

Adults Versus Children in Second-Language Learning: Psychological Considerations

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THE great popularity of audio-lingual methods in second-language teaching today is more than just an over-reaction to previous pedagogic techniques that concentrated almost exclusively on reading, translation, and composition skills, and neglected oral comprehension and speaking ability. In large part, it is also a reflection of the widespread cultural belief that children learn languages much more readily than adults¹ do. Hence, the argument runs, if children achieve such spectacular success by means of an audio-lingual approach, it must obviously be the most effective way of learning foreign languages, and adults should follow their example.

This line of argument, in my opinion, is vulnerable on two counts. In the first place, on either research or theoretical grounds, it is difficult to substantiate the thesis that children are in fact superior to adults in learning languages. Second, even if this were the case, there would still be no good reason for believing that methods which yield satisfactory results with children must necessarily be appropriate for adults. These latter methods are used, after all, not because they are demonstrably more efficacious under all conditions, but because children's cognitive immaturity and lack of certain intellectual skills preclude many approaches that are feasible for older age groups. Naturalness is a slippery argument because what is natural for one age group is not necessarily natural for another.

In this article, therefore, I propose to do two things. First, I will argue that adults can acquire new languages more readily than can children. Second, I will take the position that certain features of the audio-lingual approach are psychologically incompatible with effective learning processes in adults. These features include (1) the rote learning of phrases, (2) inductive rather than deductive learning of grammatical generalizations, (3) avoidance of the

mediational role of the native language, (4) presentation of the spoken form of the language before the written form, and (5) insistence on exposing the beginner to the "natural speed rendition" of the spoken language.

RELATIVE LANGUAGE LEARNING ABILITY OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS

To begin with, we must appreciate the fact that the child does not learn his native language with phenomenal ease and rapidity. Quite the contrary! His acquisition of his native tongue is a long, slow, and arduous process—despite prolonged and continuous exposure, and despite exceedingly strong motivation to learn so that he can communicate with adults and peers. Typically he is four years old before his use of syntax even begins to approximate the conventional standards of his language.

In natural settings (e.g., home, neighborhood, school) where children are completely or partially immersed in a second language environment, it is true that they appear to learn the language more readily than adults do under similar circumstances. Actually, however, the two situations are hardly comparable. Children receive much more practice in the new language since they are less able to maintain contact with spoken and written sources of their native language. Their motivation is also usually higher because mastery of the second language is more essential for communication, peer relationships, and school progress. Furthermore, they are typically less self-conscious than adults in attempting to speak the new language.

Objective research evidence regarding the relative learning ability of children and adults is sparse but offers little comfort to those who maintain the child superiority thesis. Although children are probably superior to adults in ac-

¹ In this article, *adolescents* may be substituted for *adults* in most contexts.

quiring an acceptable accent in a new language, E. L. Thorndike² found many years ago that they make less rapid progress than adults in other aspects of foreign language learning when learning time is held constant for the two age groups

In addition to the pronunciation or mimicry factor, children probably have some other intrinsic advantages over adults in foreign language learning. Their intellectual capacities are less differentiated along particular lines, and they are more venturesome and less rigid in undertaking new learning tasks. As a result of fewer past frustrating experiences in academic work, they are also less likely to manifest strong emotional blocks in particular subject-matter areas.

The disadvantages of adults in these latter respects, however, are more than counterbalanced by two overwhelming advantages which they enjoy. First, they have a much larger native-language vocabulary than children, particularly with regard to abstract concepts. Hence in learning a foreign language, unlike children, they need not acquire thousands of new concepts but merely the new verbal symbols representing these concepts. Second, in learning the structure of a new language—both in comprehending oral and written materials and in speaking—they can make conscious and deliberate use of grammatical generalizations and can explicitly apply them to suitable exemplars. Young children, on the other hand, are limited to the much less efficient approach of discovering syntactical rules through repetitious exposure to models and corrective feedback. Largely because of these two factors, certain characteristic features of the audio-lingual method are pedagogically inappropriate for adults.

ROTE LEARNING OF PHRASES

Because young children are explicitly unaware of syntactic functions and categories, it is often assumed that their language capability consists of rote verbal habits. Actually, however, the ability to understand and generate sentences implies, even in children, a meaningful process in which there is at least some implicit awareness of the lexical and syntactic contribution of component words to the total mean-

ing of the sentence. In adults this awareness, particularly in second-language learning, exists on a much more explicit and abstract basis, and hence meaningfulness in such learning is an even more important consideration than in children.

The audio-lingual approach, however, tends to assume that second-language learning, both in children and adults, is largely a process of rote verbal learning. Both in pattern practice drills and memorized dialogue practice, there is either no awareness of phrase meaning whatsoever or, at the very best, awareness of *total* phrase meaning. Thus the learner understands neither the syntactic functions of the component words nor the lexical and syntactic contributions of the individual words to the total meaning of the phrase. A purely arbitrary (rote) rather than lawful or meaningful relationship prevails between phrase meaning and component elements of the phrase.

