

Teaching and Learning English

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Raja T. Nasr

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Selected and Simplified Readings

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**Beirut College for Women,
Beirut, Lebanon**



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To the memory of
Charles C. Fries

Preface

The English language is more widely used around the world than ever before. More and more people are using it in business, industry, politics, education, and the various professions. The more widely English is used, the greater is the need to teach it as a foreign language; and the greater the need to teach it, the greater is the need to train teachers to teach it. Ideally, of course, trained native speakers of English would make the best teachers of English; but the supply of native English speakers (and, to a much smaller extent, trained native English speakers) cannot possibly meet the fast-growing demand for teachers of English; and more and more non-native speakers are being trained to teach English as a foreign language.

My experience with foreign teachers of English in many parts of the world, and especially in the Middle East and Africa, has clearly indicated the dire need for presenting in a simple and direct fashion the basic and pertinent findings of linguistic science along with the fundamental techniques relevant to the teaching profession.

Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language: *Selected and Simplified Readings* is an attempt at meeting this great need. Selected articles and chapters from the writings of experts in the field have been simplified in structure and in vocabulary to make them easily understood by foreign teachers of English. A number of technical expressions which may be unfamiliar to some readers are listed and explained on page 180. Not all of the ideas presented in these readings follow the same school of thought; it seems significant, besides giving the fundamental principles of foreign language learning and teaching, to show that in the teaching of English as a foreign language, as in all other professions and sciences, there are different points of view.

Raja T. Nasr
Beirut, Lebanon
1969

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Part 1

Teaching and Learning a Foreign Language

1 LANGUAGE AND LANGUAGE LEARNING¹

Earl W. Stevick

1. What Language is

As you were growing up, you learned to do things in certain ways in certain situations. You learned to feed yourself in a certain way. You learned to tie your shoes in a certain way. You learned how to conduct yourself in school and how to get along with other children. You learned what to do when you were introduced to an older person. We all learned how to do these things so well that other ways of doing these same things often seem strange to us and sometimes very wrong.

Along with the ways of acting, you learned to understand and produce a set of signs which consisted of noises. These signs accompanied and stood for various experiences in your life. Most of these signs were made by using lips, tongue, voice box and the like.

As a matter of fact, these signs were of many kinds. There were vowels and consonants, of course, but also voice tones and different degrees of loudness. You chose different words, but sometimes you added something at the end of them and sometimes you arranged them in a different order. All of these signs and ways were put together to form a rather difficult system. As the years went by and the system worked itself deeper and deeper into the set of habits which you lived, you learned to call that system "the English language."

2. What Language Learning is

Luckily, we were allowed to learn this system a little at a time. We had other advantages, too. We learned from the loving help of parents, as well as from our young friends who gave us

1. Adapted from Earl W. Stevick, *Helping People Learn English*, pp. 13-19, 23-28.

no peace until we talked “like everybody else.” We “studied” the language every waking hour. But now let’s turn our attention to the person who learns a new language after he has learned his native language.

A person has learned a foreign language

- (a) when he has learned its sound system (understanding speech and speaking well),
- (b) when he has learned to use its grammar, and
- (c) when he has learned at least a limited vocabulary.

A person has learned a foreign language when he is able to understand and use the expressions he needs in any situation. He has only in part learned a foreign language when he can use and understand part of the expressions which he needs.

That is, in the situation “asking one’s way on the street,” one needs to *use* such expressions as:

- (List A) Pardon me.
 Where’s the post office?
 Thank you.
 Well, thanks just the same.

One also needs to *understand* expressions like:

- (List B) It’s on Main Street, two blocks up that way.
 I don’t know. I’m a stranger here myself.
 You’re quite welcome.
 Sorry.

In the situation “small talk at tea or party,” on the other hand, one must use and understand a different set of expressions. Some of them are:

- (List C) Good evening.
 Where’s your home?
 It’s in Canada.
 How interesting!
 Are you a stranger here?
 Yes, this is the first time I’ve been here.

No expression appears on any two of these three lists, yet

the expressions you learn for one situation help you to learn the expressions you need for another situation. For example, "where's" occurs in Lists A and C, while "it's" occurs in B and C. The word "the" is found in A and C; "stranger" and "here" are found in B and C. Just as important is the fact that the three lists use the same stock of vowels and consonants and use the same basic "sentence tones." The trick for the student is to learn how to carry over the things he learns from one situation to another.

Now let's compare our two descriptions of language learning. The first talks about vocabulary, sound system, and grammar. The second talks about whole expressions in larger situations. The two are closely related because what we carry over from one situation to another is the sound system, the vocabulary and the grammar of the language.

