

## GERMAN INSTRUCTION ON FOURTH GRADE LEVEL<sup>1</sup>

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It is much too premature for me to present with any authority or conclusiveness the problems of second-language teaching and learning, the method best designed to instill enthusiasm and guarantee continuity, making children, parents, teachers, and administrators happy. The linguistic scientist will claim with considerable justification that my method and approach are more avuncular than scientific, but my answer is that I have not been at it very long and still have much to learn.

A short history of how we got launched on this experiment in the Ann Arbor school system may be of interest to you, since in the literature<sup>2</sup> on the subject, considerable space is devoted to the problem of going about getting foreign languages placed in the elementary school system. The University of Michigan College Committee on Foreign Language Instruction, the negotiator representing the several departments of foreign languages, worked directly with the Superintendent of Schools and his immediate staff of assistants and elementary school principals. After a number of consultations in which the purpose, appropriateness, and practicality of language learning on this level were explored in great detail, the services of the language departments were accepted and it was agreed to establish three pilot courses, in French, German, and Spanish. Actually two obstacles were encountered in our discussions; one, raised by the school administration was the problem of curriculum — what subject or subjects in the established school curriculum will foreign language supplant? The other, on the part of the principals, centered not so much on curricular adjustments as on the fact that only *three* languages were in pros-

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<sup>1</sup> From an address delivered to the Michigan Linguistic Society, convening at Ypsilanti, Michigan, December 4, 1954.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Andersson, Theodore, *The Teaching of Foreign Languages in the Elementary School*, D. C. Heath and Company, Boston, 1953; *The National Interest and Foreign Languages*, initiated by UNESCO, U. S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D. C., 1954; also the very provocative and informative *Foreign Language Bulletins* issued periodically by the Modern Language Association.

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pect and only three schools were to receive the benefit of this volunteer attention.

These differences were resolved, however, and two 30-40 minute periods per week were made available to a teacher of Spanish, French, and German in the 3rd, 5th, and 4th grade levels respectively. In general, area subject studies sacrificed some of the scheduled allotment of time to accommodate the language classes. We were committed to instruct classes of average size (about thirty children) with no selection in terms of competence, expressed interest, or parental support. The school system with which we are dealing, like so many in this country, is opposed to the principle of selectivity. The principle of equal educational opportunity for all is basic and the practice of selection is unacceptable. In defense of this policy, applied to language teaching, I might point out that in addition to the obvious objective of learning a second language, there is a less obvious but possibly more important objective: dispelling in the youngster a fear or suspicion of the foreign, the unfamiliar and the unknown, introducing him to a foreign people and their culture. This latter objective can be readily achieved by the slow learners as it can by efficient ones and it is fundamentally of equal importance for both.

In preparation for my particular assignment, I read deeply in educational lore with particular reference to psychology: the psychology of childhood, the psychology of attention, fatigue, teaching methods, etc. But in the last analysis, I found actual visits to the classroom and frequent observation of the room teacher at work and the youngsters' responses, the most constructive preparation. I was able to judge the effectiveness of the teacher's presentations, infant attention or lack of it, the class' power of assimilation and retention; above all, I made the acquaintance of the level of performance and response of each individual class member. These visits, conducted during the first two weeks of the school year before the beginning of the German instruction, assisted me substantially in casting my material at the right level, in devising a variety of challenges, and in avoiding the use of monotonous drills which would obviously bore the children.

An examination of materials developed elsewhere, particularly in Cleveland, El Paso, Washington, Los Angeles, and

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St. Louis proved to me and to my colleagues that we would have to create our own. Syllabi developed by other school systems grew out of unique, local conditions and dispensations; the Cleveland foreign language texts for juveniles, for instance, are a part of a general enrichment program for infants selected on the basis of superior competence; other materials are organized substantially around more time than the sixty to eighty minutes per week allotted us. The syllabi in some municipalities incorporate drawing, recreation and music instruction in their language work.

In devising our materials we were guided by a principle on which we were all agreed; our work would be confined to aural-oral experience, aided by visual, tangible, and dramatic means. The substance of instruction, range of vocabulary, patterns of speech, however, were to be determined by the unique and not readily transferable character of each particular language.

