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Problems of French and Foreign-born Learners of English*

After certain incidents that marked the recent visit of a rather prominent figure to "la belle province," it may be surprising to learn that English continues to be taught in our French-language schools. Nevertheless, it continues to be a compulsory subject on the program of studies for all French-speaking students in Grades VI through XI, and a large number of our students receive initial instruction in English in Grade V.

To the 1,700,000 students following courses in English as a second language in the French-language schools must be added the thousands of immigrant children whose parents have elected to assimilate with or even be absorbed by the English-language community. All this is to indicate the extent to which the teaching of English as a second language is one of the more important tasks facing educators in the Province of Quebec today.

Objectives of Learners of English-as-a-Second-Language

The presence of these two groups in schools controlled by the same Department of Education results in two teaching situations which can be characterized by the highly different objectives pursued in each case by the teachers of English as a second language.

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Needless to say, these two situations with their broadly differing objectives complicate the administration of an ESL (English as a second language) program in our public school system.

In the French language schools, the objective of our teaching of ESL may be described as basically instrumental. By this I mean that the subject is taught to give the students competence in the language so that they may communicate with their English-speaking fellow-citizens, read in English, listen to and watch radio and television programs and understand motion picture dialogues in English. In other words, the ultimate objective of the teaching of English to our French-speaking students is to provide them with a tool that will enable them to make themselves understood by English-speaking people and to understand their various media of communication.

The final objective of the teaching of ESL to non-native speakers of the language in our English-language schools has much deeper implications. What is, in the beginning, a second or foreign language for these students is to become eventually their first language insofar as immediacy of need and frequency of use are concerned, since it will be the language of instruction for all their future schooling. Stated in another way, their situation may be described as one in which all efforts are directed to leading them to acquire such a mastery of English that they will adopt finally and as completely as possible the linguistic behaviour which characterizes members of the ethnic group whose language they are learning. The objective of the teaching of ESL in this situation may be identified as assimilative or integrative.

What is being done to attain this objective? I believe this is a timely question to be considered by Canadian teachers of English in all schools where non-native speakers are to be found. Are we simply "giving them time to catch up" by grouping them with native speakers who are two or three years younger? If this is our only solution, "time to catch up" then means time to lose out. Additional time is needed but it must be devoted to language-emphasis lessons given by teachers who are trained to work with language-handicapped students. For most of our immigrant children, the stream of English speech is just a polysyllabic blur during their first months among us. Their problems of integration are thus aggravated unless they are given special help. This help should take the form of intensive courses whose duration will depend on factors such as aptitude, native language, and the like. Weeks or months should be devoted entirely, or nearly so, to the study and guided practice of English in a variety of language reinforcement drills before we send

these children to join regular classes with native speakers. In other words, it is my belief that only through the segregation of these non-English speaking children can we hope to achieve their progressive integration into the English-speaking community.

The attainment of this integrative objective demands also that school administrators recognize the nature and gravity of the language problems faced by non-native speakers of English. This recognition can come only from a deepening awareness of the awesome complexity of second-language learning, particularly when, to this task we add the learning, through the medium of a "foreign" language of other subject matter with its heavy load of concepts and terminology.

ESL Teaching Personnel

In our French-language schools, there are serious problems of a different nature, stemming in large measure from a lack of teaching personnel possessing sufficient mastery of English. One reason is that, at present, only one English-language institution in Quebec — Marianopolis College in Montreal — prepares native speakers to teach their mother tongue as a second language. In September 1965, the college enrolled twelve students in a four-year course leading to the B.A. with honours in English and providing a program in methods and applied linguistics. We hope that these students, after acquiring the necessary teaching experience, will accede to the position of coordinators in our regional, comprehensive schools. In this position, they will be able to contribute to the development of a well-planned, soundly based program of instruction in English as a second language. What is equally important, they can be of considerable assistance in an in-service training program for their colleagues.

But what are so few among so many? I should like to take advantage of this opportunity to recommend to the English departments in all our English-language teacher-training institutions to give serious consideration to the formation of personnel interested in teaching their native language in either of the two situations previously referred to. Because such programs are presently lacking, teachers who wish to specialize in the teaching of English as a second language in Quebec must obtain their training in French-language institutions. This rather anomalous situation can obviously have only one result — the task of teaching ESL in the French schools of Quebec falls to native speakers of French. This is not to intimate that, because English is taught in these schools almost exclusively by native speakers of French, it is badly taught. How-

ever, the participation of more native speakers of English in this field would reduce the incidence, if not the gravity, of our personnel problems.

