?

Would you prefer a strong sense of creativity accompanied

by little evident gratitude from your students, or enthusiastic gratitude for what you felt was a routine job of teaching? Similarly, how would you balance power against gratitude, power against creativity, or creativity against infallibility? These are some of the questions that may help you to understand better your own completion of the third sentence in your opening words to your class.

Step 4, then, is to *ask yourself these questions*, perhaps making a few notes. Then put those thoughts and those notes aside for a few days. Notice what additional answers come to you, perhaps when you least expect them.

1.5 'First, I'll call the roll.'

With the fourth and last sentence, you begin to read the students' names aloud one at a time. Have you ever noticed what people do when they first see a group photo which includes them? Each looks first, of course, to check on how he came out, and you can often overhear wry, self-conscious remarks on that subject. People react in very much the same way to a hand-lettered list that includes their names. And many (though not all) of us find it hard to let a mispronunciation of our names go uncorrected.

One obvious step that you can take, then, if you don't already speak your students' native language(s), is to learn to pronounce as well as possible these foreign names that belong to your students. More generally though, and much more important: *Step 5* is to take your first opportunity to *look at your students one at a time* – not while they're watching, of course. Spend about five seconds on each one. Remind yourself as you do so that here is one more ego laying itself on the line by becoming your student. Where you as teacher exercise your right and your responsibility to control what goes on in class, here is someone who is constantly being controlled. Where you are infallible, here is someone who expects to be evaluated every time he opens his mouth. The areas of your special knowledge are for him areas of ignorance. You may use your creativity in helping him to be creative also, but many teachers draw their feeling of creativity from their success in using their students' conformity to elicit lots of right answers. When your students feel that you are the *captive* of your own needs to display superior knowledge

or to display superior power or to feel infallibility, gratitude or creativity, they may 'draw their heads back into their shells.'

But it's not just their relationship with the teacher that influences how students do in their studies. When a student feels in direct competition with other students, that feeling will affect performance, sometimes for the better and sometimes for the worse. Another strong force between students is loyalty, and pressure to conform to the standards of the class, or of the student's home culture. Too good an accent in speaking may be taken as a sign of willingness to move psychologically away from the life into which they were born, and toward becoming too much like the people whose native language the student is learning. Being too quick in any aspect of the course may set up tensions between a good student and his classmates. In even a small class the learning styles of the students may be dramatically different from one another; this too may lead to misunderstanding and impatience.

1.6 Conclusion

The five steps that I have suggested in this opening chapter will not of themselves make you into a good teacher. Moreover, many thousands of people through the ages have become good teachers without consciously following these steps. The most you can hope for, if you do follow them, is that they will bring you to a position from which you can see a bit more clearly where you are working and what you are working with.

2 Performance from three kinds of competence

2.1 Introduction

In 1957 I wrote a book titled *Helping people learn English*. While I was working on the manuscript, I didn't think very carefully about what I meant by 'learn.' To have 'learned' a language meant, obviously, to be able to understand it and produce it. I suspect that many of my colleagues in those days were for all practical purposes working from a definition about that simple.

In recent years, though, we've begun to see that there is more than one kind of 'learning,' just as there are several ways in which a person may 'understand' or 'produce' a given sentence. The differences aren't just theoretical, either. On the contrary, if you are aware of them, you will be able to see much more clearly what you and your students are doing in your work together.

2.2 'Performance' and 'competence'

In this chapter I will be talking about a set of distinctions that you may find helpful. Of these the broadest and simplest is between 'performance' and 'competence.'

Problem 1

You say: 'How long have you been studying English?' and your student replies: 'I have begun to study English two years ago.' What do you do?

In this exchange, your student's act of speaking is an example of performance. To have written the same sentence would also have been an act of performance, but in a different medium. In either case, her performance did not fit exactly with what natives would have said or written. We say that it 'was wrong,' or that it 'contained an error.' Her purpose in coming to your class in the first place was that she hoped you would help her to