THE TEACHING OF LANGUAGES

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We are all familiar with the etymological meaning of the English word 'education', and with the emphasis that is placed upon that interpretation of the word in modern educational theory. The word 'education' means originally 'to draw out', and the idea is apparently, that true education consists in drawing something out of the pupil's mind, rather than in driving something in. But I am going to suggest that there is one important branch of the teacher's work of which that principle does not hold good, but to which it has been mistakenly applied. The most famous exponent of this theory of education was Plato, and I would like to make use of a famous passage of Plato in order to illustrate the difference between the learning of languages and the learning of other subjects. It is a passage from his *Meno*, in which Socrates is engaged in propounding his favourite theory that all knowledge necessary for life is implanted in our minds at birth, and that we only need to have our attention drawn to it to become aware of our own knowledge and to be able to make use of it. In order to clinch his argument, Socrates appeals to a slave, a completely illiterate person, and asks him whether he is aware that in a given square, the square on the diagonal is double the square on the side. Most of us had our attention drawn at an early stage to this valuable piece of innate knowledge. The Athenian slave had not been so fortunate, and so Socrates began to coax him and to question him about the properties of squares. And as soon as the slave realised what Socrates was talking about, as soon as he realised what was meant by a square, and what was meant by a diagonal, then he had only to be asked the right questions in order to demonstrate, by his own reasoning powers, this important special case of the theorem of Pythagoras, and enable Socrates to conclude with a triumphant Q. E. D. Now that was a most impressive demonstration of the Platonic theory of knowledge, and it certainly is an awe-inspiring thought, that the illiterate slave in the streets of Athens, the child in the lowest class of the primary school, nay, the babe at the baptismal front, knows beyond all possibility of doubt, that in a given square, the square on the diagonal is double the square on the side; and that he only needs the educational stimulation, properly so called, of Socrates or of his geometry teacher later in life, to become aware of
his own dumbfounding wisdom. But notice one thing; there was one part of geometrical knowledge which Socrates did not succeed in drawing out of the mind of the slave: the nomenclature of geometry, the language of geometry; and oxen and wain ropes would not have drawn that from him.

The first point therefore which I wish to emphasise is that the knowledge of languages is in a totally different category from every other knowledge to which we aspire. The first fact of which we must take account, in the choice of our teaching methods, is that the knowledge of language is no part of that universal Platonic knowledge, necessary to life, implanted in our minds at birth, and capable of being brought to consciousness by the normal rationalising processes of the mind. It belongs to an order of knowledge, for ignorance of which, let us hope, we shall not be rebuked, as St. Thomas à Kempis says, at the Day of Judgement. In fact, and this to my mind takes us to the root of the matter, it is not really knowledge at all, since words are in themselves meaningless. By words we do not actually convey thoughts, but merely make noises in the hope that other persons may be able to interpret the hints. And unless both speaker and hearer are familiar with the same noises, and associate them with the same things, with which they have no sort of necessary or logical connexion, those noises will remain meaningless noises. Understanding is a laborious process of elimination and guesswork and choice. By our reasoning powers alone we cannot arrive at the understanding of any language, and it remains for us to see how very little our reasoning powers can help us, and to what extent they can be an actual hindrance to us, in the acquiring of a new language. The use of language then, is not a department of knowledge at all, but a bodily habit; and we have to start from the somewhat paradoxical position, that though knowledge can be drawn out, habits have to soak in.

Now bearing this important phenomenon in mind, the deduction we can make from it is that if we divide the faculties of the mind into on the one hand the spontaneous and instinctive faculties which are more pronounced in children, and on the other hand the self-conscious and rational faculties which become dominant in the adult, the former are very much more valuable to us in the learning of languages. In learning our mother-tongue we use our spontaneous and passive capacities in a process of unconscious assimilation, and later in life, if we are to succeed in learning a foreign tongue, it will be necessary to revive those spontaneous and passive capacities. To that the main effort of the language teacher must be directed. Since the pupils are no longer infants, the spontaneous faculties alone will not be sufficient, nor will it be possible entirely to eliminate the conscious element. But for all that I venture to
say that every well-thought-out course of language teaching will be based upon the revival of the spontaneous and instinctive capacities of the mind. Nor is the opposition between these two groups of faculties a merely logical and theoretical opposition. It is a fact of psychology that the more interested you are in discovering the why of things, the less capable you will become of observing the what. And in language the what is very much more important than the why. In fact there is no why. Very much of the effort of the language teacher must be directed towards inducing the student, especially if he is a mature student, and especially if the language be a foreign language, to be satisfied to observe the what and to refrain from being inquisitive about the why. But if we are to see what exactly this means in the classroom, we must ask ourselves what exactly are the habits which lead to the command over language, and what exactly are the stages by which those habits are acquired.

