

LEARNING TO USE THE BUILDING BLOCKS OF ENGLISH, by Gloria Feliciano with Bryant Kearn and Richard D. Powers. Department of Agricultural Journalism, The University of Wisconsin, 1963. 623 frames plus 47 pp.

THIS PUBLICATION is an experiment in programmed learning with the avowed purpose of "helping foreign students at the University level develop greater facility in the English language." It is remedial in nature and represented as being a self-teaching book. It presents English grammar from the traditional viewpoint, although it is novel in some ways. New terminology for parts of speech is introduced. The book provides information about grammar, a section on vocabulary study, an attempt at a pronunciation guide, a small section on spelling, and is completed with 47 pages of graded reading passages. The lexical items contained in the book are neither graded nor controlled in any way. The student must have a fair reading knowledge of English before he can begin to use this self-teaching volume.

The authors have attempted to write this text in such a way that the user would need to know only a minimum of grammatical terminology. "NAMING WORDS," we are told, "name a person or a place or a thing. These NAMING WORDS are called nouns and pronouns in your English textbooks." But after spending much time and space talking about "naming words" the authors retreat "by way of review" by saying that "Naming words may be nouns or pronouns," and then they elicit these latter terms as the desired responses. "Action words" are equated to "verbs." Frame 164 calls for the response "Noun or pronoun + Verb."

There are numerous other instances in which dual terminology is employed. How this equating of one term with another results in the user needing to "know only a minimum of grammatical terminology" is not easily seen. In terms of classification, a useful dichotomy is made in referring to "is, are" as "linking verbs." However, this acceptable choice of words is offset by this unhappy sentence (Frame 83): "is and its forms are a special group of 'action' words which do not tell action but are very often used in sentences." This serves to point out the inadequacy of the term "action word." One difficulty in determining form classes, in this book as in most conventional grammars, is that the separate concepts of form and function are badly confused.

The authors very frequently ask the reader to draw circles and arrows as a means of identification. E.g., Frame 104 says, "Draw circles around all the describing words in these sentences. Then draw an arrow toward the naming word they describe."

Circles and arrows may be a useful visual aid in the initial presentation of a grammatical feature, but asking students to draw similar lines is perhaps a device of doubtful value.

The grammatical notions presented in this experiment in programming serve as an excellent example of the "impressionistic" grammar which has long been discredited by Fries and others. Here are a few examples:

Frame 30. Many naming words describe something that cannot be seen and touched. Here are examples: [virtue, freedom, danger, age, etc.]

Frame 51. Action words tell about some kind of action or motion. . . . For example: He eats . . . "eats" is an action word because it tells about an _____ . (act or action).

Frame 87. She is a kind lady. In this sentence the describing word is kind because it is attached to "lady" and tells what sort of person the lady is.

Frame 227. A "HOW" statement tells "how something takes place."¹ In the example Prisoners live in misery, the words that tell how prisoners live are _____ . (in misery).

Frame 239. When the noun is singular and begins with a vowel (a, e, i, o, u) the article an comes before it instead of a. This results in a more pleasing sound in spoken English. (For example, an egg sounds better than a egg.)

The third section is devoted to "Describing Words and Phrases." One of the disturbing things in this section is the criterion used in determining the correct answer, so necessary in programmed learning. For example, frame 92 says:

Choose the best describing word to put in each of these sentences:

1. The _____ sky is lovely. cold
2. He went out into the _____ night. dark
3. Do you like the _____ winter? blue
4. The _____ girl likes ice cream. interesting
5. This is an _____ book. little

¹This is reminiscent of Fries' experience when he asked someone how he could tell that a certain utterance was a question, and was told, "Because it asks for information."

The answers recorded in the margin are: blue sky, dark night, cold winter, little girl, and interesting book. What makes "blue sky" a better answer than "dark sky," or "cold winter" better than "dark winter," or "little girl" better than "interesting girl" is not readily apparent. And in frame 100, why is a "juicy" watermelon better than a "round" one or a "sweet" one?

Much of this book represents more a programing of information about English than a step-by-step procedure designed to help the student learn the language itself. The kind of responses called for in the book's many fill-in-the-blank exercises include: persons, places, things, qualities or conditions, naming, noun, pronouns, act or action, direct object, etc. Perhaps the authors feel that a certain amount of information about the language is useful and necessary in order to teach it efficiently. It is, however, a question of proportion and/or degree.

To give one example:

Frame 128. PREPOSITIONS are little words of location or direction or possession: in, into, on, up, down, to, from, around, inside, outside, etc. They introduce prepositional phrases. Underline the prepositions in these prepositional phrases.

1. on the beach
2. in the library [etc.]

Although not entirely traditional in its approach, this book shares many of the misconceptions about English grammar that purists are often guilty of. The following quotation from Frame 73 will serve as an example:

The future tense of action words is formed by putting the word shall or will in front of the present tense form of the action word. For example:

I sail a boat. I will sail to Brazil in June.
I sail a boat. I shall sail to Brazil in June.

.

There are rules on using shall or will. It's a good idea to learn them. But until you do, you will make fewer mistakes by generally choosing will.

