

What is in the bathwater of the audio-lingual method?:

An evaluation of the audio-lingual method

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INTRODUCTION

Gaies (1983) refers to the classroom as the ‘crucible’ of education. Here theories, philosophies and teaching models are submitted to the sore trials and tribulations of the *real situation*. The classroom occupied by a teacher and some thirty or more pupils is the battleground where theories, philosophies and language teaching models conquer or are slain in action. The ultimate test of a didactic theory is, after all, simply whether it gets *real* pupils to learn better in the *existing* situation.

1. THE BABY OR THE BATHWATER

Policy makers in language teaching are, paradoxically, often guilty of infanticide. I am referring to the very general practice of turning out the baby with the bathwater.

Let us take a hypothetical example to present the gist of the argument. Method A, The ‘Indisputable Competence’ method, is developed by several brilliant linguists with academic titles modestly

tucked into first names to ensure trust and friendly familiarity. Consider Stephan Dashen. Method B, 'The Inevitable Grammar Method', is summarily dismissed.

What is overlooked is that a method, like a person, is often the victim of its strongest characteristic. Adaptation, integration and modification to eliminate the weak points in a method seem more feasible than the current policy of summary dismissal of one method and replacing it by another which also has weaknesses among its strong points.

There have been pleas for an eclectic methodology, but until abstract terminology such as, 'an eclectic method' has been made compatible with the chalk board, the overhead projector and the preparation and record of work file, it exists only in name. It must be enveloped in learning material, into *practical didactic tools* to become functional in the classroom.

2. CAN THE TEACHER SAVE THE BABY?

The effective implementation of any methodology cannot be the sole responsibility of the teacher who, in the first place, was not consulted about the viability of the method. Instructions were issued 'from the department'. If the teacher is looking to promotion or a merit award, the new method has to be implemented post haste whether or not the practical problems have been considered.

Despite the fact that excellent ideas have been expounded in some textbooks, outstanding audio-visual and computer programs are available, concise statements of policy have been made, these exist in isolation. They need to be amalgamated into a viable, open implementation program which is constantly being tested and then effectively updated to suit the *practical* needs of our dynamically changing society.

With the increase of academic knowledge, the explosion of technological discoveries, the increased ratio of pupils to teachers, the crumbling stability of family life and questioning of the roots of our normative foundations, the job description of a teacher needs to be *realistically* revised.

Is it possible that he can still be expected to be a creator of audio-visual and other learning material, a compiler of schemes and records of work, and a performer of other specialized and time-consuming duties? Surely the child who is often neglected by his parents in their rush to provide necessities or luxuries, cannot also be brushed aside by his teacher who is engaged in a desperate search for instructional excellence? The ironic truth of this situation can have far-reaching and fearful consequences.

3. GRAMMAR TRANSLATION METHOD REPLACED

When the grammar translation method was finally ousted after several centuries of reigning supreme in the kingdom of language teaching, mindful of its tyrannical prejudice for the skills of reading and writing and its shameful neglect of the oral skills, the tables were turned. The oppressor became the oppressed. The spoken language was hailed as the all in all and the graphic skills given secondary importance. *Fluency*, and not *literacy*, was the war-cry. It was assumed that fluency in spoken language would ensure the acquisition of the far more sophisticated graphic skills of reading and writing. In a similar way it had been previously assumed by the grammar translation methodologists that literacy would guarantee fluency.

These claims contain both fact and fiction.

4. THE AUDIO-LINGUAL METHOD

With the demise of the grammar translation method in South African primary schools, the audio-lingual method, based on Skinner's stimulus response psychology, was adopted. It was implemented in slightly differing ways by the four departments of education re-sponsible for white education in the four provinces.

As this method was used during the second world war to teach soldiers sufficient fluency to infiltrate enemy territory, it became known as the 'army method'. It has militaristic features in which reside both its strongest and its weakest elements.

