

# A Short History of Oral English Teaching With Special Emphasis on Direct Method

Douglas JARRELL

Looking back through the history of teaching English to foreigners, we find at the beginning a very pragmatic audience of merchants who plied the English Channel. Several bilingual phrasebooks which also contained dialogues satisfied their needs. By the latter half of the 16th century, with the Counter-reformation in full swing, large numbers of Flemish, French and Spanish protestants emigrated to England. Suddenly there was a great need for teachers and texts. Bilingual textbooks and dialogues were generally used, but innovations did appear: one of the immigrants, Jacques Bellot developed his own phonetic system to help immigrants with the vagaries of English spelling in his textbook, *Familiar Dialogues*, 1586, and Claudius Holybrand, his contemporary, added a grammar to his own textbook to explain usage.

Two early teachers whose ideas on and insights into language and its teaching were far ahead of their time were not English teachers. Joseph Webbe, a Latin teacher, was one of the first to develop a method that relied on inductive grammar. Writing in the early 17th century he said, "no man can run speedily to the mark of language that is shackled and ingiv'd with grammar precepts."<sup>1</sup> His method took shape in a textbook that rejected word-for-word translation in favor of phrase-for-phrase translation. Although he took a bilingual approach to the teaching of Latin, he must have used an oral approach similar to modern direct methods as is evident from the following, ". . .we shall get the judgement of the ear, and retain the same for ever: which Grammar cannot help us to; in that it is imperfect and beguileth us."<sup>2</sup> This "judgement of the ear" could only come from actually listening to and speaking the language.

Jan Amos Comenius (1592-1670) was first and foremost a philosopher of pansophy. Circumstances forced him to take a position in a school in northeast Hungary late in life, and when he discovered the low standard of literacy among his students, he designed the first, and for more than a century the only, illustrated textbooks. These Latin textbooks were graded, that is, they were divided into elementary, intermediate and more advanced textbooks. While commonplace today this was nothing short of revolutionary in his time. He acted as a guide to the students, pointing out and discussing objects in their environment as he taught the language. "Only when he was satisfied that the children really understood what it was about did he move on to learning the new language of text."<sup>3</sup> His recognition of language as a means of communication rather than an academic exercise and his concern for his students make him unique in his time. Unfortunately neither his nor Webbe's ideas lasted into the next century.

The spoken language was largely ignored in the 18th and early 19th centuries because of its "unserious" nature. Grammar as taught in the Latin schools of England remained the

only acceptable basis for language instruction. Then, in 1834-1835, in response to an increase in travel on the European continent, a need for a shorter and more effective course gave rise Franz Ahn's and H. G. Ollendorff's practical (in the sense of providing practice) grammar-translation courses. Although these were not oral methods, their simplicity and the gradation of materials must have influenced the writers of subsequent textbooks. Their emphasis on (word-for-word) translation, however, encouraged the kind of mistakes that Webbe had sought to avoid.

The next major contribution to teaching the spoken language comes with Gottlieb Heness and Lambert Sauveur. When they founded language schools in the United States it is doubtful that they knew of Webbe or Comenius. I believe that necessity was once again the mother of invention. Their clientele, a wave of immigrants to the United States this time, needed the spoken language. Sauveur described his method in *An Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages without Grammar or Dictionary*, 1874. He did not rely on grammatical explanations or translation. He kept all communication in the target language, and he based his lessons on two principles: (1) "earnest questions"—where the teacher is not just practicing the language but seriously considering the student's answer, whether he already knows the answer or not, and (2) "coherence"—"to connect scrupulously the questions in such a manner that one may give rise to another."<sup>4</sup> A logical sequence of questions would allow students to deduce the meaning without recourse to translation. A weak point of his method was that the students never had the initiative. They only answered the questions.

