

Cornell Haro

A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING BEGINNERS

SEMINAR 1

What is wrong with the course books published in England in the last ten years?

1. Skinner's Pigeons

Our text books are largely based on the idea that language acquisition is habit formation and that stimulus response operant conditioning is what should be happening in the class room and the language lab. The student is asked to listen, repeat and do substitution drills of various sorts - these may or may not be thinly dressed up as 'situations'. A lot of the drill work is directly based on the Skinnerian et al. type of stimulus-response activity. When the student hears X he must then say Y. When he hears Xi he must say Yi etc.

This approach concentrates on the student's ability to imitate and on his capacity to rote-learn. It leaves his problem-solving, analytical powers untapped. It does not encourage him to infer, hypothesize, or generalise. It puts the language learners in the same situation as the child in the old primary school, functionally learning his tables without understanding them either consciously or unconsciously, or in the same situation as the new recruit on the parade ground 'learning' to provide correct muscular responses to barked drill sergeant stimulus.

I would suggest that the appeal of this language learning approach to many teachers lies (a) in its neatness and tidiness (b) in its authoritarianism (c) in its puritanism.

The drill operation is neat and tidy in that it tweezers out a tiny ligament of language gets the students working exhaustively on that. It is clear, unambiguous, and allows the lazy teacher to retire to the status of process monitor, if he so wishes. This kind of thinking certainly lies behind the way the French train their overseas teachers of Credif courses.

The stimulus-response method of language instruction implies that the teacher will meticulously control the language produced by the students. He is moulding and shaping what they will say when they open their mouths. He will naturally experience both the power satisfactions of the drill sergeant and his ultimate boredom. He is giving the students a kind of toilet training, which is very satisfying to the puritan mind - the language mistake is to be banished from the class-room as far as possible by never putting the student in the situation where he can make one. Clean and neat but totally unnatural.

I am sad to say that the behaviourist assumption is the one that underlies a lot of the very dubious methodology you see demonstrated on your teacher training course. Let me pick out two examples of this : (a) the intensive dialogue technique, (b) guided composition

The first consists of listening, repetition and substitution. The second consists of edging a limited set of ideas into a pre-ordained language mould - (see for instance O'Neill's use of this technique in Kernels Intermediate.) Clearly teachers can devise intensive dialogues etc. which are imaginative and emotionally arresting, as I believe James Dixey and I have sometimes done (WELL SAID.) This relieves the tedium of the lesson but does not in any way answer the criticism that by applying this technique we are only drawing on a very limited part of the student's language acquisition capacity.

2. The 'Pattern Sentence'

If the learning theory behind the most modern text books is a 'contextualised' form of behaviourism, their linguistic background is the work of the structuralist. This school of linguists have produced descriptions of the apparent structures of the language and from this wealth of description the course book writers have picked their 'pattern sentences' which then become the focal point for drilling etc.

In the late fifties Lado and Fries produced a well-known textbook in which pattern sentences are used as the head material for drilling and substitution. They made little or no attempt at twisting their drills into looking like 'situations' and this makes the book a classic of boredom. Texts of this sort are still widely used across Latin America in the USIS run institutes.

The English text writers of the last ten years have largely followed in Lado's footsteps, while modifying the exercising by trying to weave "contexts" round the drills, at least part of the time. Take for example Broughton's Success with English which mixes a great deal of pure stimulus response lab. work (no attempt at situationalising (with 'contextualised' class drills.

It is the "pattern" sentence approach which has given rise to the need for artificial contextualisation, to the situation in which a course writer makes a list of patterns to be presented and drilled which he then has to dress up in situations, and squeeze into "structure-loaded" dialogues and reading passages.

When you come to think of it, it's comic - in ordinary life the idea of 'uncontextualised' language is unthinkable - you have to venture into the world of schizophrenic babbling to find sentences that appear uncontextualised, and perhaps often they would appear meaningful to the speaker himself. Natural language is by its communicational nature inevitably contextualised.

Having imposed the burden of 'situation inventing' on themselves, course book writers are then faced with the ugly fact that many of them are not especially imaginative writers, and 'contextualisation' is one of the main jobs of the skilled novelist. A good many text writers simply fail to comprehend the issue and come to defining a "situation" as in purely physical or incidental terms. So you have railway station or airport "situations" or have a quarrel incident in which two completely cardboard 'characters' argue. The 'contextualisation' is then rounded off by having a styleless drawing next to the dialogue in the textbook; this is taken to be visual contextualisation.

