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THE SCIENTIFIC APPROACH TO LINGUISTICS

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For approaches to linguistics, it is not uncommon to be labelled either as 'modern' or 'traditional'. In practice both terms may be misleading since modern approaches invariably aim at an alternation between two distinct views of the aims and content of language teaching. The one, currently identified as 'modern' prefers a practical mastery, especially of spoken language, and demands maximum participation on the part of the learner. The other, labelled as 'traditional' aims at the acquisition of the rules that underlie actual performance and the deductive discussion of these rules with exercises in the labelling of grammatical forms. Naturally, there is room for enormous variation within either of these two approaches and the distinction between them may become blurred, especially in situations where the aims of teaching languages are confused or remain undiscussed.

It is interesting that the alternation between these two approaches has not only been theoretical but also historical. First one and then the other has dominated language teaching. The Romans provided their sons with Greek tutors and thereby forced them into native use of language so that they acquired it in much the same way as they learned their mother-tongue. The attempt to apply this approach to the teaching of languages in schools really stems from Comenius in the 17th century, Gouin and Victor in the late 19th century and Palmer and others in the 20th century. Comenius, Gouin and many others wrote in part out of dissatisfaction with existing methods and their writings produced great changes in methods of teaching languages. But with the discovery that the new methods themselves were not proving as satisfactory as had been claimed, methods reverted to what they had been before.

Whether one holds the view that teaching is an art or a science, but none would dispute that it should be based on whatever knowledge can be established objectively about the content and method of teaching. By studying language and language teaching in as scientific a manner as possible we should be able to make changes in language teaching a matter of cumulative improvement. If the establishment of relevant knowledge is a necessary precondition for progress, we can see why in the past change has been a matter of fashion. The technique and results for studying the learning, and teaching of languages were lacking. The nature of language itself has often been imperfectly understood. It has not always been thought necessary to understand learning in order to know how to teach. There has been no way of proving the effectiveness of language teaching methods, although it has not been so difficult to convince people of the virtues of particular approaches. Indeed, it is the last point that reveals the roots of change in the past. The appearance of gifted teachers who have combined original thinking with strong power of persuasion has often led to the adoption of new methods which have survived until another teacher has appeared to argue a different view with equal conviction.

It seems that one cannot escape the conclusion that to base language teaching

solely on the experience of teachers is to perpetuate the situation in which teaching will be at the mercy of fashion. History shows that attitudes can change that again, and there is no guarantee that at any one time teachers of similar experience will be drawing similar conclusions from it. This is a human characteristic which by no means is confined to language teachers. Conclusions drawn from experience cannot be demonstrated incontrovertibly. If one teacher claims that in his experience a particular procedure works and another states that, in his, it does not, there is no way of resolving the disagreement. There is an unavoidable subjectivity about all judgements based on personal experience, and that is why we have to look for more objective means of evaluation.

The most obvious way to establish knowledge of language teaching objectively is through empirical research. If differing opinions about such things as the effectiveness of a particular technique, about the relevance of the age of a pupil, about the advantages of a particular sequence of language or about the whole approach to language teaching, why not try out the alternatives in an actual teaching situation, compare the results and thereby resolve the difference of opinion in a scientific way.

In any case what might be called linguistic factors, are by no means the only significant variables in the experimental situation. There are also, for example, pupil, teacher and situational variables. Ideally pupils should be controlled for intelligence, known language learning ability and previous language learning experience, motivation and age. Personality will also be important, perhaps mostly in determining the relationship with the teacher. As for the teachers, fairly obviously some are better than others. This will not necessarily be entirely a matter of proficiency in the language and professional training, although these are, of course, very important. Where an experiment uses more than one teacher, there will always be a problem in knowing whether it was the teacher or the methodological variable that produced the result. Using the same teacher does not help either. It is unlikely that he will be able to adopt to different techniques with equal conviction or skill. He may be much more familiar with one than he is with the other and he may, therefore, perform much better.

The only way to conduct research into language learning so that the influence of uncontrolled variables is considerably diminished, is to improve it altogether from actual teaching situations. It should be possible to isolate many if not all of the factors that one would like to know about and devise experiments into their significance under laboratory conditions. This is to bring research language learning within the sphere of experimental psychology. Some books and articles on language teaching already contain statements about learning that are taken from such sources. Something is known of the difference between auditory and visual memory, of the advantages of distributed as opposed to massed learning, of the ease with which meaningful as opposed to meaningless language is acquired.

To the linguist or the language teacher the type of learning that has been measured has often seemed rather far removed from what he understands to be the nature of language learning. Psychologists have made their comparisons in terms of success in acquiring and retaining lists of words or isolated sentences. There is, no doubt, a memory factor in the learning of foreign languages, but for the linguist language learning is the acquisition of a competence. It is much more difficult to study this under laboratory conditions. Since the development of

the competence may by its very nature be a long term process. We should have to judge, therefore, whether conclusions drawn about this type of learning under these conditions can be extended to language learning as a whole.

A further problem that all language teaching research faces, is the inadequacy of our techniques for sampling people's real language proficiency. In investigating the influence of psychological or methodological variables on learning, some correlation has to be established with actual language proficiency tests or testing techniques. With older research this means a correlation with people's ability to translate. Although most people would agree that modern testing techniques are a considerable advance, few would argue with any confidence that they are entirely valid guides to people's ability to communicate in the language. For a start they are the weakest in their attempts to assess what is the central aim of most modern language teaching - the ability to produce the spoken language, and secondly they assume that the ability to avoid making errors is an adequate indication of the ability to participate in real-life language situations.

It is clear that there are serious difficulties in the way of finding empirical solutions to language teaching problems, and that these difficulties will not be quickly resolved. None of the types of research that have been discussed are to be rejected. It will be a very long time before they will enable us to manipulate language teaching with a confident knowledge of the way in which an individual learns a foreign language. Our ignorance is increased by the fact that there are some important features of the situation that the language teacher and his materials create that are probably not susceptible to this kind of research at all. For example, in the discussion of how the content of language learning should be programmed, it should be possible to determine experimentally whether there is any advantage in exercising some kind of linguistic control, as has usually been thought to be the case, or whether a random exposure to language would be just as effective as has recently been argued. If we assume that such research would show, as is believed it would, that there was something to be gained by limiting and predigesting language for the learning, the question arises as to the optimum way of doing this. Since there would be literally an infinite number of sequencing language, it would be fruitless to attempt to discover the best sequence through empirical research.

FURTHER READINGS

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