Total immersion in the target language is a common feature of Sauveur's method and that of Maximilian Berlitz (1852-1921) who opened his schools ten years later. Once the student could respond and showed in his responses that he understood the teaching point, he was expected to reverse roles and become the questioner. Berlitz does not seem to have accepted Sauveur's concept of "coherence". Practice in the teaching points took precedence, but what was lost in "coherence" was gained by giving the student a productive role in the classroom. The student not only had to understand; he had to use the language itself in questions.

Although the Reform Movement, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, emphasized phonetics and context in reaction to grammar-translation methods, the members didn't believe in the primacy of the spoken word. Their contributions to oral English instruction are therefore relatively minor. Structuralism in post-World War II America rejected their emphasis on context and adopted a behavioral approach which relied on pattern practice, often at the expense of motivation and interest. In the last 20-odd years new methods such as the Natural Approach and the concept of Notional-functionalism have turned the spotlight back onto speaking as communication.

Tracy D. Terrell who called his method 'the Natural Approach' describes his principles as follows: "(1) the classroom should be devoted primarily to activities which foster acquisition (activities which promote learning might be assigned as homework); (2) the instructor should not correct student speech errors directly; and (3) the students should be

allowed to respond in either the target language, their native language, or a mixture of the two.”<sup>5</sup> He defines ‘acquisition’ as the unconscious formulation of grammatical principles and ‘learning’ as the conscious cognitive-based study of grammar.

Let me address these principles in reverse order. Japanese students come from a language with few structural or cultural similarities to English and so are at a greater disadvantage than their counterparts from European cultures with languages of the Indo-European Family. They are unable to assimilate the word order and semantic values of English with ease. A method that allows them to answer questions as Terrell describes in the third principle, unless it’s a simple “yes” or “no”, may well produce the same effect that we see in word-for-word translations.

The second principle is based on the idea that children are not corrected by their parents when they make mistakes, and that even if they are it will not be effective. Correcting mistakes without humor may well produce resentment or defiance, but with an amusing touch the correction will be taken with good grace. But making too close a parallel between the way children learn their mother tongue and the way adults learn a foreign language ignores the reality of the classroom. Children are bathed in language from the time they leave the womb. Foreign language learners cannot hope for this environment unless they are in the foreign country. Therefore, short-cuts must be taken, and one of these is correction. Over-correction can be disheartening, but some is necessary and makes teaching a more efficient process. And what of correcting pronunciation? Terrell does not address this point in the article.

In his first principle, Terrell makes the distinction between acquisition and learning. An acquisition technique is where “the focus is on the message being conveyed rather than the form of the language used to convey the messages.”<sup>6</sup> Is this the perception of the teacher or the perception of the student? I think he means the student. After all, the teacher is trying to give the students a chance to use as many different structures as they can handle in order to increase their ability to communicate. But does the distinction between acquisition and learning need to exist? Stimulating visual materials such as a page of road signs, signs in a library, or a “no pets allowed” sign on a page will provide enough material for a short lesson on the use of “must not” without the students realizing the deception: that it’s a grammar lesson in disguise.

Motivation, though unmentioned by Terrell, seems to be an undercurrent in his thought. If motivation can be elicited by earnest communication, then “notional-functionalism” provides the teacher with the necessary conceptual basis. “Notions relate to how we cut up the world into such things as time, space, location, movement, shape, emotions, attitudes and the like; ‘functions’ would appear to relate to whether at any time we want to make, describe, move, change, etc., any thing as part of the situations in which we find ourselves. . . . The ‘communicative approach’ is very similar if not essentially the same thing, where courses are organized in terms of such realities as giving and exchanging information, asking questions, giving orders, apologizing, confirming something, contradicting someone, and so forth.”<sup>7</sup> This concept, however, assumes a basic knowledge of the

language, at least as far as 'functions' are concerned. How is this basic knowledge to be come by?

A direct method can combine notions and functions in a conversational pattern. When people converse, they (1) make statements, (2) ask questions, (3) answer questions, (4) make requests, and (5) make commands. Tenses can be covered in the first three points. The later two are basically in the future.

