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Language Pedagogy: Lessons from the '40s

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The innocent bystander looking in on the language teaching profession today might suppose that with the present state of the art we have perfected our craft by meticulously sifting through the experience of the past, and that after rigorous research, experimentation and testing we have taken only the best from the proven performance of previous models and culled out less successful ideas and practices.

In fact, as we in the profession all know, that is far from the truth. What advances we may have achieved have not all come about in this way. The major changes in language teaching have come about, I would say, more as a consequence of high-level changes in goals and policies that often ignored essential questions of what the learner, the teacher, the materials and the setting contribute to the language learning process in or out of academia. The notion that we have adequately sifted through the language teaching/language learning experience of the past is a myth. A careful reexamination, a resifting of the experience of the past, can be not only a useful exercise, but may turn up nuggets—if not uncover abandoned mines—from which much profit could be taken.

To be more explicit or more blunt, it is my observation that certain key principles that guided pioneers in the past have, without sufficient examination or reflection, been left behind, and language teaching today is therefore less efficient than it might be.

Much has been written about the programs of language training developed in America as part of the war effort in the '40s. It is acknowledged that the programs pioneered back then have had significant impact on language teaching in the schools and colleges of America ever since.

In this paper I will discuss some language teaching ideas practiced in the '40s by Morris Swadesh, an extraordinary linguist whose contributions to anthropological linguistics are known worldwide, but whose contributions to language pedagogy have been largely overlooked. I will suggest that we should take seriously today some things in language pedagogy that are found in Swadesh's work, but virtually unknown in language teaching since his day.

Since I wish to contrast the war-time experience in language training with some of what was done before and after the war, let me give you a setting in my own pre-war experiences with language study. On the bookshelves of the home where I grew up in Santa Barbara there were numerous textbooks of Spanish, French, Italian, German and Latin, textbooks published mainly in the first four decades of our century. My mother was a high school language teacher, a graduate of Berkeley in Spanish and Italian in the early 20s. In my early years I would occasionally take down some of these lan-
guage textbooks and glance through them. I found them fascinating. I was
struck with a German text that began: DER WINTER IST KALT. I went through
several lessons on my own, taking a free ride on the cognates. Then a
Spanish textbook caught my eye with its opening volley: EL BURRO ES UN
ANIMAL. Cognates again, offering the reader a free ride. The message to
me: there is some kind of curious relationship among languages. It
shouldn't be hard to learn a foreign language like German or Spanish.
They're like dialects of English.

At La Cumbre Junior High School I got my first taste of a language course.
At the time there were two kinds of Spanish courses offered at the school,
one entitled Conversational Spanish and the other just Spanish. I was
interested in learning to talk Spanish and thought I should enroll in Con­
versational Spanish, but my mother conveyed to me quite emphatically that
(for reasons she did not explain) such a course was not "legitimate." I
don't remember what I had against the other Spanish course, but a compro­
mise was reached and my mother had me enroll at the tender age of 14 in a
Latin class, and managed to coax me into sticking it out two years,
through ninth and tenth grade. My Latin teacher, Miss Hill, was of the
old school—she had been teaching Latin since around the turn of the cen­
tury—so I was initiated into Latin by way of the venerable tradition of
the grammar-translation method. We learned grammar rules by heart:
"Adjectives agree with the nouns they modify in number, case and gender." And as our daily homework was corrected and weekly tests scored, such
rules came to have meaningful consequences. We memorized verb paradigms
until we could recite them by heart: Am-o, am-as, am-at, am-anus, am-atis, am-ant. Noun paradigms (3 genders, 6 cases, singular and plural numbers,
nominative, genitive, dative, accusative and ablative cases): puell-a, puell-ae, puell-ae, puell-am, puellae, etc. By constant drill and review
we learned to identify and manipulate the eight parts of speech, to iden­
tify the case forms of nouns and adjectives in all declensions, to ring
changes on verbs and to parse sentences. We puzzled out Latin passages,
translated Latin sentences into English, and performed all the exercises
that go with the method. As someone once put it, we learn that one cannot
decline verbs and conjugate nouns with impunity. Miss Hill was, I would
say, a model teacher, a master of the method, a bearer of tradition at its
best.