Under these circumstances it is hardly surprising that particular grammatical patterns can be emitted perfectly in a familiar and structurally limited context, or that simple substitutions, transformations and elaborations can be made, but that new words in a wider, unfamiliar context cannot be fitted into the learned pattern, or that the same words and syntactic categories cannot be recombined in different patterns to express different ideas. The principal transferable element in pattern practice is precise knowledge of the syntactic function of each word and its semantic contribution to total phrase meaning. When the learner manifests this knowledge, it is possible for him (a) to construct a structurally comparable phrase expressive of an entirely different idea, in which each component word bears a syntactic relationship to total phrase meaning that is analogous to the set of relationships prevailing between component words and total phrase meaning in the learned model phrase, and (b) to recombine familiar words and known syntactic functions in the learning of new patterns.

The remedy, of course, is not to eliminate pattern drills but to make them more meaningful. Second-language learning obviously requires overlearning of the basic and characteris-

² E. L. Thorndike, et al., *Adult Learning*. New York: Macmillan, 1925.

tic structural patterns of the language. But unless the learner appreciates the precise relationship between the verbal manipulations he practices and the changes in meaning that he induces by such manipulation, the practice is not very transferable.

INDUCTIVE LEARNING OF GRAMMATICAL RULES

Pattern practice drills seek to duplicate in second-language learning the process whereby children attain syntactic mastery of their native language. What is primarily striven for is a functional, intuitive grasp of syntax after inducing much manipulative experience with the major structural patterns of the language. Grammatical generalizations are provided, if at all, only after the principles in question are acquired on an inductive, intuitive basis and are rendered virtually automatic.

Young children, of course, have to learn syntactic rules through an inductive process of discovering various linguistic regularities in the multiform language patterns to which they are repetitively exposed. Grammatical generalizations would make absolutely no sense whatsoever to them, since they are manifestly incapable of understanding complex relationships between abstractions. This type of discovery learning, however, is exceedingly wasteful and unnecessary when we deal with older learners who are perfectly capable of comprehending abstract syntactic propositions. It takes a long time to discover grammatical rules autonomously and inductively, and until the correct discovery is made, practice is not transferable. Furthermore, as long as these rules are known only intuitively and implicitly, their transferability to comparable situations is restricted to what is analogically quite similar and obvious.

Deductive use of grammatical generalizations, on the other hand, is decidedly more efficient in second-language learning. No time is wasted in discovery, and both the generalization and the experience of applying it to appropriate exemplars are transferable from the very beginning of practice. As a precisely, explicitly, and abstractly stated proposition, the grammatical generalization also has more transferability to new situations.

AVOIDANCE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE

The audio-lingual method seeks in all possible ways to avoid the mediating role of the native language in second-language learning. It attempts to accomplish this objective through the rote learning of phrases and through the inductive learning of syntactic rules, through direct association of second-language words and phrases with objects, pictures, and situations rather than with native language words, by giving second-language instruction in the target language itself, and by proscribing translation practice.

Avoidance of the mediating function of the student's native language in second-language learning is customarily justified on two grounds. First, it is argued that children do not learn their native language through the mediation of another language. This argument, however, is no more relevant when applied to adults than the previously cited argument that children do not learn syntax from grammatical generalizations. Second, it is pointed out that the bilingual individual thinks directly in the second language rather than translates from his native tongue. It must be realized, however, that although this latter state of affairs is generally true, it is a reflection of a terminal state of second-language proficiency and does not describe the learning situation when the bilingual individual is a beginning student.

Actually, it is both unrealistic and inefficient for the older student to attempt to circumvent the mediating role of his native language when he is learning a second language. As we have already observed, the rote learning of phrases and the inductive learning of syntactic rules detracts greatly from the transferability of pattern practice drills. In addition, numerous aspects of first-language knowledge (i.e., the meanings of many concepts, the understanding of syntactic categories and functions, facility in using many structural patterns that are nearly identical in the two languages) are directly transferable to second-language learning and lastly, it is developmentally anachronistic and artificial for the older individual to learn a new set of second-language terms for familiar concepts by associating them directly with their referents (objects, pictures, situations). Cus-

tomarily, after early childhood, new terms for familiar concepts in the native language (synonyms) are learned indirectly through association with the first-learned set of terms for the objects and situations in question

PRIOR PRESENTATION OF MATERIALS IN SPOKEN FORM

A cardinal principle of the audio-lingual approach is that instructional materials should be presented in their spoken form before they are presented in their written form, and that listening and speaking skills should be acquired before reading and writing skills

The major rationale offered for this order of skill acquisition is that it is the "natural" order in second-language learning inasmuch as it recapitulates the order in which children learn their native language. But because a child has to learn how to speak and understand his native tongue before he can read it, it does not necessarily follow that once he knows how to read, he has to observe the same sequence of events in learning a second language. Once any new skill such as reading is learned, it can obviously be used as a tool in acquiring new knowledge. It is unnatural to expect that after an individual becomes literate, he will learn in the same way as when he was illiterate.

