

Teaching Foreign Languages the Silent Way

The idea that a foreign language could be learned by memorising lists of vocabulary and grammar rules and by continual reference to one's native tongue has been rejected by most teachers of foreign languages today. Of the many alternative methods in use now, most have common basic elements: the learning of phrases and sentences instead of single words, the infrequent use of the native tongue, the emphasis on the spoken language, etc., but all still rely on memory as the key to mastery and include a variety of tools to aid memory, including video and audio tapes, drills and exercises. At the same time many of these new methods claim to teach the foreign language in imitation or simulation of the way a baby learns his native tongue.

These approaches overlook some very basic truths. If one considers speaking one's native tongue it becomes immediately clear that one does not remember it, one uses it. Situations trigger verbal responses. It is also evident that memory is one of our weakest faculties and therefore makes a poor basis for learning.

In all languages there are two kinds of words; those which can be simply substituted one for another from one language to the next, and those which cannot be dealt with in this way. The first group includes all names of objects that belong to the environments of the people using the language in question. Most nouns are in this category. These words can be matched in a one-to-one correspondence and we could conceive of them as being in vocabularies only requiring either to be recalled or looked-up.

The second category of words is the one that generates the problems in language learning. Since it is not possible to resort to a one-to-one correspondence, the only way open is to reach the area of meaning that the words cover, and find in oneself whether this is a new experience which yields something of the spirit of the language, or whether there is an equivalent experience in one's own language but expressed differently. To make sense of an original text written by a native, one needs much more than a morphological knowledge of the language and the possession of a set of equivalents.

If we consider the problems met in the acquisition of the second group of words mentioned above, it seems obvious that recourse to one's native tongue is not helpful, and the language ought to be blocked. But the acquisition of the mother tongue brings with it an awareness of what language is and it is this that must be retained; it is by keeping in touch with this awareness that a student who has already mastered his first language (at an average age of four or five years old) is in an appreciably stronger position when it comes to tackling a second.

Awareness of what language is includes the use of non-verbal components of language: melody, rhythm, intonation, breathing, inflection, etc. We could add to this awareness connected to the reading of a language: the conventions of writing, the combinations of letters to form the signs of different sounds and the possibility of one sound being represented by more than one combination.

Thus there is no chance to present to a learner of a foreign language any situation comparable to that which he has faced as a baby. The presentation of a foreign language in a classroom is far from natural and it can only be learned in school by artificial methods constructed for the purpose. In a classroom a teacher is there to present what is to be learned in a highly controlled way, which is quite unlike the situation for babies, who are subjected to a flow of words knitted together by the sustaining meaning, and coming from the source as a whole. People in contact with babies do not take special care when addressing them: they use the language which is available to them to say all they wish to say as completely as when talking among themselves.

Our proposal is to apply an artificial and for some purposes a strictly controlled approach, using materials constructed for this purpose. We will meet our students as people who already own much of what is needed to acquire a language and who have shown by the acquisition of their native tongue that they are endowed with mental powers that are, to say the least, sizeable.