TEACHING WRITTEN FRENCH

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In recent years language teachers generally have accepted the guiding principles of the "aural-oral," "audio-lingual" or the "new" approach to second language learning. In practice, this approach, whatever it may be labelled, frequently produces rapid progress in the spoken language in the early years, and enthusiasm, with a slowing down and disenchantment when the learner begings to grapple with the complexities of the written form of the language. Observation and experience suggest that there is a dearth of good programmes for developing the skills of reading and writing. Furthermore, too few teachers have an understanding of the differences between the morphology and syntax of the spoken and the written language and the contribution of linguistic science to the development of effective procedures in teaching a second language. Admittedly there is little else but opinion to support the "new" approach rather than the "old." As Nelson Brooks recently stated,

> Up to the present, what is called the new approach is largely an act of faith; research to prove the validity of its basic principles is scanty. It is, however, an act of faith of vast dimensions, participated in by thousands of language teachers acting individually and collectively, by leading publishing houses and testing agencies, and by the federal government through NDEA funds. It has, for a decade, continued to enjoy the cordial support of the general public. If research data are in short supply, it is mainly because the scientific measurement of what is sought is extremely difficult and because the needed instruments have, up to now, not been available[1].

In spite of the lack of conclusive empirical evidence, it is possible to present the rationale of current practices in language learning and to suggest experiences designed to develop competence in using the written form.

The new approach to language learning recognizes that language is habit or a complex of habits; that one acquires habits through performance rather than by analysis; that one develops competence more quickly in a situation where there is a high probability of producing a correct response; that language is speech and the written language is a secondary, derived form; that learning the spoken language must precede learning the written form.

Learning a second language is accomplished in three major phases; the first phase includes the "deep grammar," that is, the sounds of the language and all the basic structure and sentence patterns, an introduction to all four skills (aural, oral, visual, graphic); the second phase develops language competence, keeping

alive all that has been previously learned, building vocabulary, extending reading experience and acquainting the learner with the syntax of the written language. Phase three involves a greatly increased use of cultural and literary materials.

It is recognized that it may not be desirable or necessary for everyone to learn the written language. Certain individuals who, for various reasons, lack the capacity to write their own language adequately will obviously not benefit from instruction in writing a second language. For most people, however, this particular dimension of language will reinforce and enrich their oral facility. It is proposed to limit this discussion to the teaching of French as a second language in the Province of Quebec — a situation where it is desirable that all citizens be able to communicate in both French and English by the spoken and written word if they are to participate fully in life in *le Québec en marche.*

When Should Learning the Written Form Begin?

Two major decisions must be made in developing a programme to enable children to learn to write in a second language: the stage in a child's development when he should begin, and the type of experience which will be most effective in developing competence. The best time appears to be when the learner can use with confidence the basic forms and sentence patterns, and can utter them fluently with the speed, rhythm and intonation approximating that of a native speaker. He should be secure in his own language so that he will not be confused by the problem of learning to use the same twenty-six letters to represent the sounds of two different languages (English and French in Quebec).

The time lag between learning to speak and to write will vary according to a number of complex, interrelated factors including methodology, intensity of the programme, total language environment, competence of the teacher, and age of the learner. For example, if in Quebec schools, aural-oral French is begun for English-speaking children at age six or seven, it may be advisable to delay the introduction of written French for as much as two years. The time lag should gradually be decreased until, at the high school level, the pupil is prepared to learn the written form ten minutes after learning the spoken form. At any stage it is important that the interval not be so extended that the learner invents his own version of the written language before he becomes acquainted with the preferred form.

In planning a programme to develop competence in writing French, the teacher must take into account the fact that, as with English, the written form does not fulfill in a consistent and logical fashion its role of representing the spoken language. The twenty-six letters of the alphabet must be used to represent the thirty-six sounds of contemporary French. It is therefore necessary to use letters which represent more than one sound; for example, "s" represents /s/ in *son,* /z/ in *maison,* and nothing at all in *nos.* Furthermore, as Father Ernest Richer points out[2], there

have been deliberately added to some words completely useless letters whose only value is to recall for the eye the original forms, usually Latin, which have long since disappeared from the pronunciation. In some cases the fact of writing these useless letters has brought about a resurrection of the sounds. On the other hand, one finds pronunciations which are not affected by the introduction of these useless letters. Father Richer sums up the situation thus:

> Le résultat total de toutes ces complications, c'est que la relation entre notre prononciation et sa représentation par écrit constitue un véritable cauchemar pour les enfants et pour les étrangers désireux d'apprendre notre langue. Pas de normes auxquelles on puisse se référer: seul l'usage permet de s'y retrouver[3].

Learning to write French is further complicated by the use of suffixes to denote tense, gender and number. The suffix /ɛ/ may be spelled in three ways: -ais, -ait, -aient; -e, -es and -ent are purely graphic. The letter "e" sometimes indicates a feminine and sometimes does not; "s" and "z" in the majority of cases indicate a plural, although in the spoken forms of the same words the singular and plural are the same.

Arguments Against the Use of Translation

In describing effective procedures for developing a mastery of written French, let it be said at the outset that translation is a separate skill which may be learned, if it is considered desirable, when one has achieved mastery of the second language. To use translation as an instrument to teach a second language will inevitably interfere with the learning process.