I have said that habits, and in particular the habit of using language, have to soak in; and it may be thought that I am assigning to the mind of the student an unduly passive function. But when I tabulate, as I propose to do, the five important language-learning habits, I am sure it will be recognised to what a very great extent the mind of the student is passive while forming and perfecting these habits. The first, which as I shall suggest in a moment tends to be overlooked on account of its very obviousness, is the habit of auditory observation, a process during which the mind is entirely passive. The second is the habit of oral imitation, which certainly involves activity of the mind, but which in my opinion had better be as instinctive and spontaneous as possible. The third is the habit of catenising, that largely unconscious process by which we acquire what the Germans call Sprachgefühl, the feeling for the language, by which our disconnected observations of linguistic facts fall into line with one another in our minds and become a second nature to us. It is a process which takes place, not for the most part in the classroom, but when we are lying in bed in the morning, or when we are shaving or when we are taking a stroll. Fourth is the habit of semanticising, of gradually learning the meanings of words by watching them working in different contexts, without seeking at all to identify words with other words and above all without any effort at translation. Fifth is the habit of free composition, of making up sentences by intuitively perceived analogy. By this process we obtain our derivative speech-material as distinct from our directly-observed speech-material. Looking back again over these five processes of language-learning, auditory observation, oral imitation, catenising, semanticising and composition by analogy, we can see that the greater part of the mental activity
involved in these five language-learning habits is spontaneous, intermittent and to a great extent unconscious. The problem of the language teacher is to foster these fundamental habits without inducing sophistication. The more sophisticated we are, the more difficult it is for us to carry a tumbler of water without spilling it, or to balance a pencil on the end of our nose, or to learn a living foreign language. And I venture to suggest that there is more in common between learning a living foreign language, and balancing a pencil on the end of one's nose, than is commonly thought. I do not think many people will quarrel with me when I say that in most of the recognised systems of language study the value of passive work has not been sufficiently admitted. I have already pointed out that in teaching a foreign language to mature and necessarily somewhat sophisticated students, it is not possible wholly to eliminate the conscious element, or even to maintain the right proportion, which again will differ with the individual, between passive and active work. But the great thing is to observe a proper gradation of the work, remembering that the ears must come before the eyes, reception before reproduction, the immediate memory before the prolonged memory, chorus work, because chorus work calls for less initiative, before individual work.

Shall we now try to get down to brass tacks, and see what are the actual classroom methods calculated to bring into play the spontaneous and instinctive faculties essential for the assimilation of a language, and to promote the fundamental language-learning habits that we recognise as desirable? For some reason unknown to me, the study of the methods of teaching English as a foreign language seems to flourish chiefly in Tokio, where there is an institute for research in English teaching, to whose publications and other activities I should like to call attention. And in Tokio my old school-friend Professor A. S. Hornby read aloud in English to a class of Japanese pupils for three months, without explaining anything to them, without answering any questions for them, and above all without allowing them to say anything. I admit that I should probably not recommend this policy in every case; in fact, be it whispered, I consider it rather an extreme course. All the same it was considered to have justified itself by results, and when at last those pupils were allowed to do active work in English, everyone apparently was amazed at the rapidity of their progress. In view of the analysis I have given of the five language-learning processes, auditory observation, oral imitation, catenising, semanticising and composition by analogy, it will easily be recognised that much progress can be made under such a system, that cannot easily be set down in black and white, and that in the course of learning a new language, it is not possible at every moment to call a halt, as the teacher periodically wants to do,
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in order to recapitulate and review progress. After all, the teacher's art is the art of verbal exposition, of giving to airy nothing a local habitation and a name; and the teacher is constitutionally prone to think with Wittgenstein that whatever can be said at all can be said clearly, and that concerning what cannot be said, it only remains to be silent. In estimating the pupil's progress in the command of a language, it is not always possible to be so clear-cut. Moreover, by such a method as Hornby's, many things can be learnt which are definable, for instance intonation. Children understand intonation before they understand words, and animals understand intonation rather than words. But without going to such lengths it is a most valuable practice for the teacher to talk to his pupils in the language in such a way that, with the aid of gesture etc., they will understand about fifty per cent. of what he is saying.