One more thing that you need to remember as you go from country to country is to expect to find differences in how people say things. But you must also expect to find differences between your students' language and English in what they say in different situations. The most important and most difficult thing to remember is that the situations themselves differ from culture to culture. You can see this most easily in the physical objects that you see in various countries. The situation in which you offer someone a fruit does not occur in places where that fruit is not known. Sometimes the differences are not so great.

For example, in one language there is an expression which means "thank you." Yet if someone says "thank you" to you in this language, you do not answer in words. That is, this language has no expression that means "you're welcome."

Learning a language, then, includes becoming familiar with the situations in which the speakers of the language use it, as well as with the sounds, words, and grammatical system.

3. What Language Teaching is

The details of your work as a teacher of English will depend greatly on the number, ages, and culture of the people you teach. Some people like to say that there is no such thing as language teaching: "Language cannot be taught; it must be learned." Even if that is true, there are still certain things that you can do to help your students learn English:

Give them a good model to copy. In a reading class this means choosing books that contain the kind of English your students

are going to need in the future. Almost all students will need stories which give practice with everyday English. Students who are going into the business world will need to practise on books that have to do with industry, finance, and so on. Others will want to become familiar with the language of great writers. Still others will have other interests.

Most of all the teacher is needed as a model for the spoken language. Your student cannot learn English pronunciation from a book. Even if he has a set of records, he needs someone to help him with his mistakes. And that someone must be willing to point out the same mistakes over and over again very patiently.

Finally don't forget to give a model for the culture as well as for the language. As students become more advanced, it is necessary to give them an idea of some of the situations which are common in an English-speaking culture. These situations may be quite foreign to the students. For example, you can tell your students to listen to the radio, read stories, or write to other students in the English-speaking world. Or you can help them understand pictures like the ones found in English magazines.

Make things clear for your students. The art of making explanations and answering questions about a foreign language is a difficult one. You must read good books on the teaching of English. And you must spend many hours trying to work out explanations that are at the same time clear and correct.

4. An Oral Approach to Language Learning

You have probably heard language teachers talking about the different "methods" of language study: "the direct method," "the reading method," "my own method," and so on. Sometimes we may give examples of one method or another. But our purpose is not to talk about one method or a single set of materials.

Our aim is to present an approach to problems of teaching and learning languages. We call this "the oral approach." We believe that it can lead to better learning and to better results after the many hours of hard work that language learning needs.

The "oral approach" is based on the principle that the spoken language is the basis of writing and not the other way around. The approach says: "Hearing before speaking, speaking before reading, reading before writing."

Teachers who follow the oral approach say that language learning should consist, especially in the first stages, of oral practice; and that the student should do so much oral practice that he can say the sentences he has practised almost in his sleep, not just in class. While he is practising, of course, the student should always have in mind the *meaning* of what he is repeating.

The first important principle of the oral approach, then, is: "speaking before reading." People sometimes do not understand this principle. They think that it is a way of stopping the use of reading and writing during the first weeks or months of language study. But the oral approach does not do that. Writing and printed materials can be very useful. Indeed, without them the load on the student's memory might become too great after the first few hours of oral study. What the oral approach does say is that the student should come into contact with the spoken form before he sees the written form.

A second important principle of the oral approach is placing "speaking" after "hearing," and "writing" after "reading." Your student should have a clear model to follow in everything he does. Language learning, whether by younger or older students, is first of all a matter of copying. Later, as the learner advances, he becomes able to form new expressions that are acceptable to the other speakers of the language. But it is quite a problem to know how to help your student move from straight copying to speaking and writing freely.

5. Moving Ahead Step by Step

We have just mentioned the problem of helping the student move from straight copying to free conversation and writing. One way in which we can meet this problem is by limiting or controlling what a student tries to do. These "controls" stop the student from trying to do too much too soon. When the student learns to do one thing well, we let him try something new. In this way we keep the student from making mistakes. Remember that whenever your student makes a mistake, he is practising one.

In a way we need controls on ourselves as teachers, especially on the lesson materials which we use. In controlling the subject matter, our aim is to allow our students to meet one new difficulty at a time. We may divide the difficult points into four parts: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and culture.

Pronunciation difficulties are those relating to sounds. Grammar has to do with the forms and arrangements of words. Vocabulary problems are problems of words. Cultural problems and difficulties arise because speakers of Language A differ from speakers of Language B not only in the way they talk, but also in the way they live and in the way they look at the world.