A second reason for advocating this order of learning is the belief that it can lead to "direct reading" in the second language. It is maintained that if various items of second-language material can be understood and spoken, they can also be read without any explicit practice in reading as such. This would have the additional presumed advantage of avoiding any tendency to translate the material as it was being read. The available research evidence³ indicates, however, that audio-lingual and reading skills are separate and independently developed abilities. Although practice in one is partly transferable to the other, especially at higher levels of proficiency, considerable specific training in each skill is required for the acquisition of competence.

Still a third reason for advocating prior presentation of materials in spoken form is the possibility that the written form of the second language will generate phonological interfer-

ence from the native language in which the same written letters often have different phonological values. On the other hand, it can be plausibly argued that the individual sooner or later has to learn to associate letters in the second language with their phonological equivalents, and that he may as well confront this first-language interference and learn to overcome it from the very beginning.

Turning now to the other side of the argument, two defensible reasons can be advanced for presenting written and spoken materials in the second language both alternately and concomitantly. First, in our culture, adolescents and adults are habituated to learning most new ideas and subject matter by reading rather than by listening. Thus a pure audio-lingual approach deprives the older learner of his principal learning tool and of the instructional medium in which he feels most comfortable and confident. This is particularly unfortunate during the early phases of instruction when learning stresses tend to be greatest.

Second, prior familiarization with and simultaneous exposure to the written form of the material can serve as helpful props in the early stages of acquiring oral comprehension skills. Because of unfamiliarity with new sounds, with typical sequences of sounds, and with the characteristic word order and syntactic patterns of the second language, it is very difficult for the beginner to distinguish individual words, inflectional forms, and groups of words from listening alone. Hence he often fails not only to grasp the meaning of the spoken material, but also to appreciate its syntactic structure well enough for purposes of transfer. Simultaneous reading support can furnish the necessary cues for meaning and grasp of syntactic structure while listening skills are being developed, and can be withdrawn gradually, both generally and for particular passages, as oral comprehension increases.

"NATURAL SPEED RENDITION" OF THE SPOKEN LANGUAGE

In the audio-lingual approach, beginners are typically exposed to the "natural speed rendition"

³F. B. Agard and H. B. Dunkel, *An Investigation of Second-Language Teaching*. Boston: Ginn, 1948.

tion" of the spoken language—presumably to accustom them to the "natural rhythm" of the language. It is pointed out that children eventually learn to understand their native tongue under comparable circumstances. In terms of gain per unit of learning time, however, it should be self-evident that practice in listening improves oral comprehension ability primarily insofar as what is heard is also understood. Thus, if the sample of speech to which the learner listens is too rapid for him to understand, it does little to enhance his ability to comprehend the spoken language. Furthermore, even if he is able to understand the material in a general way, he may still not be able to dis-

tinguish the major structural patterns well enough to transfer them to speaking and other listening situations.

Hence, since learning to comprehend the spoken language is a very gradual process, it should undoubtedly be assisted in the beginning by means of a slower rate of speech that is progressively accelerated as oral comprehension improves. Artificial simplification is always justifiable during the early stages of any learning process. When any given passage of material is presented to the beginner, he can, of course, be exposed first to a slowed-down version to insure comprehension and then to a normal speed rendition.

Undergraduate MFL Teacher-Training in Liberal Arts Colleges: A Survey

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IN THE fall of 1963 the Modern Language Association initiated a study of the preparation and certification of public school teachers of modern foreign languages. This study, supported by the Carnegie Corporation of New York, will continue through September 1965. The two primary objectives for the study are 1) to bring information on current practices up to date, and 2) to determine how professional activity can best be focused in an effort to improve teacher preparation and certification.

The initial phase to accomplish these objectives consists of three surveys

1. Undergraduate Teacher-Training in Liberal Arts Colleges,
2. Undergraduate Teacher-Training in Schools and Colleges of Education,
3. MFL Methods Courses in Undergraduate Teacher-Training Programs

This report summarizes the data received in response to the first survey, which was sent to foreign language department chairmen in 300 liberal arts colleges. The colleges were selected on the basis of high MFL enrollments and geographical distribution. The chairmen were asked to provide information about course re-

quirements, practice teaching and future plans for teacher training.

Responses to the survey were received from chairmen of 335 FL departments in 244 colleges in 47 states and the District of Columbia. The MLA wishes to express its gratitude to these chairmen without whose superb cooperation this study would have been impossible.

Throughout this report the following abbreviations are used

FL(s) = Foreign Language(s),

MFL(s) = Modern Foreign Language(s)

Course Requirements

Chairmen were asked to indicate how many semester hours of MFL study, beyond the first-year course, are required of B.A. candidates majoring in a foreign language. The same question was asked about majors and minors intending to teach the MFL. The responses to this question are summarized in Chart I.

The analysis of individual questionnaires reveals that 263 departments (70%)¹ have equal semester hour requirements for majors intend-

¹ All per cents in parentheses in this report are based on the 335 departments which responded.