Again, with regard to the reading of the students, it is important to remember that there are two kinds of reading, intensive reading, in which everything is explained, analysed and annotated, and which promotes the conscious language-learning habits; and extensive reading in which an interesting and easy book is read for pleasure, and which promotes the spontaneous and instinctive capacities. Both are useful, especially the latter, but the great thing is to keep them distinct and do each thoroughly. The teacher should never try to combine the two methods, but should always be absolutely clear in his own mind which kind of reading he is doing, for each requires a different frame of mind, and calls different faculties into play. Composition, both oral and written, in the language, is, as I have suggested, a thing to be held over until a comparatively late stage in the student's development, and when it is at last given it should be of such a kind as to assist the process which I have called unconscious assimilation. The student should be encouraged to hold dialogues with himself in the language in his disengaged moments, and also to write in the language anything that comes into his mind and that he finds he can express. Dr. Johnson once made an observation about composition which is entirely consistent with the point of view I have tried to bring out, and which I should like to quote here. Dr. Johnson may not have been a great authority on the learning of foreign languages, but most language teachers in India are concerned, not with "the wheedling, snivelling jargon of the cringing French," but with composition in the English tongue; and upon that subject Dr. Johnson was a very great authority indeed. And he said, looking back upon his own experience as a practitioner of English: "Let the youthful writer seek fluency first and accuracy second. He that has attained to fluency will in time acquire accuracy, but he that labours after accuracy will not easily acquire fluency." And that
is even more true of a foreign language. Composition should be written when the censor within the mind is dozing, and corrected when the censor is on the qui vive. Once again, it is a question of two totally different frames of mind which must be kept distinct and apart.

I may have rather given the impression that in the scientific teaching of languages there is no place for formal grammar. That is not quite true. There is no doubt what grammar is historically; it is a survival of the scholastic logic of the Middle Ages. And when I say that I am not merely making a wisecrack, but offering a serious suggestion. If the history of language teaching be traced from the medieval trivium of logic, rhetoric and dialectic down to the direct method of the twentieth century, it will be seen that there has been a progressive liberation of the conception of language from the procrustean bed of Aristotelian grammar. Furthermore, grammar is undoubtedly a concession to the adult demand for rationalisation in teaching, which, as we have seen, is not a thing that should be gratified altogether in the teaching of languages. But grammar as a tentative codification of usage, is of immense value to students in a foreign country who have not unlimited opportunities of observing usage. The point to remember is that grammar must never be allowed to set itself up in opposition to usage. Any principle of grammar which finds fault with such expressions as “it’s me”, and so many other “sturdy indefensibles”, as Warde Fowler patronisingly calls them, stultifies itself. In language the accepted usage of cultivated people is in need of no defence; it cannot be wrong. And the golden rule for language teaching is that if grammar is taught, it should be based on the student’s own correct usage.

