

BEYOND "BASIC"

PART I

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In certain teaching situations it is fairly clear where a teacher should be leading his students. For example, generation after generation of medical students have the desperate need to read text books and articles in English but are familiar, or half familiar, only with the bare rudiments of the language. They often have very little time for English classes. The teacher should obviously try to improve the efficiency and range of the students' reading comprehension ability in the shortest possible time. Such a clearly specified end suggests the means to it: graded reading passages on medical subjects in which the commonest rhetorical devices and non-cognate vocabulary are exemplified, with expositions of how they function, and related exercises. The teacher need not concern himself much, if at all, with the students' ability in speaking, writing or aural comprehension. The class can even be conducted largely in the students' native language. Many doctors, with the sole aid of medical texts, a grammar book and an English-L1 dictionary have taught themselves up to what can only be described as an advanced level of reading comprehension of medical English (without, so far as I know, any patients who have died of a sudden attack of chronic English). However, these same doctors may be unable to converse in English or to read a novel.

ESP specialists are now catering to the needs of groups such as medical students in some institutions of advanced education. But many English language teachers are working in what we can call "general purpose" teaching situations: the students progress through the "whole of the English language" and come out on the far side of the ultimate advanced course as educated bilinguals ("con un dominio perfecto del idioma inglés"). There are, I think, two main reasons why so many students study in general purpose English courses. The first is that it is usually only in specialized institutions (technological institutes, hospitals, university departments, and so on) that sufficient numbers of students with the same limited and specific needs can be gathered together; elsewhere doctors, lawyers, businessmen, secretaries, and school children who will become doctors, businessmen and secretaries must share the same class. The second is that many students find the prospect of learning

only a limited and specific area of English unattractive: if they are going to learn the waltz they want to learn the polka, the rumba and the bossa nova too.

One major problem with general purpose courses in finding the answer to the question: "where should the students be going?" (a question fairly easy to answer in the case of the medical students). Another problem is finding the answer to the question: "How far has this or that student got on the road to wherever he should be going?" (again fairly easy to answer in the case of the medical students). What is an "advanced" course and what do the students learn in it? Certainly very, very few students learn "un dominio perfecto del inglés" in formal study conditions. Where should we put the doctor who reads English in his specialized area with great efficiency but whose speech is incoherent Spanglish, or the adolescent who spent three months at a summer camp in Illinois and whose spoken English sounds "real kinda lika native speaker", but who writes incoherent Spanglish? Should they go into a "basic" course, or into an "intermediate" or "advanced" one?

The quotation marks for "basic", "intermediate" and "advanced" are for two reasons: they are supposed to define levels of competence in English, and they don't. "Intermediate" is the level that comes after "basic", and "basic" is the level that comes. . . oh, well, you know. Does it matter so long as the student is progressing? My answer is that it does. My reason is that it is most probable that all progress in language learning is not of the same kind. If you cover all of a painting of "el hombre águila" except for a minute section of a feather, it appears to be some thin brown lines; if you increase the hole in the cover to include the eye, it appears to be part of the head of a bird; if you uncover the painting completely it is seen to be a man wearing an eagle mask. In the same way the beginning student who learns "It's a Chevrolet" gets only a partial view of IT IS and cannot suspect that "It is a Chevrolet" corresponds to "Que si es un Chevrolet" in Spanish. The value and function of the elements of English a student learns become different as he learns more elements and combinations. Not only does "the English language" appear to change as perceived by the student, but his attitude towards it changes and the strategies he uses to try to master it change (of course one type of student may perceive the English language differently and employ different strategies from another type of student right from the beginning, but there is also bound to be development in perception and strategies in the learning history of every student). Typically a beginner will be cautious and take few risks, sticking closely to the model or the rule given by the teacher (if the student has grasped the structure or the rule); later, students will take more risks (or have risks imposed upon them by the teacher) and usually will make a lot of mistakes (including

many that "even the worst student in Course Two would be incapable of making").

Not all students in "basic" courses will ever reach an "advanced" or even an "intermediate" course; this may be because of a lack of time, money, or language-learning resources. In the previous paragraph I was suggesting that "basic", "intermediate" and "advanced" courses should be different in kind (not just more and more difficult stuff of the same kind). I now suggest that each cycle of courses should reach some kind of practical goal, even though it is most difficult to set such a goal in a series of advanced courses.

