

# THE ENGLISH TEACHING REVOLUTION

by Alan Fisher

In the last forty years changes in assumptions about the English language have greatly altered both the language itself and the way in which it is taught.

Previously educators believed language students should study a prescriptive grammar that attempts to dictate what is and is not in the language. Today language educators believe that English is always changing and is governed by what forms native speakers actually use. Therefore students should use a descriptive grammar, e. g., a grammar which describes what forms native speakers actually use.

Prescriptive grammars may be appropriate for oriental literary languages like Arabic and Sanskrit which have fixed grammars. However, Western languages undergo continual, gradual change in both written and spoken forms. In English there is no central authority to decide what should be admitted to the language. Rather it is usage, e. g. what native speakers actually say and write, that decides what new forms can be incorporated. If the majority of native speakers regularly uses a new grammar form or word, nothing can prevent it from becoming a part of the English language.

Language acquisition can be clearly seen by examining the process of vocabulary acquisition. New words are continually being added to and discarded from English. There are four major sources of new words. The first, "coining", occurs when an entirely new sound is created to express a meaning or an already existing word is used to express a new meaning. The second source is via communications such as when words from a different dialect are borrowed after exposure on radio or TV. The third occurs due to invention. In this case words may be created from within the language system or the original name of the invention will be borrowed and adapted to the phonological system of the new language. This borrowing of foreign words is the fourth means of vocabulary acquisition.

As the line between formal and informal English is blurred, slang plays an important role in the language. Much slang eventually finds its way into the formal language. Pre-1950's Black English resurfaced in the 1960's in student-hippie slang.

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By the mid 1980's much of this slang has passed into disuse, but some of it has been incorporated into formal English use in newspapers, radio-TV and general conversation.

The Russian word "Sputnik" provides an interesting example of how new words are acquired. The Russians coined the word to name their new space satellite. Because of the great importance of the event, the word was quickly adopted by languages all over the world.

Syntax (grammar) also changes, although more gradually. Old English is virtually unrecognizable as English. The transformation which would eventually produce modern English began in the 11th century. The conquest of England by the French-speaking Normans ushered in a 200 year suppression of English in favor of the language of the conquerors. When English finally returned as an official language, it had been transformed into the form known as Middle English which, unlike Old English, is immediately recognizable as a forerunner of modern English.

The change occurred not only because of contact with French, a Latin language, but because of contact with Latin. Latin was the language of culture in Europe, and Latin grammatical rules were used to describe English grammar. Middle English, although Latinized in vocabulary, remained structurally Germanic, and the Latinized grammatical analysis was never completely appropriate. Nonetheless, this Latinized grammar came to be what is known as traditional grammar.

At the same time the grammar-translation method became the traditional method of language teaching. It is based on the assumption, universal in the pre-modern world, that a conscious knowledge of grammar was necessary in learning a language. Also, it was believed that the prime language skill was translation from one language to another, and the written language was considered paramount over the spoken.

During World War II language teaching suddenly began to change. The American military needed to train spies in foreign languages so that they could operate behind every lines. They found the grammar-translation method useless for teaching people to speak. Searching for a better method the army became interested in the work of Michael Bloomfield.

Bloomfield, an anthropologist, had studied American Indian languages in the 1930's. With one exception, American Indian languages have no written forms. Bloomfield came to a revolutionary conclusion, "Language Is Speech".

Spurred by Bloomfield's theory, OSS, the forerunner of the CIA, began to sponsor research on language teaching by teachers and linguists. This research was to pro-

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duce the Audio-Lingual Method and with it the first stage of the language teaching revolution.

The audio-lingual method was a total departure from traditional language teaching. Like Bloomfield, the audio-linguists believed language was primarily speech. They and their Structuralist linguist allies believed man was born without language and that language was written on man's mind by his environment. Man, they said, learned language by repeating and practising the language heard around him.

The audio-linguists believed students should learn a language in the same way as they thought first language learners did, e. g. by continual repetition of and drilling in the forms of the language. The drilling should continue until the student had "by overlearning" memorized the language and could produce it automatically.

They totally rejected Latin Grammar terminology which they said was inappropriate for analyzing English, a non-Latin language. They also said grammar should not be taught in the language classroom. The study of grammar was dismissed as distracting the students from their primary goals of learning and using the language.

Furthermore, they insisted that sentence, not the word, was the key unit of language. The meaning of words was said to be unimportant in language learning. Instead they believed structural clues and function words in the sentence showed the language speaker what the meaning was.

ex. The boys are going to the store today  
article plural helping ing preposition article noun adverb  
verb form

Therefore, they felt students should recognize the four parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, as well as function words such as articles and prepositions.

The audio-linguists began to quickly dominate American language teaching, especially in government and university language programs. This dominance was to last only ten years.