4.1 Possible advantages

One of the strongest features of the audio-lingual method is its clear cut methodology. Work is planned in Cycles, each consisting of:

Lexicon and language study

- a comprehension passage
- certain phonic combinations
- key lexicon
- a dialogue
- a song
- a substitution table
- contextualization exercises

Literature study

- a poem or jingle
- a story

Techniques

- language games
- cloze procedure
- fish bowl technique
- repetition and drill
- contextualisation

In addition, the following can be seen as distinct advantages:

- rigid structure gives direction and a strong organizational basis to instruction;
- allows for pupil participation;
- provides variation in the types of lessons given during each cycle;
- oral bias allows opportunities for the development of oral competence
- memorization and repetition, indispensable in certain learning situations, are stressed;
- learning material is less rigid than the traditional textbook and can be adapted to suit the local situation.

4.2 Serious problems

Despite these strong features, there are serious problems which hamper the effective implementation of this method and there are questions about the basic psycholinguistic theories on which this approach is based.

4.2.1 *The teacher and training*

Lack of literary ability in tertiary education has been a crucial factor in South African multi-cultural education. I am sure that research to establish how many teachers of English as second language are able to produce linguistically and stylistically acceptable learning material, will yield alarming conclusions.

If the enormity of the task of compiling effective learning material is realistically assessed, I don't think that it can be expected of teachers to carry out this task.

Nevertheless, at present a great deal of time is spent by teachers in the creation of 'cycles'. These are not based on scientific research, but are the product of *intuitive guesswork*. They are usually duplicated on inefficient equipment and at best just legible. Often

single spacing has to be used to save paper and little or no attention is paid to the letter fonts used. Unsuitable fonts often create confusion in learners with average and below average reading ability, not even to mention those with specific learning problems.

4.2.2 *Time and money*

Lack of time, expertise and money result in the use of visual aids which are usually amateurish and in very poor competition to beautifully illustrated books, to television programs and computer games which are now available.

You may be privileged to have one or two star pupils, with computers, printers and plotters; pupils fluent in ASCII, and who learnt DOS along with Little Jack Horner; gifted pupils who can produce better audio-visual aids than their teachers. Sadly these are the very factors which estrange these gifted pupils from effective communication in the 'boring' second language classroom. How can even a model lesson on 'A visit to the Post Office' presented with a slide tape sequence, contend with computer games like 'Larry in the Land of the Lounge Lizzards' or 'King's Quest'? These require a knowledge of society, a great deal of language expertise and nifty definitions from players. These particular programs may not be suitable for the language class room, but the need for sophisticated programs in language teaching will need serious consideration.

4.2.3 *The psycholinguistic principles*

Although Skinner and his associates did, no doubt, make a valuable contribution to psychology, these principles, based mainly on animal research, are no longer acceptable guidelines to language teaching. Subsequent research has changed and complicated our view of the child who has been revealed as a dynamic creator of language structures with the view of expressing meaning that is *within himself*. This young encoder and decoder of his own destiny has to be motivated, constrained, lured, coerced, loved and entreated to participate in his own development.

Only he holds the unduplicable key to his own mind, that insulated, sensitive, intricately wired, grey operational area where the flesh and the spirit, the temporal and the eternal endeavours of man negotiate a meaningful existence or short-circuit into the original chaos; the centre where creation and destruction co-exist in inexplicable interdependence.

We have moved far beyond the rat cage, but some of the methodology such as drill and repetition favoured by the stimulus response psychologists, factors such as praise and blame, positive and negative reinforcement, still have a place, but have to be adapted to the new, much more complex, view of the child.

5. POSSIBLE ADAPTATION OF AUDIO-LINGUAL METHODOLOGY

I quote a formulation of aims for the substitution table technique from Stoltz and Brooderyk (1983:16): 'The substitution table offers a great number of sentences to be drilled, all based on the same grammatical structure. Sufficient repetition and practice should develop the feeling and ear for the right structure among pupils. ... the above table can generate 5 760 different sentences ... in general 60 to 100 variations are adequate for the class.'

All of us in inner speech repeat certain structures of meaning and possible tones we may resort to when we face certain situations. We may choose to practice pronunciation of certain second or third language structures because *we choose* to learn these; so pupils are willing and indeed over-enthusiastic to build substitution tables where the teacher has merely presented the bare bones. They are then invited to supply additional words to the table. This enables them to construct the sentences *they* wish to, while practising the basic language structure with which *they* may experience difficulty.