A series of basic courses should prepare the students to "get by" in all normal real life situations; that is, they should be able to make themselves understood in speech and writing, when they and the person addressed are familiar with the topic and the person addressed makes allowances for the fact that they are not native speakers of English; and they should be able to understand speech and writing intended for them and taking into account the fact that they are not native speakers of English. This specification of the end (much broader, I am afraid, than that specified for the medical students) leads us to the means. A structural-situational approach to a series of basic courses (as in the official Programa de inglés para secundarias federales) has much in its favour. It aims to teach aural comprehension, speaking, reading comprehension and writing. It works through a programme of selected and graded structures. It presents these structures in situational contexts to exemplify typical meanings and usages of each structure. It has a repertoire of teaching techniques and student activities that maximize student participation and production of meaningful English. It avoids as far as possible grammar explanation and translation. The structures covered by a basic course should stop short of easily avoided ones; for example, "He will not win if he doesn't practise", or "Never before have I seen such a mess", which can be avoided by "I have never seen such a mess", or possibly even reported speech ("Mr. Smith said he had been to India" can be avoided by "He has been to India, Mr. Smith said"). Also to be left out of basic courses are structures which are virtually expressions (in TG terms, rules that generate few sentences); for example "In case of fire, break the glass".

There are a number of criticisms of structural-situational teaching as it is usually practised at the basic level. Two of the more serious criticisms are the following. Everything that is presented to the students is practised for production and there is little systematic attention to the students' most likely communicative needs. In general it is understandable that most of the English in a basic course should be for production as well as recognition, since it will mostly be fundamental (whether structure or vocabulary). However, this general principal is taken to ridiculous ex -

tremes when no new structure or word (even if it is a cognate) is met by the students without being presented and practised (Do Spanish-speaking students need intensive practice of "The man playing the guitar is Jim?") The lack of attention to basic communicative needs can be seen when a student who has just completed the final basic course, at last finds himself in New York. He can still remember the dialogue in which Susan told her mother she was going to marry Tom, but he cannot remember dialogues booking a plane ticket, checking in at the airport, taking a taxi, or (excuse the expression) chatting up a güerita.

If students can finish a series of basic courses with the ability to get by in English, what should the teacher be doing in the intermediate courses? What should the goal be? Perhaps we should first consider the kinds of students the teacher will be working with. Some will indeed be good products of a series of good basic courses. Others will come from outside the institution, and may be strong on "grammar" and writing but weak on speaking, or the opposite, strong on speaking but weak on grammatical precision and writing. (Incidentally, the doctor with good special purpose reading comprehension but poor on speaking, should, I think, go down to the level in the basic courses appropriate to his production abilities). Given a group made up of students with different abilities and problems, as is typical in intermediate courses, the teacher should work at the following areas. He should try to pull students weak in oral-aural ability or conversely in reading-writing skills up to the average level of the group. He should do remedial work on recurrent errors (such as those that "even the worst Course Two student would be incapable of making"). He should extend the range of structures ("unless", reported speech, low frequency structures, etc.) He should work more systematically at communicative functions. He should require students to comprehend and produce longer stretches of discourse than in the basic courses. He should push recognition (vocabulary, structure in speech and writing) beyond production. He should begin to foment an awareness in the students of the differences between colloquial spoken English and formal written English, and even of subtler distinctions of medium - style. The goal should be native-speaker-like comprehension and production in appropriately restricted tasks. For example, students should produce short letters like this:

Río Neva 18
México, D. F.
January 19, 1976

Dear Tammy,

I was very glad to receive your letter. It will be a pleasure to

have you here with us. I'm already making plans with my parents to show you the most interesting places in Mexico.

I think you won't have to bring warm clothes because the weather will be very nice in March. Also we will spend a lot of time in Acapulco and other hot places. Acapulco is a beautiful place and I'm sure you'll enjoy it a lot.

I'm going to take some time away from school. I won't have any trouble with my English teacher because I'll be practising with you, and I've promised him to do my best on the final examination.

Please say "hello" to your family and don't forget to write back as soon as you can. Take good care of yourself.

Love.

and not like this:

México, D. F.
19 of January, 1976

Dear Sandra,

I receive your letter telling me that you're coming to Mexico next month and I am really very happy for that. Mario and I will be very please if you stayed with us at home, we have an extra room which I can arrange it for you. You should bring light cloths but bring some sweaters because in the morning and the night is quite cold. We can go to Guajuato a typic city. I'm sure you will enjoy a lot. Give my regards to your family.

Sincerely yours,

I have said "what" about intermediate courses but not "how". I will suggest specific materials and techniques in a following article, as I will also for advanced courses.

This is the first of a two part article, the second of which will appear in a later issue.