In 1959 Structuralism, the linguistic base for Audio-Lingual Methodology, was attacked by a linguist named Noam Chomsky. Chomsky's attack completely changed the course of linguistics and indirectly but decisively the course of language teaching. Chomsky presented a new analysis of grammar which he called Transformational Grammar. He believed that grammar came from inside—that man was born with language and did not acquire it from outside.

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He believed language existed on two levels. The first, basic level "deep structure" is an innate part of the mind and exists universally in all men. In the process of language maturation, deep structure is transformed into "surface structure" which is, according to Chomsky, the specific language which an individual uses. Transformational grammar is primarily concerned with studying how deep structure is transformed into surface structure.

Chomsky agreed with the audio-linguists that the sentence is the main unit of speech. He disagreed, however, that speech is more important than writing. He felt them to be equally important.

He also strongly attacked the audio-lingual concept that meaning was unimportant in language acquisition. To challenge them, he prepared a sentence and a phrase which he said they would be unable to analyze. The sentence, "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously," was a nonsense sentence, i. e. a sentence whose words were arranged grammatically but lacked any intelligible meaning. Take this sentence with its clear grammatical markers and recognizable parts of speech, Chomsky said to the Audio-Linguists. If your system is correct, then you should be able to analyze this correctly. The Audio-Linguists tried and failed.

Chomsky's second test was the ambiguous phrase "the shooting of the hunter." This phrase could mean the hunters were shot (killed or wounded) or that they were shooting their rifles. The Structuralists had declared their system could provide clear analysis of any language forms, but they proved unable to resolve the ambiguity.

Chomsky emerged from this contest with greatly increased prestige. For the next ten years linguists and language teachers took sides in what amounted to a civil war within the field. But by 1970 Chomsky and his supporters had clearly won out.

Unlike the Structuralist, who, although linguists, were interested in language teaching, Chomsky remained aloof from efforts to apply transformational grammar concepts to language teaching. His chief importance in this area was that his victory over the Structuralists broke the Audio-Lingual stranglehold on language teaching. Teachers were now free to develop and use other methods in the classroom.

Today we believe that any teaching method that produces good results should be used. Furthermore, we believe it is best to select the best from different methods according to their suitability to specific language learning tasks. Thus, our approach today is eclectic.

The audio-lingual method is still in use, particularly in commercial and business-

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sponsored programs. Its original extreme positions have been modified, but its drills are a common feature of many textbooks and language programs today.

Probably the most widely-used method today is the contextualized or situational approach. This method always teaches language in reference to a specific situation or context. Its proponents argue that language use outside the classroom is situational and believe students learn and retain more thoroughly this way. Situations can be drawn from the textbook, students and teachers' lives, the physical surroundings of the classroom, a story or film, etc.

Many of the most popular language textbooks of recent years have been situational. These textbooks have been organized around two differing principals. Many textbooks, such as *Kernal English*, *New Concept English* and *Streamline English* are organized according to grammatical syllabi. Other "Notional" textbooks group its chapters according to ideas or functions such as giving directions or having a party.

Testing also has undergone change and offers new possibilities to the language teacher. The Audio-Lingual multiple choice exam is still widely used. However, new integrative (requiring the use of more than one language skill at a time) testing methods are now available.

"Cloze" test have been developed both for teaching and testing. In a cloze test words are omitted in a selected reading passage at a fixed interval regardless of whether the passage has been previously read or not (ex. omit every 5th word). Each blank must be filled in with a single word which must be correct in grammar, meaning and usage. The cloze test has proved a highly accurate testing device.

A sample cloze test would be:

I'm going to the store tomorrow. I'm \_\_\_\_\_ to buy some rice \_\_\_\_\_ vegetables. After I go \_\_\_\_\_ the store, I'm going \_\_\_\_\_. At home I'll study.

Dictation, which had been declared useless by the Audio-Linguists, has made a full recovery both as a teaching or testing device. In a dictation each sentence is read one to four times according to student level. The students must write every word said, contracting as the teacher contracts. Spelling mistakes should not be penalized unless students write a different word or produce an incorrect key grammatical inflection. The underlying assumptions is that a student cannot produce any language form that he/she doesn't already know.

Technology also has become important. All methods employ audio-visual aids of some kind. Fully Audio-Lingual programs also exist, built around the use of tapes,

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films, etc. The French Consul program is built primarily around films. A major drawback is the expense of such programs, and in the case of third world countries, the need for a stable supply of electricity.

The teaching of the written language has also revived since the days when the Audio-Linguists had consigned it to a relatively unimportant role in language learning. Today, both reading and writing are introduced to first-year language students.

A new current in language teaching dating from the 1960's has been to shift the center of attention from the teacher to the students. Today it is believed that the student role in the language learning process should be maximized while the teacher's role is sometimes reduced to that of advisor.

