BEYOND "BASIC"
PART II[1]

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In Part I of this article, I suggested that a learner's perception of and attitude towards the English language are likely to change considerably as learning progresses, and that the learning strategies employed are likely to change also. At first, only simplified bits and pieces of the language are perceived by the learner, who may manage to make apparent sense out of them but cannot be fully aware either of how they can be used or how they cannot. For example, the learner is unlikely to suspect that the Present Progressive can be used for future time ("We're having a party next Saturday."); that "It is a Chevrolet" may correspond to "Sí es un Chevrolet"; or that "box" may correspond to "palco" but not to "caja de cobro". In the early stages of learning, in formal study conditions, the learner is likely to be cautious and happier when he can work almost exclusively with the rules or models given by the teacher.

I also suggested that structural-situational approach to basic course teaching can create favourable conditions for learners to reach some limited communicative performance objectives. So far, I have been concerned with learning, but in talking of a structural-situational approach, I am now concerned with teaching. In formal study conditions, teachers traditionally attempt to impose learning strategies on the students. I have said that beginning students are likely to have little or no awarness of how the items of English they first meet fit into the wider panorama of grammatical structure and usage, and that they are likely to be cautious - and happier following the teacher's

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rules and models closely,

Beginners (adolescents and adults at least) also tend to approach the learning of English as they would approach the study of geography or any other school subject. A structural-situational teacher may, therefore, consider it his first task to train the students to learn English "his way" -by guessing meanings from situational contexts (rather than expecting Spanish translations and vocabulary lists to memorize); by constructing sentences after models (rather than expecting grammatical explanations and rules in Spanish); by listening to and producing English sentences most of the time (rather than talking about English in Spanish). I believe such a teacher is largely justified in his efforts to persuade students to learn English his way, with a greater deal of time devoted to performing in the language and very little to discussing the language. However, it should not be forgotten that some flexibility is always advisable and a little experimentation commendable

After two or three hundred hours in classes, the learner should be developing a broader perspective of the English language. He should be aware of much of the complex patterning, of regularities and irregularities ("rules" and "exceptions"), of the polysemy of many words and sentences, of some alternative ways of conveying the same message. He should be able to perform some simple communicative tasks quite well: write short letters, ask the way in the street, understand a simple airport announcement, and so on. Indeed, if these statements are not in any way true of learner, he should not pass to an intermediate course. The fault may not lie with the learner, of course, but with the syllabus designer or the teacher.

Along with this broader perspective of English and this communicative ability, the learner is likely to feel rather impatient at learning new meanings and grammatical features in an elaborate fashion when he can see a more direct way himself: for example, by definition or explanation in English. Also, one cannot be sure what is completely new for students at the inter-mediate level. Different learners will almost certainly have had different exposure to English so that the teacher cannot

assume that all items in the syllabus are "new" for every student.
The student who has previously encountered the item may prefer
to tell the class about it himself rather than be told over again
by the teacher. Intermediate learners, even if they are conscious
of their short-comings and problems, are likely to want to listen
to the teacher and repeat after him less, and risk talking and
writing more themselves.

A sensitive and realistic teacher should respond to these
characteristics and aspirations of intermediate learners, so that
how they learn is determined rather less by the teacher and more
by the learners themselves. The intermediate course teacher
should certainly attempt to impose learning strategies on the
students much less than the basic course teacher. It is also
worth bearing in mind that the basic course teacher's efforts
may not in fact determine what learning strategies the students
employ. Rather, he should offer a variety of ways for students
to overcome their errors and weaknesses and to expand the range
and flexibility of their English. On the other hand, the teacher
should still create classes which appear to the learners to be
well-planned and purposeful.

Observation of actual teaching can be much more illuminating
than speculative discussion. What follows is intended to be
something between a plan and a description of a sixty-minute
intermediate class. It is fiction, but based closely on what
has happened in real classes I have given or observed.

