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Teaching
ENGLISH
as a Foreign
Language

LONGMANS

PREFACE

THIS is a book for teachers of foreign languages. It discusses many of the problems that they have to face, and it describes methods that have been found effective for each stage of a learner's progress, and it explains the principles underlying them. It is concerned mainly with the teaching of English in schools in environments other than European, and gives prominence to the urgent needs for thorough learning of the language that is the medium of instruction in schools and colleges. But as the principles and many of the methods and techniques of teaching languages are applicable everywhere, teachers of foreign languages in American and European schools will, no doubt, find enough here for them to think about, and enough for them to compare or contrast with their own methods and principles.

Some of the methods and suggestions described here have been adapted or devised in accordance with the results of research in the Gold Coast. I wish to express my gratitude to my helpers there for their criticisms and generous assistance in that research: to Mr. J. H. Andrews, Mr. R. R. Okyne, Mr. C. O. Botchway, Mr. P. Strevens, Mrs. Isabel Hope and Professor C. E. Smith; I also welcome this opportunity of thanking all those teachers who have invited me into their classrooms to observe their work and to teach, especially those in Hungary, Finland, Norway and in the large number of schools in the Gold Coast that I visited or that sent in contributions for the research team to study.

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Chapter 1

THE NEEDS OF THE TEACHER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

TEACHING a foreign language is hard work; but hard work will nearly always bring success, especially if a teacher persistently exerts himself to make his pupils do the work. Few people, however, realize what an unceasing expenditure of thought and energy is essential for teaching this subject. Of course some of the burden of teaching a foreign language can be carried by a textbook—"The English Reader," as it is usually called, or "The English Course"; but though the textbook provides much material and guidance—text, vocabulary, grammar and exercises—yet this material is language in print, and therefore is recorded language, not the language that is the purposeful expression of a living mind. The teacher therefore has to transform that silent, inactive array of printed symbols into living speech. He has to make all those words, phrases and sentences in the book play a useful part in some real situation, or imagined real situation. He must do this in order to ensure that the language that is being learned by his pupils is realistic and living. To achieve that, he will need to use all the skill he has, all his energies, and all his abilities of voice, mind, action, will; for he himself is the instrument, the language transformer of the cold printed word, giving out the sounds, tones, rhythms, which the new language uses to express meanings of all kinds—intellectual, emotional, purposeful.

We note, too, that the successful teacher especially needs vitality and enthusiasm to carry on the necessary oral work

during the first years, when day after day, week after week, he must continually summon up fresh stores from ever-dwindling reserves, until by the end of the term, he can hardly avoid feeling drained and empty. Language teaching demands this expenditure of energy. It requires so much mental and physical activity, partly because so much oral work is essential, and partly because of the complexity of language learning. The teacher has to see that his pupils understand the language, that they learn how to pronounce it correctly, that they learn to read it and use it in speech and writing. To handle this complexity efficiently, a teacher needs to have a dozen different methods at his finger ends and a number of skills at his command.

All this is, of course, well known, but we should remind ourselves of the difficulties and demands of the task, for an understanding of them impels us to realize that the language teacher needs help. He needs help to view his task with a clear mind, to perceive how the complexities of language can be dealt with in a simple way, to see how different aspects of language teaching can be handled by ringing changes on the methods he has at his disposal, and he needs continual help to enable him to maintain his determination and enthusiasm.

The three things that a teacher needs for his language lessons are: a knowledge of the best and most effective methods to use, an understanding of the purpose and aim of each method he uses, and confidence and skill in his handling of them, with perseverance and courage to carry on the work with good humour and enjoyment.

The help which a teacher needs cannot, of course, be supplied merely by a book; because it is essential for the teacher himself to use his initiative and to exert his own energies, if those needs are to be satisfied. He must seek

advice from others if he wishes to receive effective help; so he should discuss language-teaching problems with colleagues, visiting supervisors, training college lecturers; he should invite criticisms of his plans and of his actual teaching; and he should put his own methods of teaching languages, his procedures, teaching habits and mannerisms, his objectives and results, under the revealing microscope of his own critical and well-focused scrutiny. He should also study many books on language teaching. Some of these will certainly help him to see his problems more clearly; but above all he needs to renew and refresh his determination continually to improve in skill and efficiency. Then he will gradually acquire a greater mastery of the techniques and methods of language teaching, and with this a fresh interest in his work.

All that a book like this can hope to do is to set a teacher on the right road to see the principles more clearly, to select his aims more carefully, and to understand the purpose and procedure of his methods more completely and precisely. It is always helpful to review and re-consider the essentials of language teaching: the value of sound aims, the necessity for pupil activity, the importance of inspiring their interest, and of enabling them to enjoy the successful achievement of their tasks and ambitions.