There are several advantages to a direct method. First of all there is no need for translation because everything can be taught in the target language: "There is" can be demonstrated by placing objects around the room; the simple present only needs to be contrasted with the present progressive which has already been introduced, e.g., "I'm not having dinner now, but I HAVE dinner at 7 p.m."; "How long? + been" can be verbally represented, e.g., "I came at 2 p.m. It's 2:30 now, so I HAVE BEEN here for 30 minutes."

Of all the methods I have mentioned, a direct method differs least from everyday speech because of its continuous use of questions, statements and answers. Here is an example of the technique as used to teach "enough + adjective", a concept foreign to Japanese speakers. The students have already learned "too + adjective".

T: Are you too young to get a driver's license?

S1: No, I'm not.

T: Good. Then you are OLD ENOUGH to get one.

(to student 2)

T: Are you old enough to go to college?

S2: Yes, I am.

T: Are you strong enough to lift a car?

S3: No, I'm not.

T: What are you strong enough to lift?

S3: I'm strong enough to lift my desk.

T: This room is large enough to hold a party in, isn't it?

S4: Yes, it is.

T: What about your bedroom?

S4: It isn't large enough to hold a party in.

Note how four different question forms were used in the above example. Not only are the students learning a new structure and concept; they are also being exposed to a variety of question forms.

From this exercise in inductive grammar we can create a role play, one of many functional techniques that provide a realistic setting for conversation. Students are told to imagine that they've just seen a dress that they like in a store window, but that they only have \$50 in cash. They go into the store to inquire:

S: How much is the green dress in the window?

T: It's a real bargain. Only \$75! That's a 20% reduction off the regular price.

S: I don't have enough cash.

T: Do you have a credit card? We take Visa, Mastercard and American Express.

S : Yes, I have a Visa card. I'd like to try it on.

T : Certainly. What's your size ?

S : Medium.

T : Medium ? No, what's your size, 10 ?

S : I don't know.

T : Try this one on. (Student tries it on)

How does it fit ?

S : It's too small. Could I try on the next size ?

T : Just a moment. . . .

And the role play continues. The situation is close enough to a real shopping experience that the students can identify with it.

Sauveur and Berlitz realized almost a century ago that the written word could be an obstacle to improving spoken fluency. It is also an obstacle to the teacher when it comes to assessing a student's ability to respond to questions. A direct method, by removing this obstacle, allows the student to speak without reading and gradually to speak without pondering each question. For this reason students must be given a large number of questions using the same structure so that they'll be able to answer almost without hesitation (see example on the previous page). This appears to me to be the real road to fluency.

In the teaching of English as a foreign language truly oral methods have been the exception up until the last 100 years. If anything, the practitioners in the field of language teaching have become more pragmatic, but as I have pointed out many good "modern" ideas have long-lost antecedents. Of the methods I know I view direct method as the most versatile. It can be as interesting and as challenging as the teacher makes the questions. It provides students with a solid base in the language so that their words, like a careless pile of blocks, don't come tumbling down into a meaningless pile. It is motivating simply because the questions are asked about the students themselves rather than about a fictitious character in a textbook. At the same time it is flexible enough to incorporate new techniques almost anywhere in the curriculum.

## NOTES

- 1) J. Webbe, *An Appeale to Truth, in the Controuersie betweene Art, and Use ; about the best, and most expedient Course in Languages. To be read Fasting* (London : Scolar Press 42, 1622) p. 9
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 38
- 3) A.P.R. Howatt, *A History of English Language Teaching* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1984) p. 44
- 4) L. Sauveur, *Introduction to the Teaching of Living Languages without Grammar or Dictionary* (Boston : Schoenhof and Moeller, 1874) p. 23
- 5) T.D. Terrell, "The Natural Approach to Language Teaching : An Update," *Methods that Work*, ed. by John W. Oller, Jr. and Patricia A. Richard-Amato (Rowley : Newbury House, 1983) p. 269
- 6) *Ibid.*, p. 281
- 7) T. McArthur, *A Foundation Course for Language Teachers* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1983) p. 102