3. The T.E.F.L. Text-Book Dialect

All this has important repercussions on the range of language presented to the beginner student of English. He is largely exposed to English of no recognisable register or type and all of much the same anodine texture. This tedium is compounded by the fact that the voices on the tapes accompanying the courses are often those of unsuccessful actors speaking at a monotonously even pace. The learner has none of the phonetic excitement he would get from half a day as a tourist in London. For the most part the language presented to beginners is neither fast nor slow, angry nor depressed, poetic or scientific, and is insensitive to differences of class, age and sex.

It is suggested above that the patterns the textbook writer uses to build up his course around are derived from the research of the structuralists. Partly true only. Text book compilers also seem to have heavy recourse to previous textbooks, and so they continue in book after book, to repeat the misguided presentation of patterns, apparently merely because there is a tradition of false presentation and interpretation.

Let me give you two examples of how the structure of TEFL dialect often diverges from that of modern south-east elite British English. In most intermediate text books the student learns that there is a 'sequence of tenses' in conditional sentences. So the 'second conditional' goes : S+ would+ inf, + S+ stem+ed. Under the influence of this strange formulation many teachers would mark the following sentence wrong if they found it in a piece of homework :

"I would have to beat you, if you don't get down at once."

The sentence breaks the "sequence of tenses."

So, though, did Mr Healey on June 25th 1975 in a public speech : "I know I wasn't appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer in a Labour Government to cut jobs and welfare. BUT I WOULD BE LEFT WITH NO ALTERNATIVE IF WE DON'T GET INFLATION DOWN."

Another example of a rule which the TEFL dialect does not have in common with modern spoken English is the one by which backshift is mandatory in a clause depending on a past verb of reporting. According to the TEFL dialect rule "I'm coming," said John, becomes in reported speech: John said he was coming. Any native speaker of mainstream elite English equally attests: John said he's coming.

The factors governing the use of backshift or its omission are complex, but, as the pattern sentence approach detests complexity, it sweeps the problem under the carpet and produces its simplified dialect solution. A good example of this weird tactic comes in the British Council Unit on Reported Speech, assembled by J Higgins.

4. Illogicality of the sequence in which the structures are taught

So far we have examined the behaviourist assumptions of TEFL writers, the constraints they have imposed on themselves with the pattern sentence approach and the resultant deviant and dead language the students are subjected to. What has been said up to now represents a general attack from the outside on the positions held, knowingly or otherwise, by the course writers.

What follows is a look at the degree to which, within their own assumptions and aims, the course book writers of the last ten years have shown themselves to be inadequate.

Most modern course books introduce lexis systematically starting with the most common words and gradually introducing more infrequent items. They base themselves on various lexical frequency counts. (See H V George, Furgeson and C Frank) Oddly enough, though, the principle of frequency in spoken usage is not allowed to influence the order in which structures are introduced. So for instance the present continuous is often the first tense presented to students, while frequency counts show conclusively that the tenses most in use are the present simple and the past simple. To employ the principle of frequency in the case of lexis introduction but: not for structure is a glaring inconsistency.

5. Contrastive teaching of structures

I suspect that the idea of presenting two over-lapping difficulties side by side derives in part from phonetic teaching methods and in part from the pre-behaviourist translation method still used for instance by BBC World Service English radio lessons to Germany. So Pit Corder teaches lay and lie side by side and phrasal verbs are taught in clusters - you learn all the common verbs taking up, for instance. In Kernels Intermediate, O'Neill introduces the past continuous in contrast to the past simple.

The normal result of such juxtaposition is that the student gets the two patterns or items confused. This has happened to me time and again in trying to teach say lend and borrow contrastively.

Perhaps the worst thing about the contrastive method is that often the contrast is fallacious or inadequate. Broughton and a host of others contrast. "I go every day" with "I am going now". The distinctions between these two tenses are myriad and the above distinction deals with such a small area of their use that to try and implant this as the main distinction is extremely misleading to the intelligent student, who then goes and hears on the TV: "He's coming up field now, dribbling nicely, he shoots for goal!"

The aim of this first short piece has been to query some of the currently orthodox teaching practices, to stimulate you to question what you are being taught on the teacher training course and perhaps also the way you teach yourself.

In my second piece I shall go into the kind of beginner's course James Dixey and I are groping towards putting together and some of the reasons for organising it the way we have begun to.