

MISS BROWN'S TWO-MINUTE DRILL

C. HAWKINS

Miss Brown was an excellent teacher of French. At a time when the written form of a language enjoyed academic prestige to the detriment, if not to the exclusion of the oral form, Miss Brown trained her pupils to speak French as much as possible.

One winter's day, with the heating system functioning full blast, John Smith raised his hand: "Voulez-vous ouvrez la fenêtre, Mademoiselle?" (1)

Miss Brown complied, and class routine resumed. At an appropriate moment, Miss Brown addressed her pupils:

- (2) MISS BROWN: John a dit, "Voulez-vous ouvrez la fenêtre?" Qu'est-ce qu'il aurait dû dire? James?
- (3) JAMES: Voulez-vous ouvrir la fenêtre?
- (4) MISS BROWN: Répétez, John.
JOHN: Voulez-vous ouvrir la fenêtre?
MISS BROWN: Tout le monde.
- (5) CLASS: Voulez-vous ouvrir la fenêtre?
- (6) MISS BROWN: . . . choisir un livre. Mary.
MARY: Voulez-vous choisir un livre?
- (7) MISS BROWN: Linda.
LINDA: Voulez-vous choisir un livre?
- (8) MISS BROWN: Toutes les jeunes filles.
GIRLS: Voulez-vous choisir un livre?
MISS BROWN: Peter.
PETER: Voulez-vous choisir un livre?
- (10) MISS BROWN: John.
JOHN: Voulez-vous choisir un livre?
- (11) MISS BROWN: . . . finir le travail. Beth.
BETH: Voulez-vous finir le travail?
MISS BROWN: Frank.
FRANK: Voulez-vous finir le travail?
- (10) MISS BROWN: John.
JOHN: Voulez-vous finir le travail?
- (8) MISS BROWN: Tous les garçons.
BOYS: Voulez-vous finir le travail?
- (9) MISS BROWN: . . . écrire votre nom. Jean.
JEAN: Voulez-vous écrire votre nom?
MISS BROWN: Bob.
BOB: Voulez-vous écrire votre nom?
- (8) MISS BROWN: Ces deux rangées.
TWO ROWS: Voulez-vous écrire votre nom?
- (12) MISS BROWN: . . . faire vos devoirs. John.
- (13) JOHN: Voulez-vous faire vos devoirs?
MISS BROWN: . . . voir le film.
JOHN: Voulez-vous voir le film?

MISS BROWN: . . . vendre la maison.

JOHN: Voulez-vous vendre la maison?

MISS BROWN: . . . ouvrir la fenêtre.

(14) JOHN: Voulez-vous ouvrir la fenêtre? (15)

Miss Brown, and others like her, practised this type of routine frequently. These teachers had probably formulated no theory to justify the procedure. They knew, however, that the drill worked. It took very little time (you can read the preceding passage at a moderate pace in two minutes). Pupils quickly understood what was expected of them and participated readily. If pressed to explain what she was doing, Miss Brown would probably have replied that she was giving the pupils practice in the use of the infinitive following the verb *vouloir*. Miss Brown might have been alarmed to learn that she was twenty years or more ahead of her time. Essentially, Miss Brown was using what we now call the Pattern Drill technique, and that technique today forms one of the bases of modern language teaching.

Let us tabulate a few observations about Miss Brown's Two-Minute Drill. The observations refer to correspondingly numbered portions of the passage.

(1) Miss Brown identifies John's mistake as soon as he makes it. She may follow one of several courses of action:

a. Ignore the error. Thankful that John has tried to formulate a request in French, she may quietly open the window and continue her work.

b. Correct the error herself and procede with the class.

c. Spend five minutes scolding John.

d. Launch into her Two-Minute Drill at once.

e. Continue class activity and at the end of the current phase start the Two-Minute Drill.

(2) At the beginning of the drill Miss Brown restates the problem. Then she may either offer the correction or ask a pupil to make the correction. If a pupil cannot give the preferred form Miss Brown will of course supply it.

(3) James gives the correct answer. There is no need for Miss Brown to repeat the form. It is not she who needs the practice, and all her pupils have been trained to speak clearly. Everyone has heard James.

(4) John has the opportunity to correct his error. Will Miss Brown stop now?

(5) The whole class has an opportunity to use the preferred sentence.

(6) Another pupil has the chance to show mastery of the preferred form. With a slight vocabulary change, Mary gives the desired sentence.

(7) The pattern is repeated.

(8) To make sure that everybody participates, Miss Brown chooses arbitrarily a group to repeat — this time it is all the girls, or all the boys, or two rows. Another time Miss Brown

might call on *tous ceux qui portent des lunettes, toutes les jeunes filles rousses, tous les louvetaux.*

(9) Back to individual practice, and —

(10) returning, of course, to John.

(11) Still another example with a similar infinitive —

(12) and eventually a series of examples for poor John. But poor John deserves no pity and he asks for none. Quietly, painlessly, the preferred form is being implanted in his mind.

(13) At an appropriate moment, other types of infinitive are introduced.

(14) Miss Brown concludes with the original sentence, and perhaps we may detect a note of satisfaction in John's correct response.