We endeavored, at the inception of instruction, to create what Andersson calls a "climate of sound", a principle governing the natural learning of a second language. For example, I renamed each child, giving him the German equivalent of his name if there was one, or if I encountered a Briant, Sheridan, Allen or Ralph, they became without ceremony Adolph, Hans, Otto, or Gottlieb. The climate of sound ideally requires me to speak nothing but German in the classroom. Slow-learners whose fidgeting is quite contagious, force me to depart from this requirement somewhat, but gradually I am able with assurance of complete comprehension to give all instructions in German which can be dramatized readily. An enhancement of the climate of sound is the song, and songs were introduced at the very beginning of the course. The selection of songs was determined by two factors, familiarity of the melody and the applicability of text to classroom recitation and further exploitation. Thus the song, "Brüderchen, komm' tanz' mit mir," from *Hänsel und Gretel*, a melody already known to the children, taught them parts of the body; or the three-part round, "O, wie wohl ist mir am Abend, wenn zur Ruh' die Glocken läuten," and the less familiar and certainly less popular variant, "O, wie wohl ist mir am Morgen, wenn zur Schul' die Glocken läuten," provide expressions of time, several essential speech patterns set to a very familiar tune.

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Since the written word is consistently avoided, it is necessary for me in my presentation to create marked visual impressions. That is, for one thing, I behave with some exaggeration as the German behaves when he speaks, exaggerating lip movements, facial expressions, and gestures. Strong appeal is made to the eye in associating sounds with concrete objects of reference, classroom objects immediately at hand, supplemented by aids, such as cut-outs, pictures, and my own rather primitive sketches on the board. These are the bases for presentation of vocabulary and basic patterns, such as: *Was ist das ?*, a readily apperceptible signal requiring identification of object with repetition of pattern; or *"Ist das ein Buch ?*, requiring assent or negation with correction and repetition of pattern.

Concrete points of reference can be employed to demonstrate transitive relationships. I have been quite successful after a number of demonstrations in getting the youngster to understand what has happened when I state in this sequence: *Das Buch ist auf dem Tisch: Ich sehe das Buch: Ich zeige das Buch*, transferring then to *Der Bleistift ist auf dem Tisch: Ich sehe den Bleistift: Ich zeige den Bleistift*, or *Der Fuss ist klein: Ich sehe den Fuss: Ich zeige den Fuss*. In any event after repetitions of these and many similar patterns their response to direct queries based on them is accurate. No infant in my class has yet said: *Den Bleistift ist auf dem Tisch*.

I have already alluded to the necessity to dramatize — that is, translating as much as possible into action. Children, particularly, have to dramatize. Thus we enact conventional greetings (entrances and exits with appropriate greetings), presentations, songs which permit it, in fact, we verbalize and act out almost all classroom activities. Whenever possible, round-robins relieve the tedious conventional question and answer between teacher and pupil. I have found that conventional greetings for which there are no concrete points of reference, very difficult for the pupil to grasp and retain, are pretty well automatically committed once they have run the round of the class. So, for instance, *"Wie geht es dir ?"* *"Es geht mir gut, danke,"* was finally and ineradicably committed after it had gone the round of the class on two successive classdays, with one youngster asking his rear neighbor, the neighbor responding and then

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querying the youngster behind him. Other fairly advanced patterns have been committed using this device: for instance, *Das Buch gefällt mir, gefällt dir das Buch?* or taken from the song mentioned before: *Es ist mir wohl, ist dir auch wohl?* Neither round-robin or dramatization, however, enabled me to convey the concept of tense. But with a framework of the names of the days of the week (learned through a jingle) and frequent repetition of the patterns: *Heute ist Montag: Morgen ist Dienstag: Gestern war Sonntag:* then *Heute gehe ich in die Schule: Gestern ging ich in die Schule* got across to most of the children what was being conveyed. Again the test of comprehension was the readiness with which they responded to the queries, *War gestern Montag? Nein, heute ist Montag, gestern war Sonntag.*

In estimating the achievement of the class to date, I might list the following: the class learned in context and can produce in context when challenged about 85 vocabulary items; within a limited framework it can produce declarative patterns in several variations, interrogative and exclamatory patterns. The vocabulary items are confined to classroom *realia* but include some subject matter quite on the level of their English learning — telling time, giving dates, and arithmetical operations of a simple kind, conventional exchanges, introductions, etc.

In estimating the success of my efforts to date, I can judge only on the basis of enthusiasm demonstrated in the classroom, the obvious gratification the youngster derives from demonstrating what he has learned. Judging from parental response, this demonstration most definitely goes on at home, too. The room teacher is particularly impressed with the stimulating effect the language learning experience has had on the slow learner. The youngster who is backward in reading so frequently rises to the verbal challenge, shows up well in comparison with his classmates and with restored confidence demonstrably performs better in his routine classroom work.

The very sticky problem of continuity has not been resolved — that is the problem which the school administration must solve. I have planned the year's work as an organized preparation for a continuation course employing unedited German texts designed for elementary levels on the Dependents' Schools in Germany.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup>An excellent continuation text, for example, is Bruckl, Hans, *Mein erstes Buch*, Leibniz-Verlag, München, 1948.