It is no easy task, either to teach or to help a teacher to teach, a foreign language. But for the teacher, there is a special difficulty that is not commonly considered: it is the difficulty of overcoming the barrier of the pupils' mother tongue. For the mother tongue acts as a block in all the learners' language-reactions, and impedes the learning of the new language because it is so firmly seated as the first language. Indeed, the mother tongue is so much a part of our mental lives and of our unreflecting consciousness, as

well as of our automatic responses to experience, that usually we are not aware of language when we speak or listen or write. We are conscious then only of what we have in mind, what we want to say or to know; and so our minds concentrate on meanings, not on words as symbols. For language is a vessel carrying a load of meanings; and we do not perceive the words, in sound or written symbols, as words, but only as meanings. It is only when there is some ambiguity or misunderstanding or doubt that we become aware of the language symbols conveying meanings. But in using a new language we cannot at first avoid being aware of language symbols, and of attending to words, sentence-patterns and grammatical forms, instead of meanings. Thus, we see that using the mother tongue is a somewhat different linguistic process from first making use of a foreign language. This makes the task of the foreign-language teacher a task that requires special procedures and technical methods.

Furthermore, the mother tongue is so deeply embedded in our mental lives and inner consciousness that learning a second language requires at first a different reaction to language: one that is a re-orientation and in part a re-organization of consciousness. Therefore special exercises, certain kinds of language drill, and carefully devised methods are necessary to help the pupils to form new language habits. There also have to be very many repetitions at first in order to establish these new linguistic responses, and to ensure their re-occurrence when needed, and especially to increase the availability of all the elements of the new language, as these are learnt: words, structural patterns, inflections, tones, rhythms and pronunciations. Then, later, there is needed the constant use of the language in a variety of contexts and for a variety of purposes: in dialogue, stories, plays, questions, etc. This is necessary so that the new

language may become a manageable medium of thought, communication and expression. So we see that the task is highly complicated, and that the training that a language teacher should have is by no means simple, or easy to carry out. In fact, the trainer of language teachers needs to have special gifts of mind and personality.

There is yet another aspect of this subject that does not often receive much consideration: how to make the foreign language learning contribute to the pupil's education. Indeed, we might ask, can it help to educate him? Some people would no doubt reply: we are equipping him with a skill, so that he can educate himself. Or they might say: the task of equipping him with skill in using a language is so difficult and prolonged, that no time will be left to educate him. Some might even say that many pupils cannot learn a second language, and therefore the attempt cannot be educative. All these answers are wrong, even if they refer only to the pupils with the least ability. The learning of any new language can always help in the linguistic education and in the mental development of a pupil. For language is one of the main activities of mind, and mind is the main part of personality. If the new language, therefore, is taught in a way that is psychologically sound, it must contribute to the pupil's general growth, because it is sharpening his intellect and making it play over many kinds of knowledge and experience. But to promote this, the teacher has to use methods that foster intelligent thought, wider understanding and deeper sympathies, as well as linguistic skills. So the urgent and difficult question for the teacher is "What methods shall I use?" Above all, the values of understanding and sympathy must always be kept in mind, in order that the foreign language teaching may bring something of permanent value to the pupil. There must be no

acceptance of the short-sighted view that a mechanical language-skill is all that can be produced: for language, whether a vernacular or a foreign tongue, can touch life at its fullest and richest.

Chapter 2

GENERAL AIMS AND PARTICULAR OBJECTIVES

IN teaching, it is highly desirable to know exactly what one is hoping to achieve, as it is in all great undertakings. If that can be clearly seen, then the best way of getting to work usually becomes evident. We ought therefore to consider carefully what we are trying to do when we are teaching a foreign language. As is well known, there are four general aims: to teach pupils to hear and understand the spoken language, to understand what they read, to speak the language and to write it. In short, to understand the spoken and written language, and to speak and write it. There are, then, four abilities to train: hearing, reading, speaking, writing—with understanding as the main ingredient in each. This indicates that our chief concern should not be about difficulties of pronunciation, growth of vocabulary, grammar and structure, but with language abilities. And it should always be the teacher's first concern to get the pupils' language abilities into action, for only when there is activity with language is there any language learning *at all*. This obvious fact should dominate the devising of method, the planning of work and the selecting of schemes for the language teaching in every class throughout the school.

In planning to develop the four language abilities, the aims of the teacher throughout a course will be to teach new words, and so build up a varied, well-balanced vocabulary; to teach new grammatical forms, usages, constructions, patterns; and to have all these elements of language used to express whatever the pupils have read or otherwise have

in mind. He must also aim to teach his pupils to write passages of a page or so of clear, well-connected thought in correct language, with every point relevant to the topic they are writing about. Nevertheless, these aims are far too general to be of practical help to a teacher in the classroom. They are useful only for general guidance, and perhaps to suggest what should be achieved by the best pupils at the end of their school course.