CLASS 1
The teacher enters and makes the comment: "Good gracious!
Not many people here this morning! What do you think has
happened?" He gets a few suggested explanations and the comment
from one student: "It always is the same. Everybody is going
to be here in five minutes." The teacher asks the students to
do Exercise 14 in the textbook (a mixed conditional fill-in
exercise). As the other students come in, he gets them working
at the same exercise. Before most of them have finished, all
15 students have arrived. The students then give the answers
orally. To one of the sentences (Jack won't go to the party
unless Mary------), students offer the completions: '...unless
Mary goes" and "unless Mary goes to it too". The teacher says:
"Good!" or simply "..unless Mary d..", and pauses with the initial
"d" formed. A student says: "does". The teacher asks the student

to repeat the complete sentence. Then he says: "You can also say : Jack won't go to the party if......". A student completes: "Mary doesn't". The teacher exploits several sentences from the exercise in a similar way. The teacher also asks questions like: "Do you never go to parties unless your girlfriend does?" and is lucky enough to get the reply from one student: "I always go to parties unless my girlfriend wants to go too." The other students laugh.

The teacher also asks for the opposite of "polite" which occurs in the exercise; a student offers "unpolite" which the teacher rejects. A second students offers "rude". The teacher says: "Good! Does "rude" mean "rudo"?" One student thinks it does but the rest say it doesn't. The teacher confirms that it doesn't and asks: "How would you say "rudo" in English?" The students decide: "rough". One or two sentences using the word are elicited.

This exercise takes about 15 minutes. Some students take notes about different points that come up. The teacher writes two or three models on the blackboard like this:

(If) he had studied, he would have passed the exam.

This is an "old" pattern but the class is having some trouble with it. Notice the circling and underlining to emphasise the grammatical features. A short oral drill follows this exposition.

Then the teacher quickly draws a picture on the blackboard:

Students are asked to suggest what might have happened. "Might have" plus the past participle was practised intensively a month before. Then the teacher tells a story. "This man, Fred, quarrelled with his wife. You see, she spent all the house-keeping money on clothes. So Fred quarrelled with her and went down to the pub. He drank too much. On his way home he started throwing stones at the street lights. A policeman stopped him and he punched the policeman on the nose. The policeman arrested him and now he's in prison." The teacher checks that the students have understood the story, eliciting explanations of "pub" and

"house-keeping money", He asks a student to retell the story.
He continues: "Fred wishes he wasn't in prison. Would you
like to be in prison? Of course not. He wishes he hadn't
quarrelled with his wife. What else does he wish he hadn't
done?" The students produce sentences like: "He wishes he
hadn't gone to the pub." "He wishes he'd stayed at home."
The teacher has to get some students to correct "has" to "had".
From time to time, students are asked to write sentences on the
blackboard as oral practice continues. Then the teacher suddenly
asks an older student: "I didn't study very hard at school.
Did you?" The student replies: "No, I didn't". The teacher
waits, smiling at the student. After a moment's thought, the
student says: "I wish I had studied hard...harder." The teacher
says: "Me too." More personal examples follow from other stu-
dents. The teacher now writes on the blackboard:

Fred (wishes) he had stayed at home.

(If) he had stayed at home he wouldn't be
in prison now.

The teacher explains: "Both sentences refer to the past, to
something that didn't happen in the past. Fred didn't stay at
home; he went out to the pub. He didn't stay at home, but he
wishes he had stayed at home. He didn't stay at home, but if
he had stayed at home, he wouldn't be in prison now." The
period of teaching "wish plus the past perfect" (the teacher
having assumed that the item would be "new" for most students)
takes about 15 minutes.