On the first page the authors say, "There was an effort to write this book in such a way that the user would need to know only a minimum of grammatical terminology. Some imprecision

inevitably resulted, and some distinctions that grammarians consider important were ignored or slighted. The authors—and particularly Miss Feliciano—regret this necessity." In the above-cited frame it would have been much better if the authors had "ignored or slighted the distinctions that grammarians consider important."²

A few statements about English grammar are either in error or highly suspect. For example:

Frame 171. "Singular forms of action words usually end in s, plural forms usually do not end in s. For example, bark is the plural form of the action word 'bark'. Its singular is _____ . (barks)"

Under this analysis the utterances "He can sing" and "I sing," contain plural verb forms.

There are several instances in which the authors provide a long, inefficient, and in some cases imprecise, description of English grammar which the modern techniques of descriptive linguistics could easily put right (cf. frames 60 and 61).

The section called "Mastering Sentence Patterns" is one of the bright spots of this book and represents an interesting exercise in syntax, one that is structural in approach. However, there is one frame in this section that is misleading in its implication. Quoting from frame 516:

Mary wrote letters is also of the pattern

NAMING WORD + ACTION WORD + DIRECT OBJECT

Make the sentence more interesting by adding describing words Aunt to the naming word "Mary" and extremely interesting to the direct object "letters." Your new sentence will read thus:

(Aunt Mary wrote extremely interesting letters.)

The misleading implication here is that a construction like "Aunt Mary" is the same as "computing machines" and "mathematical problems" which occur in the immediately preceding frames. This may be a minor fault but it serves to illustrate a case in which a transformational approach would clearly reveal these constructions to be dissimilar.

²Cf. C.C. Fries, "The Periphrastic Use of Shall and Will in Modern English," *PMLA*, Vol. XL, No. 4, pp. 963-1024. (Also reprinted in *Language Learning*, Vol. VII, Nos. 1 and 2, pp. 38-99.)

There is a small section on the use of idioms in which the following amusing item occurs:

She ran away from the orphanage.

To run away means to leave without permission.

The maid _____ with the milkman.

More seriously, Frame 604 says: "To wait for means to await, to expect. . . ." The difficulty with wait for and expect is that they must be differentiated, rather than lumped together as the same.

Pronunciation is ignored, except for a two-page section in which dictionary-type letters with diacritics are offered as a "Guide to Pronunciation." A few errors occur. The words "wool" and "cook" are listed as containing the same vowel sound as "pool" and "spoon." "Bush" and "bullet" are listed as having the same vowel sound as "fruit" and "juice." The symbol "oø" is used to head up two non-contiguous columns, i.e., it is listed twice for no apparent reason. On the other hand, words containing the vowel sound of /u/, the high back, lax sound as in "cook," are not listed at all, except erroneously, as cited above. Also, the vowel sound in "bat" and "cat" is represented as being different from the vowel sound in "ask" and "cast."

Another section entitled "Some Difficult Words" deals with words that are often confused. The treatment is adequate.

The last 47 pages contain graded reading passages which are prefaced by the question, "How well do you read English?" The students are told that they can "use these passages from time to time as a test of your reading ability." Each selection is labeled as to the ease or difficulty of the lexical items and of the sentence structure in a scale ranging from "very easy" to "very difficult." The students are told that they will thus be able to see which of their problems in reading are the result of difficulties with the vocabulary and which are caused by the sentence structure. It seems reasonable to say that the student's ability to analyze would have to be very great in order to realize this claim. The criterion for judging ease or difficulty is not made known. The selections are varied and interesting. Perhaps, since this is an endeavor in programed learning, questions testing comprehension should be added at the end of each passage.

That much work went into the production of this volume is apparent, and it has good points as well as weak ones. Its coverage of the subject matter is extensive rather than intensive. It proceeds from identifying parts of speech to reading rather difficult passages. The number of grammatical patterns presented are not

numerous, the vocabulary-building section is not overly long, and the pronunciation guide is quite short. The reading selections do provide ample material for study.

On the whole it is a very uneven work. The level of English proficiency required to attempt most of the reading passages is much beyond that which is required for the other sections of the book. Scarcity of examples throughout the book is much to be lamented. Likewise, exercises that would strive toward the acquisition of correct verbal habits are in very short supply.

As an experiment in programed learning, some of the "basic guiding principles" of this "promising educational tool" are violated. The specific goals, or "terminal behavior," are not stated, nor are they readily apparent. The "small step" is frequently a big one in which new grammatical features are introduced without previous mention or explanation. Furthermore, the student is not able to test himself much of the time. He is asked to produce original sentences or phrases without any way of knowing if his responses are correct or not. Frequently, throughout the book, in the left-hand margin where correct responses are recorded, occurs the legend "Let your teacher correct your answers." As a teaching technique in programed learning, this must prove unsatisfactory. For one thing, producing original sentences in this uncontrolled manner leaves too much room for error (ideal programing should make it difficult for students to make a mistake). Secondly, if the student must stop and consult a teacher frequently he cannot proceed at his own rate, or have the reinforcement which comes with the immediate presentation of the correct answer.

If one believes that language is acquired through the formation of correct, automatic verbal responses by means of systematic concentrated practice of its principal grammatical structures, with an assist from directed practice of the various aspects of phonology, then this book points up the additional work needed to make it a more satisfactory text for the teaching of English as a foreign language.

Milton Wohl
The University of Michigan