

*The
Techniques of
Language Teaching*

F. L. BILLOWS

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Teaching

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INTRODUCTION

THIS is the book of a practising teacher who has had opportunity to see the work of a great many other teachers and has been engaged in training teachers for some years. It is not written from the point of view of the linguist nor of the psychologist, though as many of the findings of the psychologist and the linguist as can come within the reach of a busy adviser of teachers have been taken into account. Nothing here is based on theoretical considerations alone; everything has been tried, and most of it has been evolved in the classroom. I hope that my interpretation of what I have found in the books is correct, but I have used them primarily to explain phenomena encountered in the classroom, not to initiate policy.

Some teachers concern themselves a great deal with the arrangement of the material which they wish to teach, and this is certainly important, but of limited value if they do not also concern themselves with the minds that are to receive the material. I have preferred to combine concern with material and mind by working, always experimentally, on the material in its human context, judging the merit of any arrangement of language material, not on theoretical or logical grounds, but on the grounds of practical success in stimulating expression in the pupils. It is very important to grade the language material which we teach to our pupils, both structure and vocabulary, but we must bear in mind that the needs of a situation can overrule any theoretical presuppositions about when it may be appropriate to introduce particular words or language structures. Once we have arranged our material for teaching, we have to apply it to a human mind in a particular context.

The teacher may never make up his mind that he has found a formula for success in teaching; he must always be on the

boundary of his experience, forcing his way on to the next stage of enlightenment which he sees always ahead but never quite reaches. For this reason it would be a mistake for anyone to regard what is written in this book as in any sense final, but I do hope that it will help others to greater success by showing the way.

On some points I am disposed to be dogmatic. I believe that to teach successfully we must take into account the social, as well as the psychological, situation of the pupil, remember that we are teaching language to be put to use for social purposes, for the expression, communication and reception of ideas, for establishing and maintaining contacts between people on the emotional as well as the intellectual level. I believe that we have to abandon the onlooker attitude to language when we are teaching or learning it, sink ourselves in it and use it for every purpose, and not begin to scrutinize or analyse it until we know it well. I believe that we are only helped by grammatical or other rules if they come to us as a handy summary of what we already half know. It is an advantage if we have ourselves worked hard to achieve the clarification they give.

The book is, of course, in some ways, a compendium of what other people have written and said about teaching. If I have not acknowledged all the ideas I have received from others, it is either because I believe them to be too generally accepted to require justification by reference to a particular statement on the subject, or because I am not sure where I read or heard them. A great deal more I have learnt from particular teachers whom I have watched. It is impossible to acknowledge my debt to them except in general terms. My practice has been to observe success in learning, whether in my own classes or those of others, and try to abstract the cause of the success from the complex of what was done. From this I tried to establish a rule which can be generally applied. I believe that we can only perceive generality, or abstractions such as rules for teaching or behaviour in the classroom, in terms of numerous particulars.

This is the account of an active skill, a form of athletics practised in relation to human beings. Thought, based on reading and reflection, may inform and guide the skill, but the skill has to be acquired and exercised in the classroom; it has to be compared with the skill of other practitioners, discussed and modified. The teacher must learn ultimately by submitting himself to the judgment of success or failure in the classroom. If I have been able to show the way to do this, rather than by any actual technique suggested, this book will have been worth writing.

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Situational Language Teaching

I. THE CHILD'S FIRST LANGUAGE

The child learns its first language by getting used to hearing certain patterns of speech in relation to certain situations. We say to the child: "Let me look in your eye," and draw him towards us, hold his head in our hands and open his eye. He has long been used to his mother repeating in words what she is doing to him, washing, dressing, cutting his nails. Words have formed clusters and patterns in his mind. He has begun to find some of them come unbidden to his mind. The language teacher can learn a good deal about language teaching and the kind of repetition needed for learning language if he listens to a mother washing her baby or to a child of four or five speaking to himself when he thinks he is not observed. The mother's speech is largely unconscious and is designed rather to wrap the child in her love, in a cocoon of words that will cover him and hold him in the family and the community, and make him feel accepted there; the child's speech is also partly unconscious; he brings out the teeming sentences to look at and put back, as he brings out his favourite marbles, enjoying the grain and the colour of them, but not worrying much about their relevance to one another or their meaning. The details of the language may change—the nouns, the verbs and the adjectives—but the structural elements are relatively few and constant. He learns them and certain nouns that are necessary to his life and well-being before he is conscious of learning language. He makes a good many mistakes at first, but the nearest grown-up patiently repeats the correct form and does

what is expected. The child learns a great deal by using scraps of language before he understands more than the fringe of the meaning of what he says. The situation and his needs are understood well enough by the grown-ups round him for language to be hardly necessary; they fill in the gaps for him. But we seldom realize how little the child understands or means what he says; the grown-up uses language as usual as if everything were plain, he is so used to language as an accompaniment to what he does that he could never do otherwise; but he reinforces what he says with gesture and pushing.