If three different classes are taught in the same standard it may be convenient to use a substitution table which has been well thumbed over several years in a preparation file, but this is psycholinguis-

tically unacceptable stimulus response practice which is not part of communication but merely repetition. Boredom and lack of participation is likely to short-circuit successful encoding in the long term memory. *These words don't belong to pupils personally.*

Furthermore it is my experience that the best output is achieved if the minimum choral repetition is done and all individuals are given an opportunity to construct their own sentences with the words which they themselves have suggested. These can be repeated, 'Let's all say Peter's sentence'. This *personalized drill* restores some of the communication element which is the very basis of language and without which language degenerates into mere noise.

I am sure within the dynamic classroom situation many new ways of restoring meaning to drill and repetition will be developed by resourceful colleagues.

It is equally important that the pupil's written work should be treated as *communication*, his ideas respected and his written communication answered when the teacher reads it. After assessing an essay on 'Modern music or the classical music...that is the question..', a remark like 'You need to pay more attention to punctuation...' may be less effective than 'Yes, I also watch Tina Turner. Watch punctuation!'

6. RETHINKING AUDIO-LINGUAL PRINCIPLES

Supporters of the audio-lingual method consider it necessary to postpone the introduction of the graphic skills until the skills of 'listening and speaking are firmly fixed'. The fear of interference with the mother tongue also gives support to this view. This fear has been discussed by many eminent linguists such as Olga Rivers and a legion of others. This consideration is not really valid any longer if we measure it against the importance of becoming fluent and literate in English in South Africa (Sharpe:1986 1, 2).

I find this postponement the 'unkindest cut of all' as it deprives the pupil of:

- the rich and varied input of reading at an early age;
- the transfer of initial reading skills from first to second language;
- the supportive function of the graphic skills in second language learning.

The child already knows the alphabet because he is literate in another language which uses the same alphabet. It is in reading and transcription that the *slurred sound* pattern of the spoken language becomes visible and words and phonemes can be isolated.

The skill of transcription is the easiest of all the second language skills. Its value has been disregarded since the graphic skills fell into disrepute.

This departmental decision to postpone the introduction of the graphic skills has had far-reaching consequences and could supply sufficient material to be discussed as an individual topic.

In the classroom, we, the teachers, see the transfer of reading skills from the first language, blossoming almost effortlessly in the reading corners during the first year of school. I am referring to the average and the above average child. We are not permitted to give credit for this on a school report. Although the transfer is *almost* automatic, it is not supported by proper letter-sound correlation instruction. Without this essential support a great deal is lost.

The syllabus, like the Oracle at Delphi, is well known for its often mystic ambiguity. The answers given in the syllabus to some of the teachers' questions are similar to that given by the Oracle who, when asked where a much sought after treasure had been buried, answered after three days of mystic raving, 'Leave no stone unturned'.

So it is with the section on phonics. The attenuated information in the second language syllabus amounts to no more than, 'Leave no stone unturned ...'.

Garbers, Piaget and a long line of eminent men and women stress the importance of the early experiences which form the basis of all subsequent development (Garbers:1972). **To attenuate the input to a mere oral repetition and drill during the first three to four years of school in the Transvaal and Natal and for the first three years in the other two provinces, hardly seems justifiable input to form the foundation for literacy and optimum language development.**

7. QUO VADIS?

The following are but a few challenges to which I sincerely hope some of the readers will respond:

- establish second language objectives for all the speakers of the various first languages in South Africa and realistically evaluate their needs as regards English;
- establish letter-sound correlation, frequency of occurrence, and hence relevant importance of these correlations in South African English;
- create a computer data base of high frequency words and structures which pupils should know in the South African situation;
- trained linguists in consultation with experienced language teachers establish a realistic frequency table, learning material and effective didactic methodology;
- conduct research into the transfer of reading skills from the first to the second language, as well as the possible transfer from the oral to the graphic skills and vice versa, so that a differentiated optimum time for the local introduction of the various language skills in English second language instruction can be scientifically established;
- create linguistically, socially and pedagogically acceptable language instruction programs accompanied by the learning material, didactic guidelines and audio-visual programs; these are to be in the form of dynamic, vital, regularly updated data bases to which the creative teacher can add and through which ideas be tested and revised.

This is a plea for both literacy and fluency for *all South Africans* not only in their own languages but also in English which is the second language of the Western world and the language in which I believe it may be possible for all the people of South Africa to find in communication common ground for peaceful and just co-existence.

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