This inductive approach, where the student is encouraged to use his/her logic and other internal resources, has a central place in a highly influential approach to language learning known as the Silent Way. The brainchild of maverick educator Caleb Gattegno, the Silent Way places responsibility for language acquisition on the student. The teacher's role is not so much to instruct but to focus student attention. In the forms of language instruction which have evolved from Gattegno's ideas, peer group correction and the use of charts and colored rods are employed. The teacher, while limiting his verbal role primarily to providing initial models, maintains tight control over the learning process.

Meanwhile a growing realization of the role of stress in blocking language acquisition led a Bulgarian educator to develop Suggestopedia. Suggestopedia, a pre-learning technique, attempts to relax students so that they will be maximally open to language acquisition. Meditation techniques, listening to classical music and other means are used to relax students before instruction begins.

The issue of stress has elevated language games, a previously minor aspect of language teaching to prominence. Language games with clearly-defined learning goals have become an important part of many programs. When involved in games, students frequently forget they are in class and practice language in a natural, stress-free way. As yet games remain a supplement to language curriculums but an increasingly important one.

In the 1980's attention has focused on another approach, the Natural Way. Developed by Tracey Terell, the Natural Way is almost diametrically opposed conceptually to the Silent Way. It posits that native speakers acquire their language primarily by listening repeatedly to meaningful chunks of language. Second language students

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should, therefore, acquire language in the same way. The concept of language learning, i. e. conscious analytical learning, is rejected. Listening should precede speaking with students exposed to language in continually recycled forms with new forms regularly interspersed on a graduated basis. Strict control over the amount of new language to be introduced is expressed through the natural way dictum: comprehensible input (recycled language) plus one (new linguistic or semantic forms).

The Natural Way has spawned one highly successful teaching methodology TPR (Total Physical Response). Developed by James Asher, TPR is used with introductory and low basic students. It uses a graded series of commands each of which is accompanied by a physical gesture. For example, the teacher tells the students "Raise your right hand" and raises his right hand. The students silently mimic the action. As in the Natural Approach, student speech is delayed, and listening is stressed. The technique has been especially effective with beginning level, non-academic students.

Community Language Learning (CLL) has been developed by Charles Curran at Gerogetown University. Students are assigned a "coach" fluent in their native language. The students and coach form a community with shifting roles. Students with the help of their coach make tapes of language which is important to the student, and text are developed from transcripts of these tapes. The method focuses on student needs and provides for a maximally supportive environment.

One problem of the new methodologies is that a very high degree of skill and judgement is required of its teachers. Likewise, non-native speakers using these methods must have a correspondingly higher mastery of English.

This is less true with Threshold, a highly-structured patchwork of Audio-Lingual, Situational and game activities. In Threshold students practice exclusively in pairs while the teacher monitors and does close, individual correction. Some educators have attacked Threshold as too mechanistic, yet it has been used successfully up to the advanced level.

Under ideal situations most educators agree that an environment dimension to a language program is valuable. Such an environment would be likely to extend outside the classroom including sports and other leisure time activities. Such "milieu" programs attempt for short periods to duplicate the situations of students studying abroad. The major problem here is that creating such a milieu requires extensive funds, teaching rescourses and a large staff of native speakers.

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In some cases special materials have been prepared for students with special purposes. These materials differ from standard ones primarily in vocabulary. The underlying thesis of English For Special Purposes (ESP) is that it is preferable to begin immediately with a specialized vocabulary if, for example, one is teaching helicopter pilots and electricians who need English only for their work.

In the world of modern English teaching nothing is certain. Tomorrow will bring new theories, methods and textbooks. The revolution that began in World War II is still continuing. For English teachers throughout the world these are exciting times.

The conclusion of the moment is that language is production. If students cannot speak, read, write or understand the spoken language, then they do not know it.

Note: The professional organization for Teachers of English As A Second Language (i. e. teachers of English to non-native speakers of English) is T. E. S. O. L. within the United States and T. E. F. L. (Teachers of English As A Foreign Language) outside the U. S. The term E. F. L. (English As A Foreign Language) is sometimes also used in the United States.

### Suggested Further Reading

- A Way and Ways*, by Earl W. Stevick, Newbury House Publishers, 1980  
*Innovative Approaches to Language Teaching*, by Robert Blair, Newbury House, 1982  
*Teaching Foreign Languages In Schools*, by Caleb Gattegno, Educational Solutions Inc., 1963  
*Counselling Learning in Second Languages*, by Janes Asher, Apple River Press, 1976  
*Suggestology and Suggestopedia*, the Institute for Scientific Research, Sophia, Bulgaria, Ministry of People's Education, 1977  
*A Natural Approach to Language Teaching: The Monitor Model In the Classroom*, by Tracy Terrell, Newbury House  
"The Total Physical Response to Second Language Learning, by Janes Asher *The Modern Language Journal*, 1969  
*Focus on the Learners: Pragmatic Perspectives For the Language Teacher*, ed. by John Ohler and Jack Richards, Newbury House Publisher, 1976  
*Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach*, by Robert Lado, Mebraw Hill, 1964  
*The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher*, by Wilga Rivers, University of Chicago Press, 1964