It is of prime importance that the learner has respect for his second language. If he attempts to learn it by constantly working from the mother tongue it suggests that only his mother tongue is 'real' language and that the target language is but a pale imitation, a second-class language spoken by second-class citizens. Translation, when used to teach the written forms of French, tends to debase the language. Constant comparison of the two languages suggests that the second language is inferior, that it has a bizarre system of representing its sounds, and that its structures, because they are different from those of English, could only be tolerated by a disordered, eccentric speech community. Principle 15 in Robert Lado's *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach* suggests that the teacher should,

> Except in cases of incompatibility, as in wartime, impart an attitude of identification with or sympathetic understanding of the people who speak the second language rather than merely a utilitarian attitude toward the language or a disinterested or negative attitude toward the people or the language. This principle is based on the belief of many teachers and has been partly confirmed by the research of Wallace Lambert and his associates, who used attitude questionaires and correlated their results with achievement in French.[4]

As well as creating an undesirable attitude toward the second language, translation runs contrary to all sound principles of language learning. Its use is the mark of the inefficient teacher who is either incapable of developing more effective techniques or falls back on the argument that is has been used for centuries and is therefore hallowed by tradition. As Mallinson says "translation properly used teaches nothing; it is the teacher's stock-taking device . . ."[5] Lado, is not convinced of its effectiveness even in this respect: "There is insufficient evidence for or against the use of translation to convey the meaning of what is taught or as a means to check comprehension." Lado's Principle 9, however, makes it abundantly clear why he would banish translation as a language learning device.

> Translation is not a substitute for language practice. Arguments supporting this principle are (1) that few words if any are equivalent in any two languages, (2) that the student, thinking that words are equivalent, erroneously assumes that his translation can be extended to the same situations as the original and as a result makes mistakes, and (3) that word-for-word translations produce incorrect constructions.[6]
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> Psychologically, the process of translation is more complex than, different from, and unnecessary for speaking, listening, reading, or writing. Furthermore, good translation cannot be achieved without mastery of the second language . . .
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> Bilinguals who achieve full use of both languages do not translate when using either. They are said to have acquired two coordinate systems. Translation, on the contrary, develops a subordinate, overly complex organization of the second language.[7]

Planning a Programme

What then are desirable types of activity which will enable the learner to achieve mastery of the written representation of the second language? Robert Politzer tells us that "It has been a well recognized principle among language teaching methodologists or educational psychologists that the real skill of the teacher lies not in correcting wrong responses but in creating situations in which the student is induced to respond correctly."[8]

The type of exercise best calculated to give practice in writing with little probability of errors is copying a model. The material must be based on sentences which have been assimilated orally. The sentences will be written by the teacher following their utterance by the pupils and then copied by the pupils. While this approach is sufficiently challenging to maintain interest in the early stages, as children progress they need a type of activity with some motivation beyond that of merely producing a correct copy. Some exercises which have proven successful are: (1) a series of pictures and a list of captions; the pupils copy the appropriate caption under each picture; (2) a series of sentences with words omitted and a list of the missing words which the pupils write in the blank spaces; (3) a paragraph or a dialogue followed by a series of questions; the pupils select sentences from the passage which provide answers to the questions and copy them in their

notebooks; (4) two or three columns each containing linguistic units which will be combined with units in the other columns to construct complete sentences.

Once sufficient practice in copying the specific patterns has been provided, the next step is to complete sentences convering the same material. The third step is writing from dictation the patterns which have been practiced in the two previous steps.

A Programme for the Elementary Grades

The greater part of the written work done in the elementary grades will be restricted to the three types of activity described above. Some children, however, will benefit by being encouraged to express themselves in writing in the second language. This type of activity must be used with caution for as Nelson Brooks points out "One of our most grievious errors in training to write in the foreign language has been . . . to require the writing of original compositions too soon and too often, which results in the invention of unacceptable forms."[9] The child who has developed a sufficient mastery of the written form, may be asked to write answers to questions, statements about pictures or experiences, or guided compositions, always provided that the material is so structured that he will be called upon to use only the vocabulary and structures that he knows. Nevertheless, the skills of understanding, speaking and reading must take precedence in the elementary school over writing and at no time should more than ten percent of a pupil's time be devoted to developing this fourth skill.

A Programme for the Secondary Grades

Pupils in the first three years of secondary school will spend about twenty percent of their time developing competence in writing. Copying, completion exercises and dictation will still play a part but an ever increasing proportion of time will be spent in more creative kinds of writing.

In the final years of secondary school the course in French should prepare the pupil for the type of work or studies in which he will be involved in his post secondary years. For all pupils there will be a greatly increased content of cultural and literary materials. There should be an attempt to develop style as well as clarity in writing.

The university-oriented student will find topics for composition in French literature; he will practice various kinds of writing: expository, argumentative, narrative, descriptive. He may even try his hand at poetry. Students with a less literary bent, in particular, those for whom the final year of secondary school will complete their formal instruction in French, should get practice in personal and business correspondence, in writing reports on scientific and technical subjects, on current events or on any topic which is appealing.

Finally, among those bilingual and bicultural students who have achieved sufficient mastery of written French, a course in translation based on a study of comparative stylistics could be offered to those who would find this specialized skill useful.

Rôle of the Teacher

In the final analysis, the success of each child or adolescent in mastering a second language will depend on his teachers more than on the programme. It will depend on his having teachers who have a mastery of French, who have been trained to observe children so that they can create experiences designed to produce effective learning, who will be aware that lack of success on the part of the learner often means that the teacher has failed to discover the way of helping him to achieve success. The school administrator should ensure that such a teacher is supplied with a wealth of materials and given a free hand in developing a programme best suited to the needs of his pupils.

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