Experience has shown us that what is hard for a speaker of Spanish sometimes presents no difficulty to a speaker of German, or the other way around; a point which is almost impossible for a Russian may seem easy to an American. For this reason it is well for a set of lessons to consider not only the structure of the language being taught (say English), but also the structure of the native language of the students.

When a textbook writer knows which language he is to teach, and to whom, he can decide what his readers' difficulties are going to be. When he knows these difficulties, he must decide how to introduce them. Some textbooks are written in such a way that no word is used until it has been taught and practised thoroughly. Other books give less importance to vocabulary control but they are careful to use no grammatical structures except those that have been taught thoroughly. Other materials, using both types of control, give more importance to one or the other. Still others place no controls on new material at all. Materials that have been carefully planned and controlled can be very useful to teacher and students alike.

Controlling cultural matters is more difficult. The principle is to "start where the students are." They should not have to study both the new language and the new culture at the beginning of their work. But as time goes on, the subject of the lessons may gradually include things about the English-speaking culture.

2 GENERAL AND PARTICULAR AIMS OF LANGUAGE TEACHING¹

P. Gurrey

In teaching, as in all great work, it is important to know what one's aims are. If one knows his aims, he can choose the best way to get there. Therefore, we must consider carefully

1. Adapted from P. Gurrey, *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, pp. 7-11.

what we are trying to do when we are teaching a foreign language. As is well known, there are four general aims:

- (a) to teach pupils to hear and understand the spoken language,
- (b) to understand what they read,
- (c) to speak the language, and
- (d) to write it.

There are, then, four abilities to develop: hearing, reading, speaking, writing — with understanding. This shows that our chief concern should not be about difficulties of pronunciation, growth of vocabulary, and grammar; our chief concern should be with language abilities. And it should always be the teacher's first concern to get the pupils' language abilities into action. Language learning comes from activity with language. This clear fact should govern the method, the program, and the plan or work in language teaching in every class in school.

In planning to develop the four language abilities, the teacher's aims in a course should be:

- (a) to teach new words and build a good vocabulary,
- (b) to teach new grammatical forms and constructions, and
- (c) to have the pupils use these words and grammatical forms to express what they have read or what they have in mind.

The teacher must also aim to teach his pupils to write passages. These passages should be about one page long and should be written clearly. But these aims are too general to be of particular help to the teacher in his classroom. They are useful as guides for the teacher to know where the pupils should reach at the end of their school course.

In addition to the general aims, a teacher should have a clear and definite aim for each lesson. If the teacher tries to reach this particular aim, his lesson will be of help to his pupils even if he does not succeed fully. But if he only has a general aim, his lesson will not be of much help to his pupils. The teacher should decide upon his particular aim when he begins to prepare his lesson. When he has selected his aim, the teacher should try his best to reach it. The quality of his effort to reach this aim is

very important. It makes the pupils' learning exact, and it develops the pupils' language habits in the right way.

It is very useful to keep in mind the difference between a general aim and a particular aim. For instance, instead of choosing *tense* for an aim in one lesson, the teacher should select one particular *tense*, such as the *present continuous*. It is very important to limit the aim. If a teacher limits his aim, he will know exactly what to do during the lesson. If he chooses the *present continuous tense* for an aim, he can do some simple actions in class, saying each time what he is doing. He may also ask the students to act, too. For example:

"We are now speaking English."

"We are now sitting down."

"Now we are standing up."

"A car is passing the school."

"Two people are visiting the school."

"Now the school bell is ringing."

A second lesson on the same *tense* might be given. The general aim would be "to teach some grammar"; even the limited aim "to teach the present continuous" is not exact enough. But the particular aim "to illustrate the *present continuous tense* and to have it well practised" would be definite and detailed enough. This clear and definite aim enables the teacher to see exactly what the students have to learn; it makes the preparation of the lesson simple; and it makes the teacher and the pupils work on a limited subject.

A Reading Lesson might give us another illustration. An aim like "just reading" is not enough. Is it to be reading aloud or silently? Is it to develop one of the important reading skills? Is it to be reading for discussion or writing? If it is to be reading aloud, what is the particular aim? Is it to improve the oral expression of meaning? Is it to develop speed in reading? Is it to improve pronunciation? A teacher should choose a particular aim like one of these for a single lesson instead of trying two or more.

A clear and particular aim leads to success. If the teacher has a single, definite aim, then he and his class can work together without wasting their time and efforts; they can go together in the same direction towards the same end. The teacher should usually tell a class what the particular aim is. For