2. SPEECH PATTERNS FORM IN THE MIND

Speech is not at first understood or regarded for itself but as an accompaniment to action and situation. Who would associate a white line across the water with the passing of a ship unless he had seen ships leaving wakes, and perhaps leant over the stern and watched the wake of his own ship receding? Just as Pavlov's dogs got used to the ringing of the bell when they were fed, so we get used to hearing certain words with certain events or situations. The dogs salivated at the ringing of the bell even when no food was given; so we recognize, in time, the action spoken about from the words alone. The sounds and patterns of sounds have been heard often enough, in connection with certain actions or situations, to become associated with them so that the sounds alone can bring the actions or situations to mind without support from the situation. But before this happens the association of sound and situation must have been prolonged and close, the variations of the non-essentials on the essential theme must have been profuse enough for the essential pattern to emerge.

A dog barks; that dog is barking now; can you bark like a dog? Bark, then. (Pupil imitates teacher's imitation of barking.) Can you bark like a dog too? (Second pupil barks.) Yes, two of you can bark like a dog. Who else can bark like a dog? What does a dog do? It barks.

Do you bark?—No, we don't; but we can bark like a dog.
Can this dog bark?—No, it can't, it's only a picture.

The same with *mew like a cat*, *cackle like a hen*, *crow like a cock*, *bleat like a lamb*, *bray like a donkey*, *neigh like a horse*, *growl like a bear*, and the essential patterns of language, the simple (or general) present tense, with its "s" in the third person contrasted with *can*, begin to establish themselves, and the words *bark*, *mew*, *cackle*, etc., can be abandoned and forgotten as having done their work of building up general language patterns and associations in the mind. Or they can be remembered by the whole exercise being repeated from time to time, members of the class taking over the role of questioner; gradually pictures of animals and imitations of their sounds can be dropped and the words take over alone.

3. A TEACHER'S MAIN TASK IS TO GIVE EXPERIENCE OF WORDS

When teaching a language we should spend very little of our time in giving the meanings of words, and whenever we have done so we should ask ourselves if it was really necessary. The teacher's first and most urgent task is to give his pupils the opportunity to hear words used, to hear them used often and significantly enough for the sounds and the patterns of sounds to form in their minds and make durable impressions there, impressions that stand for something when they are repeated. As soon as he sees that this is beginning to happen, the teacher should give his pupils the opportunity to use the sounds themselves to explore the situation they are in with these new tools of perception. They must experience language, live in it, not merely understand it; every movement, every process, every wish, every need must be introduced by words, accompanied by words, commented on in words, followed by words and dismissed by words. But action should always come before expression. The words themselves, beginning as an accompaniment of action like the tail of a comet or a cock, may end

by being the most significant and memorable characteristic of the action in the classroom.

This is a glass; I'm pouring water into it. Now there's water in the glass, it's full. I'm going to drink some water from the glass. I'm drinking. I'm drinking water from the glass. Now the glass is not full; it's half-full. I have drunk half the water. The glass is half-full (indicating the bottom half with the fingers) and half-empty (indicating the top half). Now I'm going to drink the rest of the water.

Now the glass is empty; I have drunk the water. What have I been drinking?—You've been drinking water. How much have I drunk?—You have drunk a glassful, etc.

Then:

This is a cup; I'm pouring tea into it. Now there's tea in the cup, it's full, etc.

Gradually the pupils begin to take part in the use of language:

This is a glass. What's this?—It's a glass.

What am I pouring into it?—Water.

Is it full or empty?—Empty.

As they take over more and more of the speaking, we can expect longer answers, and either one or two pupils can take over the demonstrating and questioning roles.

What's this? It's a glass.

or What's that? It's a glass.

What am I pouring into it? You're pouring water into it.

or What's he pouring into it? He's pouring water into it.

Who's pouring water into it? You are (or He is) (or John is).

Is the glass full or empty? It's full.