The teacher then hands out a supplementary reading comprehension
book and asks the students in pairs to answer the multiple
choice questions on a particular passage. He gives them ten
minutes to do this and walks around encouraging the students to
discuss the questions in English, not Spanish. The students then
offer their solutions and where there is some controversy, the
teacher asks the students to locate the relevant information in
the passage. For one question, the relevant information is
contained in the phrase "was willing to help". Asked for a
translation, most students offer "deseaba" but one or two give
"estaba dispuesto". The teacher asks a student: "If a rich
relative invited you to spend a holiday in Europe, would you say
you were willing to go or you would like to go?" The student
hesitates and answers: "I would like to go." The teacher asks

another student: "And if someone asks you to help him to paint his house?" The student replies: "I say I am willing to help." The teacher says: "Yes. You would say you were willing to help. Does that mean you wanted to help?" A good student replies: "No, not necessarily."

Then the teacher reads through the passage aloud, breaking off to ask for an alternative way of expressing a particular idea, checking the meaning of words by asking for opposites, definitions or translations. The teacher also asks personal questions where appropriate. The activities based on the reading passage take about 20 minutes.

The teacher now says: "Suppose Juan had won first prize in a poetry competition. What would you say to him? Maria?" María looks blank. "Anyone else?" A student offers: "I'd really like to congratulate you on winning the poetry prize, Juan." The teacher says: "That's right. We looked at ways of congratulating people last week. Now suppose you've got some bad news for someone. Pepe has just failed an English exam and you've got to tell him. What would you say to him?" Students suggest: "You failed the English exam, Pepe. I'm sorry." "I'm afraid you've failed the English exam, Pepe." The teacher suggests: "Why not prepare him for the bad news and then tell him? For example: I'm afraid I've got some rather bad news for you. You didn't...." The teacher then drills this formula, substituting failure to get promotion, a lost book and so on. Alternative formulae are then discussed: "I'm sorry to have to tell you this, but...." The class is now coming to an end. The teacher asks the students to be ready to discuss the place of women in society in the next class. He points out that men still dominate in public life and asks the students to think (1) of reasons why this is so and (2) how this situation is changing (or not).

CLASS 2

In the following class, the teacher handles "I wish I lived..." and "I wish you wouldn't...", explaining that in the first the wish is impossible (or the speaker feels it is), and in the second the speaker feels that the person addressed may respond favourably. "I wish you wouldn't speak so loudly" is very similar to "Would you mind not speaking so loudly?" The grammatical and semantic similarity of "I wished I lived..." and "If I lived ...." is discussed. A fill-in exercise practising "wish" and conditionals is set. The topic of women in society is then discussed, first in groups of four or five and then in the whole class. A taped dialogue is then played to the students and their comprehension is checked in different ways, including the students writing occasional sentences on the blackboard. This

often helps to reveal and clear up misconceptions, either of meaning or grammar. Finally, ways of giving bad news in a formal letter ("We are sorry to have to inform you that..." etc.) are discussed, practised, and compared with informal, spoken formulae. At the end of the class the students are reminded to hand in their brief book reports in the following class. This task was set three or four weeks previously.

The reader may disagree with many aspects of the intermediate teaching described above. In my opinion, however, it has a number of virtues. It exposes the students to a great deal of varied English without going beyond their capacity. They listen to the teacher, to recorded materials, to each other; they read from the blackboard, from the textbook, from reading comprehension books, from simplified readers. The teacher frquently comments on the language and the students are free to ask questions about the language itself and how it is used. The students are also given ample opportunity to use English com-municatively rather than just practise structures and usage for their own sake. The students use English to talk about the language as well as to discuss topics of common interest and books they have read. In doing so, students experiment in finding words for the ideas rather than ideas for their words. They take risks and make mistakes, but with the teacher and other students monitoring their English and helping when necessary.

During free production, students will make some errors which are merely slips of the tongue, others which are developmental errors that will be corrected in time, and yet others which are fossilised errors which have gained a permanent place in the students' English. Errors of the first kind should normally be ignored (except in written work); errors of the second kind may sometimes be ignored, but may be self-corrected by the student concerned or by the teacher; errors of the third kind are often best handled by focussing the students' attention on the problem and explaining very clearly what he is doing wrong. It is not always clear, of course, which errors are of which kind. Slips are usually not recurrent; developmental errors are usually in items recently acquired, or in attempts to say something for which the most appropriate form of expression has not yet been encountered; fossilised errors are highly recurrent and often in items taught a long time before.