Now I want to say a word or two about speech, because in this matter things have come to such a pass that anyone who suggests that the sounds produced by the human vocal organs are an important part of language is looked upon as an amiable eccentric. In my opinion there is a good deal to be said for the point of view that words are primarily and essentially sounds, rather than marks upon a piece of paper. Moreover this has certainly been the traditional view. Everybody knows that there are extant four or five examples of the signature of Shakespeare, and if I am not mistaken he spells his name differently in each case. Sir Walter Raleigh, his contemporary, is known to have spelt his own name in more than thirty different ways, and the explanation is that Sir Walter Raleigh regarded his name, not as a series of marks on paper, but as a series of sounds produced by the human vocal organs. The English alphabet was to him, as to all his contemporaries, a somewhat crude system of phonetic symbols, by whose aid the sounds composing his name had to be represented as nearly as
possible. I do not suppose that he pronounced his name in thirty different ways. The idea that the orthographic symbols had an independent value of their own, apart from the sounds that they were supposed to represent, was foreign to the sixteenth century, and I think there is no doubt whatever that the Latin alphabet would in time have developed into an accurate system of phonetic symbols on the lines of the International Phonetic Alphabet of today. But with the growth of literacy and the progressive standardisation of the written language, the sign came to be regarded as of equal authority with the sound in the definition of an English word. So much so that the tendency for the past three hundred years has been for the sound to be altered in order to make it conform to the spelling. That is a tendency that can easily be observed by studying the rhymes in English poetry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It is because this process never went far enough that English spelling gives so much trouble today. Now the tendency is all the other way, for the popularity of the wireless has led to the rehabilitation of the spoken word, and the spelling reforms initiated by Robert Bridges and others have all been in the direction of making the symbol correspond to the sound, the sound and not the symbol being regarded as the datum. I am sure no one will misunderstand me if I say that the spelling of Kannada is phonetic and sensible today because the literacy movement has not yet gone very far in the State, and Kannada lexicography still awaits its Dr. Johnson.

But the point I am anxious to bring home to now, is that, whatever may be said as to the relative importance of speech and writing, speech is par excellence the department of language in which we are least habituated to the accurate observation of usage. And the failure to observe usage accurately in this sphere almost invariably leads to some form of affectation. It is precisely the person without phonetic training who imagines that and is pronounced ænd, and innumerable kindred superstitions are thus kept alive. How is it pronounced, after all? Bread and butter. Βιεδμβατα. Is it possible that and is pronounced m? As a matter of fact, in this particular context, the sound m corresponds not only to the, and of ‘and’, but partly also does duty for the d of ‘bread’, which combines with it to form an indirect plosive. And I do not think that any Englishman would pick this out in connected speech as a sloppy pronunciation; on the contrary any other pronunciation would sound self-conscious, if not pedantic. Enough has been said, I think, to show the enormous weight of misconception about the pronunciation of English that remains to be cleared away by the accurate observation of phonetic usage. In teaching foreign languages to English students
I have come up against the most heartbreaking difficulties because English people themselves often have the wildest ideas about the way in which they pronounce English words, ideas totally at variance with their own practice. For instance, in teaching German the sound of \textit{ch}, and in teaching Welsh the sound of \textit{ll}, give endless difficulty to English students, both children and adults. In fact, Welsh is in England a proverbially unpronounceable language largely because of the frequency with which that very sound occurs. Yet both these sounds are perfectly common in English; you get them in the words ‘hue’ (\textit{\textsc{cu}}) and ‘\textit{little}’ (\textit{\textsc{ltl}}). But people who pronounce these sounds perfectly in English hundreds of times a day, regard them as impossible linguistic contortions when they meet them in a foreign language. And even the standard text-books of German and Welsh, written by Englishmen for English students, treat them as non-English sounds, presenting special difficulty.

It cannot be too strongly emphasised, that in all departments of language teaching, reading, composition, translation and speech, the work of the teacher must be to encourage the accurate observation of usage, by fostering the revival of the spontaneous capacities of observation and imitation, freed as far as may be, having regard to the comparative maturity of the students, from the irrelevancies and red-herrings of rationalisation. And I should like to point out that I have been dealing with the inherent difficulties of language-study and not with those created by educational institutions. The examination system, for example, is in the nature of things:

\begin{quote}
The troubles of our proud and angry dust, 
Are from eternity and shall not fail.
\end{quote}

That is all that can be said about the examination system. I have one further remark to make in conclusion. It is with very great humility that I offer these suggestions upon the teaching of languages to the trained and experienced teachers of the State. Mr. Bernard Shaw once made a very cruel joke at the expense of the teaching profession. He said: “He who can, does; he who can’t teaches.” And if we carry that argument a step further, and ask what is left for him who can’t even teach, I suggest that one answer might be: he publishes articles upon educational theory.