(15) Miss Brown may use some *-er* verbs if she deems it wise. Evidently today she wishes to avoid the original cause of confusion — the oral identity of *-er* and *-ez*.

Two-Minute Drills by Miss Brown — and by similarly enlightened teachers who worked better than they knew — these drills received theoretical backing when the findings of linguistics were applied to language teaching. From the Danish Jespersen at the turn of the century to the American Lado in the fifties and sixties, eminent teachers have been advocating reforms along linguistic lines and with gradually increasing success.

If we consider linguistics as the scientific study of language we shall realize that linguistics as a pure science has little to tell us about language teaching. Reflection will show us, however, that an ever broadening study of *what* we teach cannot fail to have import for *how* we teach. In this lies the contribution of applied linguistics.

At the present state of development, linguistics has many observations to make about language; some of them are as follows:

Language is sound.

This surprising discovery dismays the teacher who has always believed that language is written literature, written conjugations and declensions, written translation exercises — anything but the spoken word.

The spoken form of the language is the "real" form.

A corollary of the first observation. Written representations of a language are but pale, inconsistent, frequently inadequate reflections of the spoken word — frozen at times in the grasp of a tradition long since abandoned by the spoken form. It follows that we must teach the spoken language before we teach the written language.

Each language is a system. The learner must master the system in order to speak the language.

One of our tasks in teaching will be to discover the system and organize our presentation of the system. Will the system of

the oral language be identical with the system of the written language?

Each sound has a "privilege of occurrence." Some languages have more sounds than others. Some languages use sounds in positions where they will not be found in others.

Can we teach the sounds of one language in terms of the sounds of another?

Each language has its own identity. The units of speech in one language will not necessarily be the same as the units in another, nor will the arrangements be identical.

Which language is the "right" language? Shall we teach French in terms of English?

The relationship between a language symbol and that which it represents is arbitrary.

"The French say *vache* for *cow*!" exclaimed the old lady. "Now I ask you, does *vache* sound anything like *cow*?"

Language, then, has meaning. In some cases two or more languages may contain symbols of identical meaning. In some cases there will be resemblances without identity — these offer pitfalls for the learner.

Réaliser is not the same as to *realize*; *actuellement* is not the same as *actually*; *demander* is not the same as to *demand*. As a matter of fact, *elevator* (Great Britain) is not the same as *ele- vator* (North America).

Language changes constantly, in the main through interaction with the environment.

Reflect on what we have done in the space of several hundred years to Shakespeare's English and to Racine's French — and what language in turn has done for us.

Language, however, has form. This form is observable in the circumstances in which the language is used.

We cannot say "this is right" or "that is wrong;" we can but remark "this is used in such and such a place," "that is used by others in another situation."

Some Conclusions

a. Because each language is a system of sounds, having its own meaning, we shall teach the language on its own terms. We shall use the language to teach the language.

b. Because the spoken language is the "real" language, we shall teach the spoken language first.

c. Because the form of our target language differs from the form of the learner's mother tongue, we shall indicate the differences.

d. Because no language is identical with another language, and because we wish constantly to stress our target language, we

shall avoid translation as a vehicle of teaching. Translation exercises in some circumstances may serve as a form of evaluation of material already taught, but in general we shall regard translation as a highly specialized skill reserved for the final stages of language study.

Some Applications for the Teaching of French

a. We shall be chiefly concerned that our pupils learn to understand the spoken language and learn to express themselves orally.

b. We shall emphasize the correct production of French sounds.

c. We shall concentrate on the basic structures of the target language — particularly on those which differ from those of the mother tongue. This we shall do with pattern drills (variations of Miss Brown's Two-Minute Drill) using a controlled vocabulary.

d. We shall build vocabulary as a secondary objective, very much subordinate to our interest in correct structuring.

e. We shall encourage pupils to draw conclusions, formulate observations, after acquiring familiarity with the phenomena of language. We shall do so because we no longer believe that rules govern speech — speech sets changing, but observable, patterns. In addition, pupils will learn that which they themselves will have observed more readily than "rules" imposed by teacher and text.

f. We shall introduce the written language after establishing a good foundation in the spoken language. Timing will vary with circumstances, but we shall remember that "oral comes before written".

The Two-Minute Drill formed only a part of Miss Brown's "bag of tricks." Miss Brown could hardly be blamed for not realizing the importance of this aspect of her work, because in her day so little was known about the function of speech. What causes alarm today is the fact that the scientific findings of modern linguistics are taking so long to reach the schools. Many of Miss Brown's successors still teach French as a moribund if not yet dead language.

Why is this so? Perhaps teachers' colleges, school administrators, professional associations and the public share the responsibility for delays in implementing change. Judicious caution can be understood. But the audio-lingual methods inspired by linguistic data have proved their worth, and should have received wide acceptance many years ago. Eventually they will win their place. By that time, no doubt, some other breakthrough will make audio-lingual methods obsolete, and the struggle will begin anew to supplant entrenched procedures with more effective teaching methods.

In the meantime it must be our aim to implement the most recent and most solidly based theories — those of the applied linguists — in our second-language programmes.