There was never any expectation of our learning to speak Latin. That
wasn't the aim. Latin was considered mainly as a linguistic system to be
studied, and the study of Latin as an intellectual exercise that, like the
study of mathematics, would increase our brainpower. But when I thought
about what was in it for me, I figured that even if I stuck it out for
several more years, what I might eventually attain would only be the skill
to read (rather than decipher) Latin literature. And since neither the
content nor the style of Latin literature held out any great attraction
for me at that time, I quit before getting past the slow and painful deci­
pherment stage. But what I brought away from my two years' study of Latin
I now see was not without value: notions of what the structural pieces of
language are like and how they fit together, how complexly language is
structured, respect for the difficulty of language learning, plus notions
of what that kind of language study entails, etc.
In eleventh and twelfth grade I took French. My teacher, Miss Houghton, was a young and beautiful recent graduate of Middlebury College—the famous language school that, even before the war, immersed its students in a "total language experience." Miss Houghton spoke French. And she taught French as a spoken language, a full-blown communication system that was very much alive, not just as a linguistic system related in an odd way to English translation. My experience with French was consequently very different from my experience with Latin. Miss Houghton's course was designed to get us using the spoken language, as well as the written language. She communicated with her students at least partly in French, real French that is, not "la plume de ma tante est dans la jardin de mon oncle." True, I did not acquire fluency in French, even after an hour a day for four semesters, but what I learned from Miss Houghton gave me a very different idea of what a language is, what language study should be, and what it's like to confront a living foreign language. I would say that judged against the standards of our day, Miss Houghton's French class of almost 40 years ago would stand scrutiny, and in most respects, would be seen as a model class. I wonder if French students these days learn any more efficiently or achieve a higher degree of proficiency in the language than we did after two years.

The picture one might deduce from deprecating accounts published much later about language teaching in the schools before the war does not match the reality I remember from Miss Houghton's French class. Because of this I have long suspected that some such accounts substitute a false stereotype or caricature of language teaching in the schools of that period, taking only the worst examples. At any rate, little is said these days in praise of language teaching practices of the pre-war period. It is cast ignominiously onto the dumpheap of ill-founded and outmoded practices.

The modern period of language teaching in America, according to this script, began with World War II. Under great pressures of time an intensive language training program was designed to train selected military personnel in various languages. The strangest or most innovative thing about it was that the privilege of directing the program, formulating its philosophy, designing the training model, developing curriculum and directing its pedagogy was given not to experts in the languages concerned, nor even to specialists in language teaching methodology, but to persons from a very different tradition of esoteric scholarship that traced its brief life only to the turn of the century and the anthropological linguistics of Franz Boaz, Edward Sapir and Leonard Bloomfield.

The men and women trained in this far-out discipline who now, to the great surprise and envy of other language professionals, were called on to work out new and practical modes of language training had had the extraordinary experience of learning and scientifically analyzing exotic languages, but they had had little or no experience in teaching any language. Unencumbered as they were by dogma or tradition, but armed with great confidence in their science, they pioneered new approaches that captured the attention and praise of the American public and exerted influence on language teaching in American schools and colleges.
The phenomenal effort began with Leonard Bloomfield, the dean of American linguists, who in 1942 published the very influential manifesto on language learning, Outline Guide for the Study of Languages, and then wrote two model courses (Russian and Dutch), plus a dictionary of spoken Russian. Following him a number of brilliant young men and women, many of them recent graduate students of Sapir's or Bloomfield's, bent their minds to the work of creating the innovative curriculum for intensive language training. Looking back now, the list of names of these wonder-workers reads like a roster of eminent American linguists, though at the time few of them had many publications to recommend them beyond an analytic grammar of an obscure American Indian language or other exotic language. The amazing thing was that, despite the urgency of the situation, many of these young linguistics scholars were assigned to develop courses in languages they had never studied. Charles Hockett, then in his mid-twenties, was put in charge of developing the course in Chinese, though he had never before studied that language. His work had been on Potawatomi, a Central Algonkin language. Mary Haas, barely thirty, but the author of an excellent description of a moribund Indian language of the south, was put on Thai, though she had no knowledge of that language. Norman McQuown, a young Mayanist, was put on Turkish.

Morris H. Swadesh was born of Russian-speaking parents in 1909. He did his graduate work in linguistics under Edward Sapir in the early 30s, and married Mary Haas, the linguist assigned to develop the Thai materials. He had never been a language teacher, but he had analyzed Eskimo, Chitimacha, and a group of languages in the Pacific Northwest. He was later to develop his famous glottochronology and do outstanding work on Yana, a language of California, and Maya, Aztec and Tarasco, languages of Mexico. I met him in his home in Mexico in the mid-60s, not long before his death. He was totally bilingual in English and Spanish. During the war he participated in the planning and design level of the intensive language training curriculum, and collaborated with Bloomfield to some extent in developing the Russian course. But on his own he developed two innovative and extremely interesting short handbooks for learners of Chinese and Russian. Though influenced to some extent by the materials designed for intensive instruction, Swadesh's two books were intended for learners who did not have such opportunities.

Today I'll give particular attention to aspects of these two books, Talking Russian Before You Know It, a 1945 publication of Henry Holt and Company, now out of print, and Chinese in Your Pocket, a 1948 publication of Henry Holt and Company, reissued by Dover Publications in 1964 and still available under the title Conversational Chinese for Beginners. In particular I will focus on two guiding principles that are evident in these books. These principles I will call (1) "Take them Where They're At" or "Go from the Known to the Unknown" and (2) "Get Them Talking Before They Know It."