Apart from giving wide exposure, ample opportunity for communication and the chance to experiment and correct one's own errors, I would argue for further merits in the style of intermediate teaching described above. In the areas of grammar,

lexis and usage, the students should be acquiring a clearer preception of the systems of the language. At the same time, grammatical and lexical skills and knowledge are being extended. Key examples, drills, translation, explanations and so on, are used in extension and remedial work, giving students the opportunity to employ a variety of learning strategies. Explicit attention is also given to ways of expressing different communicative functions, and to different styles of expression.

Above all, I believe that an intermediate teacher should not approach his task from one angle only: by continuing, for example, with the same style of teaching used at the basic level; by "intellectualising" the teaching by using only grammar-translation and academic exercises; by totally abandoning teaching strategies and just encouraging students to talk and talk; or by teaching only "communicative functions". The intermediate teacher should be the master of a broad repertoire of techniques and should use a wide variety of materials and activities in the classroom.

If there are no "methods" for intermediate teaching, there are certainly none for advanced teaching. This is probably as it should be but it is nonetheless disconcerting for teachers.

Continuous exposure to a wide variety of English is essential for students to progress from the intermediate level towards an educated native speaker's command of the language. Extensive reading should form an important part of an advanced course. Oral and written discussion of topics for their own sake rather than for the sake of practising English should also be a key element. Students should be faced with the problem of finding appropriate language to express specific kinds of ideas in different types of communicative situations. Some students, however, do not readily get down to reading and writing or do not participate well in discussions.

The ideal focus of attention for an advanced class may well be a project or a series of projects. The preparation of the project can involve the students in reading newspapers, magazines and books, in discussing the material in class and in writing up their research. Points of pronunciation, lexis, grammar and style will be handled within this framework, usually with explicit explanation and dicussion and the giving of examples. Unfortunately, ideals are difficult to attain, and the enthusiasm of students is not always fired by a project. Also, the very challenge of the task may defeat the student's persistence and language resources.

An alternative to major project work is a variety of short and self-contained tasks. Here are a few examples.

(1)   The teacher gives five or six sentences and the students have to give alternative ways of expressing the same ideas; this can lead to the discussion of specific structures.

(2)   The teacher reads a passage containing information which the students take down in notes; after a second reading, the students write a summary of the passage.

(3)   The students are given a number of extracts from different sources. Their task is decide what kind of text they come from (giving reasons) and commenting on style, use of lexis and so on.

(4)   The teacher says a word ("spring, for example) and a student says the first word that comes into his head ("love", "bed", "water" or whatever) and then has to explain the association.

      This continues round the class.

(5)   The students are presented with a problem situation; various solutions are discussed and voted on. For example: Venice is sinking. Should we

      a) let it sink as it is too expensive to save it;

      b) spend an immense fortune on saving the city;

      c) spend less money reconstructing the city in a safer place?

Again, as for intermediate teaching, I would stress that a varied approach is vital to advanced teaching. I can imagine nothing worse for students than an endless string of reading comprehensions followed by summary writing.

In conclusion, I would like to correct any impression I may have given that I see the basic stage as being clearly divided from the intermediate stage, and the intermediate from the advanced. Obviously, each merges into the other. What I do believe is that a series of basic courses should have clear performance objectives; this is especially important for the many learners who will go no further in the formal study of English. A series of intermediate courses should have further performance objectives (based on the native-like use of English in a fairly wide range of restricted tasks). A series of advanced courses should be aimed towards an educated native speaker's command of English, so learners should engage in

many of the same language activities that the native speakers
can, and how to cope with.

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