So, in addition to his general plan with its general aims, a teacher should have a definite, clear-cut aim for each lesson. For if he tries hard to achieve a well-defined objective, even if he does not fully succeed, he will always give a lesson that is some help to his pupils—and we need not be so blind as to think that every lesson does that! But if he has only a general objective, he will usually not help his pupils very much. An aim should usually be decided upon when beginning to prepare a lesson, so that it may help in the planning of the method. Having selected an objective for a lesson, or for a series of lessons, the teacher should strive his utmost to achieve it; for the striving will give just that extra pressure and urgent insistence that are nearly always needed to make the pupils' learning exact, and to fix the new elements of the language firmly in their minds and language habits.

It is also most rewarding to keep the distinction clear between a general aim and the particular objective for a lesson. For instance, instead of choosing a grammatical category, such as Tense,¹ for the objective of a grammar lesson, one Tense should be selected; for an early lesson the objective might be “to illustrate and use the Present

¹To distinguish such words as 'object' meaning thing or aim from Object, a part of a Predicate, and 'subject', theme, topic, from Subject, the grammatical category, all grammatical terms are in capitals.

Continuous orally." It is essential to particularize and limit an objective. If he does this, a teacher will know exactly what he should do during the lesson. Here, for instance, he might begin by carrying out a number of obvious actions, saying each time what he is doing; he can then get his pupils to use that Tense, seeing that they do simple and natural actions, and that they say correctly what they are doing: "We are now speaking English"—"We are now sitting down"—"Now we are standing up"—"A car is passing the school"—"Two inspectors 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 precise enough. But the particular objective 'to illustrate the Present Continuous Tense and to have it well practised' would be definite and detailed enough. This clear-cut definiteness of aim gives a lesson a focus which enables the teacher to see exactly what his pupils have to do in the lesson, and it helps the pupils to realize exactly what they have to master. It simplifies and focuses the preparation, and impels teacher and class to concentrate on the topic to be learnt.

A Reading Lesson might provide another illustration. "Just reading" is quite inadequate for an aim: is it to be reading aloud or silently? Is it to develop one of the essential reading skills, or is it to provide material for a discussion or a composition? If it is to be reading aloud, is the objective 'improvement in the oral expression of meaning'? Or is it to improve the pupils' enunciation, or their fluency of reading? Is it to polish up pronunciation? A teacher should choose a limited objective like one of these for a single lesson, rather than attempt two or more.

For success, a clear and definite objective is absolutely essential. If a teacher has a single, definite aim, then teacher and class can concentrate on one aspect of the whole subject and on one language activity, with the result that their efforts are not scattered and dispersed in all directions. Teacher and class are then going together in the same direction towards the same objective, and they are then all trying to reach some clearly seen goal, instead of going along blindly in an aimless journey without a known end (which happens sometimes, even in the best schools). The teacher should usually tell a class what the objective is: "Now you are going to use the Present Continuous Tense so many times that you will always use it correctly in the future," or "In this lesson you are going to practise rapid silent reading in order to learn how to get information quickly and accurately from books."

A teacher who thinks out clear aims finds other advantages: the preparation of his lessons is easier. It is easier because an aim usually helps him to select the material for a lesson, and to decide the kind of work his pupils should do on it, *e.g.* chorus repetitions, or oral question and answer, or written exercises, or reading aloud. If his aim is to improve grammatical correctness of written work, he will see at once that he must give sentence-completion exercises or oral drill. If his aim is to get more fluency and ease in his pupils' reading aloud, he will know that the class must first read the chosen passage silently, and then be questioned on it until they know it thoroughly before they read it aloud; for he knows that they will stumble or read badly if they do not fully understand the passage.

As we have said, a clear aim can help in the selection of material for a lesson; for instance, to teach rapid reading, easy stories are the best material; to teach exact comprehension,

it is best to select informative passages, rather than stories or plays; to give practice in using a Tense, questions need to be framed which require answers containing that Tense; to explain the use of similar Tenses, such as the Present Perfect and the Simple Past, the narration of short incidents will be useful. Here is an example: "Yesterday when I *returned* home from shopping, I said to my brother: 'I *have forgotten* to post your letter.' He said: 'I am not surprised. Last week you *forgot* to buy some stamps for me.' Today when I *arrived* home, I said: 'I *have not forgotten* to post your letters, and I *have also bought* some fish for your supper.'"