To understand what I mean by these principles, face with me the question that every author of a language course must face. Suppose we were charged with the responsibility of developing materials to help Americans learn to speak and understand exotic languages like Russian and Chinese, what first principles would we begin with?
Let me propose we start out with the first principle above, if we can agree that it is good in principle to take our intended audience where they are, with what mental and cultural equipment we expect them to have, and proceed by juxtaposing the unknown to the known, and where seen helpful to point out a relationship between them. Showing that MAMA and PAPA in English relates to MAMA and PAPA in Russian and MAMA and PAPA in Chinese is an example. The connection is so direct it is not worth spending time teaching these facts. As language learners, all of us are happy to find such correspondences. They connect in immediately.

Of course if everything in a foreign language could connect in as easily as MAMA and PAPA, the teacher's and the learner's task would be much easier. But for a Russian or a Chinese course, we would immediately have to face teaching the foreign matter too. The question we must ask ourselves is then: how can we use this principle? How do we take learners in easy steps from the known to the unknown? And just how far do we want to push this principle? What are we willing to do to relate the unknown to the known?

It seems to me that, despite much lip-service paid in support of the principle it isn't really being exploited much at all—at least not systematically in any published materials I have seen—in teaching the foreign matter. The principle seems often to be forgotten, neglected, or overruled by other considerations. There is no doubt a question of perceived legitimacy here, the means and kind and amount of "facilitation" (as we can call any attempt in instruction to relate the unknown to the known) being limited by what is regarded as legitimate or as conducing ultimately to effective language learning. The question of what initial practices in language training are helpful in the long run in the language learning process is a critical one—possibly the most critical question of all. As has been said many times, serious language learning is a marathon, it is not a sprint, and what may be good practice for the sprinter may not be good at all for the marathon runner. So what is done in the initial phase of language teaching should provide a good foundation as well as motivation for going the whole distance.

As we look very briefly at Swadesh's work we will see that he set out to exploit the principle—almost with a vengeance—with the aim of facilitating formidable parts of the learning process in the early stages of training. What he was after was efficiency, right from the first. He felt that the challenge of learning should not be in overcoming needless learning barriers either by force of brainpower or by costly time investment; the challenge should come in learning significant amounts of useful material efficiently. Swadesh was not one of the method hawkers who dupe the public with "magic" methods that promise "Fluent Russian in Ten Easy Lessons," but he was not afraid to try to cut corners, to simplify, to reduce the learning load even by artificial means.

Well before Swadesh's time there was a widely advocated language teaching approach called the Cognate Method which capitalized on the ease of connecting cognate words, like mama and papa. Of course Swadesh capitalized on cognates where possible. That was no innovation, and to do so fit the principle. He presents them though in small quantities and only to directly serve functions of communication.

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But let me give you a clearer picture of some things he did in those books that were more remarkable. In both books he presents the sound system in a novel way, mediating the sounds of Russian and Chinese through the sound system of English. In effect he sets out first to help the learner pronounce English in a Russian or Chinese accent—and with Russian he teaches the foreign alphabet in the process. That approach is, I believe, both novel and of real interest to language teaching theory. At present, Dr. Carl Jacob with his delightful Mariachi Method advocates teaching Spanish pronunciation to American learners through singing in which they acquire Spanish pronunciation habits first by learning to speak English with a thick Spanish accent. This is really the same kind of thing Swadesh did in the '40s, and akin to what James L. Barker promoted as an internationally respected phonetician and professor of Modern Languages many years ago. The fact that this approach to teaching pronunciation was not picked up after the war is no testimony that it isn't a sound and very efficient practice. I can see no good reason to rule it out. Hopefully we will see a Master's thesis this year reporting research on the effects of this radical approach to acquiring a Spanish pronunciation.

Let me show you now some of what Swadesh has in his book Chinese in your Pocket and point out wherein his innovations seem most interesting.

From Unit One, First Session. After presenting the spelling system earlier in the session, he presents some practice reading English written in the Chinese romanization. With familiar English texts, he drives home a profound lesson that can get learners over a major barrier: grasping how the sound system of Chinese is represented by phonemes written in Roman letters. I doubt that a more effective way could be found.

(a) Dau, rai, mi, fa, sau, la, ti, dau.
(b) Wan, tu, tri, far, faiv, sik, savan, sit, nain, tan.
(c) Sim-pal Sai-man mat a pai-man,
   Gau-ying tu da far.
   Sad Sim-pal Sai-man tu da pai-man,
   Lat mi taist yur war.
   Sad da pai-man tu sim-pal Sai-man,
   Lat mi si yur pa-ni.
   Sad Sim-pal Sai-man tu de pai-man,
   In-did Ai hav nat a-ni.