By and large, this personnel is comprised of people who, during their teacher-training period, have had to grapple with the mastery of both matter and method simultaneously and the result is, quite often, inadequacy on both counts. English is a ninety-hour course in the first year of our four-year program in the French-language teachers' colleges. In the second year it is an elective, ninety-hour course. Only a few of these institutions are offering more than a one-hour-a-week course in language and methods on the third and/or fourth-year levels.

Students who have received this somewhat meager formation often begin their teaching careers on the lower secondary level with results that leave a great deal to be desired. Within four or five years, some of their former students are admitted to teachers' college, follow the same program, and the vicious circle tightens. It can be broken at the teachers' college level, but help is needed, particularly from our English-language institutions. If they can devise a program for native speakers of French who are sufficiently competent in English to follow a teacher-training course with emphasis on the teaching of ESL, I am confident that they will provide a partial but nonetheless important solution to our personnel problem. In a word, I am proposing that the training of teachers of ESL become the responsibility of our English-language, not our French-language teachers' colleges, regardless of whether the trainees are native speakers of English or not.

Training ESL Teachers

Native speakers who plan to teach ESL will probably require a complete reorientation of their attitude toward language, its nature, its structure and operation, and the process of language learning. This reorientation can be effected by convincing the trainee of the primacy of the spoken language, not only pedagogically but also as a basis for understanding its structure. (Many teachers are still reluctant to give more than mere lip-service to the accepted sequence of language-learning: learning and understanding the spoken language, reading and writing. They hurry children into what passes for reading but what is really "word-calling".) The trainee must also be brought to think of a language as consisting of a set of habits which are capable of systematic description and development. He must be persuaded that the conventional grammar he has learned is often not the most economical and accurate way

to describe the structure of English to people of another tongue. The trainee must come to regard language-learning as the fixation of a set of habits to the point where they become automatic responses to verbal or situational stimuli. He must realize that the points of difficulty in learning a given language may be identified in terms of specific contrasts between the structure of the learner's native language and the target language. (I am quite aware that these contrastive studies are not always compatible with teaching situations in large urban areas where students of ESL are of multiple language backgrounds. It would be unrealistic to expect teacher trainees for these areas to carry on contrastive analyses of English and each of the native languages represented in the school system where the trainee intends to teach).

Specifically, then, the training of native speakers for work in the teaching of ESL should include courses in English phonology, the structure of English, the psychology of language learning, a contrastive study, if feasible, of the phonology, morphology, and syntax of the native and target languages, courses on methods of teaching ESL and on the means of measuring the productivity of this teaching. Furthermore, where native and non-native speakers of English are trained together, the former can draw great profit from observation of the problems faced by the latter and of the steps taken to solve them and from peer teaching. Many of the difficulties encountered in peer teaching will appear again in future teaching situations.

If the trainees are non-native speakers, courses aimed at increasing their language competency must be added to the regular studies in methods and applied linguistics. Where further mastery of the language itself is the aim of a course, priority should be given to fostering the ability of these future teachers to produce as perfectly as possible those features of the sound, structure, and vocabulary systems which appear in ESL textbooks and which the trainee will have to present to his pupils. In other words, these language courses should first help the trainees to do better what they are going to be called upon to do. Consequently, if they are to work on the elementary or secondary level, as most of them are, their training should stress language rather than literature. In the training of non-native speakers for work in ESL, there is often the danger of spending on English literature time which might be more beneficially devoted to language courses. Lecture courses in English literature, for many of these students whose aural comprehension is still deficient, may seem intellectually seductive but they often turn out to be practically unproductive.

A Call to Action

Our problems in the teaching of ESL are, then, numerous and as complex as the nature of language and language-learning. The non-native speakers, particularly in our metropolitan school populations, present an ominous dilemma. Their position must be recognized and administrative steps must be taken to remedy it by giving these children every opportunity to develop the skills they are lacking. Otherwise, inferior performances and humiliating failures in all areas of learning will follow. Our schools must take appropriate steps to solve the language problems of the immigrant child before they become insurmountable. The language disabilities of our foreign-born children must be eliminated.

In our French-language schools, successful second-language teaching requires the combined efforts of native speakers of English and native speakers of French who have acquired a high degree of competency in English and who are thoroughly conversant with the problems of teaching ESL in their areas. I invite the participation of English departments across Canada in efforts to increase the professional competency of both groups of teachers in meeting an educational need that is a vital component of national understanding.