A young teacher may have some trouble at first in deciding exactly what objective to choose for a lesson, though he should always know clearly what his general aims are; and a well-experienced teacher may not have realized that he has had a definite objective for many of his lessons. But with careful thought, puzzling out precisely what he wants to achieve, and what are the immediate needs of his pupils, a teacher of languages can soon become expert in noting the objective that he should strive for; and once he is aware of the advantage, he very soon forms the habit of directing his efforts and those of his pupils on to a selected objective.

The technique of choosing a very limited objective for each lesson is a most fruitful aid to better teaching. It gives focus, and therefore concentration; it gives clarity and therefore better understanding; it gives precision and therefore more firmly established progress. The careful thinking out of detailed and well-defined objectives for lessons will do more than almost anything else to improve a teacher's work and to make it effective. Then with greater success and pleasure in his pupils' quicker progress, the teacher's interest and satisfaction in the work increase, and give him inspiration for further advances.

Chapter 3

BEGINNING TO SPEAK THE NEW LANGUAGE

THIS beginning period is all important, for "Well begun is half done." If therefore good pronunciation, absolutely correct grammar and sentence-structures are carefully taught, not a little later on but from the very beginning, there will be no need later to impose numerous corrective and remedial exercises. If absolutely correct language is insisted on from the beginning, then firm habits of correct language usage will be established, and there will be no need to disturb the foundations later by corrections and alterations. The subsequent gain will be considerable, for progress will continue smoothly from the first, and there will be no setbacks or halts. It is far far easier to teach new material than to eradicate old faults. And having to unlearn bad pronunciations and other incorrect usages is troublesome and retarding, even to the best pupils. And it is much more difficult to learn correct usages when incorrect forms and structures have been acquired, than to learn the correct usage at the start. Therefore it is vitally necessary for language learners to work at correct pronunciation, grammar and structure at the very beginning of learning a new language. It is fatal to defer insistence on correctness 'until the pupils are older,' for then the damage will have been done.

It would be excellent if beginners were taught only by the best teachers in the school, as is done in a few schools. Certainly these teachers would find it a much pleasanter task than they now suppose it to be, for young pupils beginning to learn a new language are always keen to work and are

willing to carry out the numerous repetitions that are necessary for them. And they are always ready to strive intently for perfection, if their teacher insists on their trying to achieve it. But it is often not easy to arrange for the best teacher to take the beginners, though sometimes it might be possible for him to take the beginners and the top form, rather than the two top forms. Perhaps the best way out of the difficulty would be for some of the keener teachers who have a gift for teaching languages to specialize in this important work, and to receive recognition as specialists, with financial benefit attached. When such teachers had equipped themselves with a sound knowledge of phonetics and with the techniques for a finer handling of the Direct Method, they would be of great service in a school.

It is essential to have skilful teaching in this beginning period for four reasons. First, because children can learn correct pronunciation *only* from a teacher who has perfected his own pronunciation, and has mastered the art of teaching the sounds of a foreign language that differ from those of the mother tongue. Secondly, because it needs special skill, liveliness and energy to give a lot of young children in a large class enough practice in speaking a new language. Thirdly, because it needs unusual patience and persistence to keep on repeating correct sentences and correcting pronunciations, and to do this throughout a lesson with good humour. Fourthly, because it needs the skill of a gifted teacher to vary the ways of getting repetitions and corrections, and to turn these into enjoyable games in making strange sounds and in making up unexpected sentences. This skill is needed for making use of the very limited number of sentences and sentence patterns that the children have learnt, and for bringing in sufficient variations to secure attention

and interest, and thus to lay a simple foundation of correct usage in the pupils' language habits.

The Importance of Correct Pronunciation at the very beginning. It is a sad thing to think that all over the world teachers are busily teaching *incorrect* pronunciations to thousands of children daily ! They do this because they do not understand the importance of correct pronunciation from the beginning; and they have not realized how much trouble one must take to learn to pronounce a foreign language correctly. Few of them know how difficult it will be for children to learn correct pronunciations when they have been taught the wrong ones first—and taught often with painstaking assiduity ! Why is this ? Is it not that teachers cannot teach correct pronunciations because their own teachers did not master the foreign sounds correctly, because no insistence on correctness was made at their training colleges or by their inspectors, education officers and headmasters ? To some extent this is true, but it is also because they themselves did not make up their minds to train their own ears to *hear* correctly, and to learn how the sounds were really made. The ultimate responsibility rests on the individual. Always, we may be sure, he could have found out what to do. So the simple question “Why teach incorrect pronunciations when you could teach correct ones ?” is unanswerable.

When there is so much well-informed opinion about language teaching, it seems strange that the extreme urgency for pupils' first pronunciations to be correct has not been widely recognized by teachers and those who are responsible for the training of teachers or for their efficiency in the classroom. The chief reason for this urgency is that a pronunciation once learned is more difficult to change than any other element of language. As we have said, the mother