From Talking Russian Before You Know It we can see that he carries the principle even farther. Here is one of several exercises in reading English written in Russian letters, to be pronounced with a Russian accent.
Much more in Swadesh's books could be shown to derive from the application of the first principle. In the interest of time I'll leave that and go on to a brief exemplification of the second principle, which is "Get them talking before they know it."

With a modern Comprehension Approach such as that of Postovsky, of Terrell, of Asher, of Winitz, of Nord, of Gary, and others, all of them of considerable interest in the light of current SLA theory, it is supposed that speaking skills need not be taught directly, that they will emerge naturally as the learner exposes himself to situations that invite verbal participation, and as he learns how, verbally and otherwise, to get meaning across and to get and maintain large amounts of comprehensible input in the target language. What he must learn is skills of keeping conversation going even when he does not understand everything, skills of inferencing, guessing, acting interested, conveying to his interlocutors the impression of understanding and participating successfully enough so that they will continue interacting verbally with him. The learner's control of the details of linguistic form in such communicative interaction counts for relatively little. It is not form but meaning that is the focus of communication at this level, and meaning can be conveyed successfully without native-like correctness of form. By using in conversational situations the pieces of language he does control—no matter how far they may be from native speech—the learner will be able to get meaningful feedback in a natural way and make observations and comparisons that can, it is supposed, be of optimal value in improving his communicative competence.

As we are all much aware, most academic language courses stress correctness of form right from the first rather than showing how to communicate
right off at the coping level. The criterion from Day One is native-like
speech, hewing to the native model with precision, exactness. That and
only that will yield the desired reward: the high grade. Rewards and pun­
ishments are contingent on one's approximation to the model.

Notice the difference in Swadesh's very unacademic approach. In its very
title Talking Russian: before You Know It, which you will note is cleverly
ambiguous, he gives away what he is after. It says: Don't wait until you
know Russian before you try to talk it; talk it even before you know it!
Dive in and don't worry about the form. Just communicate, using whatever
will make a Russian understand. Communication will bring its own rewards.
You will not be punished for mistakes, as long as you can make communi­
cation, that is, get meaning across and receive native speech without utter
frustration.

Both his Chinese and his Russian books are built around enabling the lear­
ner to engage in a meaningful level of communication from the beginning.
The learner is not put under any delusion that his efforts will approxi­
mate native language use, but he is led to believe he can generate a lot
of meaning with just a little language, that he can find ways to gain max­
imum purchase with minimum means, engaging in rudimentary communica­
tion with natives right from the first. Swadesh tells the learner,

"There is no harm...in speaking less than perfectly at the outset.
All learning is by trial and error; that is, you make a stab at the
thing, see how you're doing, and then improve on it."

In the Chinese book, Unit One, Second Session, we find seventeen Chinese
sentences which, Swadesh proposes, "will get you just about anything you
want, provided you use them cleverly and throw in a few gestures."

The seventeen short sentences contain 31 words and exemplify a dozen sen­
tence patterns. Here are the sentences.

1  Okay? (also Hi!) 2  Fine, good.  3  Not good.  4  Go there.  5  Come
here.  6  Have a look.  7  What's this?  8  What're you doing?  9  Don't
do that. 10  Do this. 11  I want this one.  12  Give me that one. 13
How much money? 14  Where's X?  15  You take me. 16  Thanks. 17  So
long.

At this point, with deft strokes the author demonstrates how with these
core expressions, their versatile vocabulary and structure, one can gener­
ate a very large number of useful meanings. But beyond that, he helps the
learner see how to use these expressions and their parts in managing a
variety of situations that call for communication. He advises:

Use your head to figure out ways of getting your meaning across with
what few words you know. For example, you go to a Chinese mechanic
to get your brakes fixed. You say (using phrases you have learned)
'Hi, come here, have a look.' When he comes over, work your brake
and say, 'Not O.K..'"
If you follow this system you will not only get what you want but you will also be using the same words over and over till they stick with you. In the end you learn the language a lot faster than the man who is always thumbing thru his dictionary to find the exact translation of his thoughts.

Swadesh did not have the advantage of all the research on language acquisition, instructional science, etc. that has been done in the years since the war. Encouraging meaningful production from the beginning would be questioned by Communication Approach hard-liners today. But Swadesh was no more inhibited in this than his contemporaries, or than most of our contemporaries. What Swadesh had was a genius for organizing language instruction for the common learner and an uncommon and daring sense of how to apply certain principles of learning to the task of language teaching. I suggest that we re-examine our own efforts in materials development to see if we could not use Swadesh's principles to the learner's advantage.

I would wager that as we more thoroughly re-examine his work and that of other brilliant, principled, but forgotten "mavericks"—the Pliny Goddards of the past—we will find that we still can learn useful lessons from them.