This can then be expanded and varied, written on the board and copied down, and pairs of pupils can practise it together,

varying it with coffee, milk, soup, etc., in mugs, bowls, etc., until the patterns are quite at home in their minds. Throughout the whole process the teacher may have explained not a single word except to say at the beginning "This is a glass," and to demonstrate *full* and *empty*. The repetition of the words and word patterns in situations that are perfectly clear brings the language into the mind without any effort of comprehension or memory being called for, even if no single word is understood at first.

4. THE BASIS OF SPEECH IN LISTENING

To speak a language with confidence learners must have the opportunity of hearing it spoken correctly and fluently in this significant way, so that their minds can move rapidly in the language without reflection on the individual words or their positions in the sentence. They must therefore never be expected to speak before they are quite ready to do so. If the teacher uses language naturally and significantly, asking questions and answering them himself until the pattern of question and answer has begun to establish itself in the learners' minds, they will begin to join in with the answers quite spontaneously without prompting, when they are ready. If the teacher tries to hurry the process, the learners may be uncertain of what to say, make mistakes and lose confidence. For this reason the first answers expected should be simple short responses that show little more than recognition. *Is this a book? Yes, it is. Is that a table? Yes, it is. Is this a table? No, it's not.* Probably a great many tongue-tied language learners have been frustrated and discouraged by the teacher expecting too much from them too soon.

There is a period, which we may call the incubation period, for a word or sentence pattern to settle in the mind; it may be different for each word or pattern according to the nature of the word or pattern or the circumstances of learning. The skill of the teacher is seen in his ability to judge the time required to absorb a word before the pupil can be expected to use it. He

may encourage the pupil to use it before this if he thinks the use of it is clear, but he should never expect it or pause for a moment—giving the answers himself—if the pupil has any difficulty in producing it. Very often, however, the pupil can quickly be given a formula that he can use as his part of the dialogue; his use of it then helps him to learn the whole pattern. He should not be discouraged from using a word, or participating in a dialogue, as soon as he shows signs of wanting to. He need not wait until he understands the essential words or knows the pattern independently.

We are all here now. I have come here, you have come here, he has come here, she has come too. We have all come here today.

Have you come here, Dillip?—Yes, I have (the teacher whispering the answer into his ear).

Has Chicku come too?—Yes, he has (again the teacher whispers him the answer conspiratorially).

With these pattern answers and a return to Dillip and Chicku, or more whispering if someone misses his cue and the flow is checked, the teacher goes on:

Have you sat down, Balu?—Yes, I have. Has Dillip sat down?—Yes, he has. Have I sat down?—No, you haven't. Have I written anything on the blackboard?—No, you haven't. Have you written anything in your book?—Yes, I have.

Then, when they are ready for the next stage:

What have you written?—I have written these sentences (helped by whispering and pointing). Where have you written them?—I have written them in my book.

5. LANGUAGE TEACHING MUST BE SITUATIONAL

It follows from all this that effective use of language, economical and telling language teaching, in which no time is wasted

in explanations, translation or reflection on patterns of usage not yet learnt, must be situational. The need for expression in language must arise from the need to realize and deal with the situation we are in; the fascination of bringing new language tools to bear on the familiar circumstances we live among must be exploited to the full. The mind must be passed to and fro over the well-known landscape dressed in the disguise of a new language, as a gardener sprays the familiar garden with new chemicals, or a ghost might revisit his home after death.

If the need for the language we use is urgently felt it is learnt quickly. We are making a village with cardboard houses and paper trees in the first few weeks of learning the language; a boy wants more sticky paper to stick the walls of his house together. He hesitates and looks at the sticky paper in the teacher's hand: "May I have some sticky paper, please?" whispers the teacher in his ear. "May I have some sticky paper, please?" he repeats urgently, reaching for the roll, and in no time the rest of the class are repeating the formula, varying it with: "May I have some green paper?" "May I have some more cardboard?" "May I have some more glue?" etc. Or a boy in his first few lessons in writing has come without his pencil; again the whisper, "May I have a pencil, please?" followed by "Thank you" after borrowing it and again on returning it. These are used as a sailor might hoist a signal laid ready for him by the officer but might learn to recognize and use it at the right moment by continually hoisting it in similar circumstances.

But the circumstances must be perfectly clear and unmistakable. The story is told of a teacher of French who used to come into class every morning in a great rush, saying: "Bonjour, mes élèves, comment allez-vous?" and require from them the answer: "Bonjour, monsieur." After a time he asked them what they thought his opening words meant, and they answered: "Good morning, boys, I'm sorry I'm late," and their answer: "Oh, that's quite all right, sir." The boys who