A VIEW OF THE PAST

The First Decade (1963-1972)

by Patricia Sullivan

IN CELEBRATION OF THE 40TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE *ENGLISH TEACHING FORUM,* in each of this year's quarterly issues we will feature excerpts from selected articles that reflect major trends in English language teaching during the past 40 years. This special section is called "A View of the Past." We have selected these articles not only to look back and see where we've been and how we've changed, but also to remind ourselves that much of what was previously published is still relevant. In the Volume 1, Number 1 issue, published in March 1963, the editors state that "the ideas expressed here will be varied and perhaps at times conflicting, in order to insure adequate coverage of controversial subjects." We believe that the continuing success of the *Forum* is due, in part, to its commitment to publish individual perspectives on widely varying topics of interest to language educators around the world.

Articles from 1963 to 1972 reflect the growing influence of Noam Chomsky's revolutionary ideas on the innateness of language. Although Chomsky himself did not focus on the relationship between his linguistic theories and the field of ELT, teachers and researchers did. In the *Forum,* authors raised questions about the role of linguistics in language teaching. They also began questioning the audio-lingual method and uncontextualized drilling. They addressed their concerns in many articles from the first decade that caution against the overuse of rote drills (backward build-up, substitution, transformation, etc.) and dialog repetition (mimicry and memorization, or "mim-mem"). They recommend instead techniques for incorporating varied responses to controlled and guided practice. These concerns and recommendations are also reflected in articles that encourage teachers to bring conversation into the classroom to complement pattern practice and to view the learner as a whole person capable of much more than imitation and habit formation.

The four excerpts that follow are from the first decade of the *Forum.*[1] Though they were written more than 30 years ago, they present ideas that are just as useful and pertinent today. Hamolsky provides teachers with games that motivate students to practice the language they have learned, Jackson gives guidelines for developing a conversation class, Dalzell emphasizes the importance of understanding language change, and McIntosh reacts to an overemphasis on language analysis by calling for a humanistic approach. We hope you enjoy this view of the past as we celebrate the 40th anniversary of the *English Teaching Forum.*

When I want

to understand

what is happening

today or try

to decide what will

happen tomorrow,

I look back.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

American jurist

(1841-1935)

1. The complete texts of these four articles can be found in the on-line version of the *Forum* at http://exchanges.state.gov/forum/.

IS ENGLISH FUN FOR YOUR STUDENTS?

Sidney L. Hamolsky

Three issues of the *English Teaching Newsletter* were published by the U.S. Information Agency in 1962 as the predecessor to the *English Teaching Forum.* This article appeared in the second issue of the *Newsletter.*

These games are for the teacher who wishes to add pleasure to the learning of the English language and for the student who appreciates this approach.... This list is divided into Early, Intermediate, and Advanced Conversational Games. The games generally require little movement of chairs and people, with a consequent saving of time....

Early Conversational Level

3. Beano–a good game to practice numbers [more commonly known as Bingo –ed.]

   a. Dried beans and specially prepared cards are distributed to each player. All cards must have different numbers, or differently arranged numbers.

   b. Everyone places a bean on the space marked FREE.

B	E	A	N	O
2	12	21	34	45
3	16	23	35	46
7	17	FREE	36	48
9	18	25	38	49
10	19	27	39	59

   (Note: Column B may have numbers from 1–10; E, from 11–20; A, from 21–30; N, from 31–40; O, from 41–50.)

   c. The caller then selects numbers and calls each one aloud, including column-letter, until someone covers five spaces that are in a row vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. The first player to do this is the winner.

   d. The winner then calls out the column-letters and numbers of the five covered spaces so that the caller may check to be sure that they are numbers that he has called.

4. Twenty Questions

   a. One student stands and thinks of an object.

   b. Then, members of the class ask questions which the student can answer with a "yes" or "no" answer only. After twenty questions, the object is divulged.

   A variation could have three or four students try to guess what the whole class is thinking of. This means that a few people have more practice in question-making this time; another group of three or four can do it next time....

6. Who Am I? or Who Was He?

   a. The teacher pins a slip of paper with the name of a famous person written on it, on the back of a student.

   b. The student then asks his neighbor or the class for information sufficient to enable him to guess who the person is (or was).[2]

Intermediate Conversational Level

Many of the games that are described in the preceding group may be used to good advantage in this level, too....

4. Tourist Guide

   a. The teacher explains the game by asking: "Have you ever been a tourist guide in your own city?" He then assumes the role of a tourist on a walk or a drive around town. The "tour" might begin by having one "guide" tell something about the history of the city.

   b. The "tourist" could obtain further information by asking questions about population, industries, buildings and monuments, schools and libraries, shopping centers, just to mention a few.

   c. The "tourist guides" might also indicate specific and relative locations of important places, and describe movement through the city to reach these places.

5. Carry A Message [more commonly known as Telephone –ed.]

   a. The same confidential telephone message is given orally by the teacher to the first person in each row.

   b. The first person in the row must then transmit the message to the person sitting behind him, etc.

   c. The last person in the row writes down the message.

   d. All the messages are then compared for accuracy.

Advanced Conversational Level

1. What Would You Do?

   The teacher lists a few predicaments on the blackboard for the students to consider. Forming an "if" clause with a stated predicament, and using the question "What would you do?" at either the beginning or the end of the sentence, ask the students to provide a solution. The students answer, repeating the "if" clause, and using "I would…"

   Here are a few predicaments:

   1. You had no money after eating in an expensive restaurant.
   2. You left a package in a train that just left.
   3. You missed the last bus.
   4. You lost the ticket to the football game.

   As a variation, two or three students leave the class and the class decides on a predicament. The students come back to the class. When asked what they would do to solve the predicament—they are not told what the predicament is—they try to guess solutions. Funny? Try it!

2. Object Description

   Many students get to the point where for lack of a word they feel stymied. If you want to refer to some object and you don't know the name, what do you do? If it's really important to your conversation, you begin to describe its shape, size, color and use.

   a. Ask a student to carefully describe an object, the name of which he knows in English, indicating only one characteristic in each sentence.

   b. The other students attempt to identify the object after hearing each sentence.

   A worthwhile variation to help build vocabulary would have the student describe an object the name of which he does not know in English. In this case, the student should submit the native-language equivalent to the teacher in written form in advance; the student's description in the classroom should be entirely in English. Another variation would have the student describe words related to actions, including adverbs of manner.

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2. Rather than change the authors' words, we left them as published in the original articles, although by today's standards, we may wince at the sexist language.

THE CONVERSATION CLASS

Acy L. Jackson

IRAN · 1969

This article was published in the January-February 1969 issue of *English Teaching Forum* (vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 98–100).

The conversation class occupies a unique place in the process of learning English as a second or foreign language. From my own experience with Persian-speaking adults, I have drawn up a number of simple but important guidelines, which may provide helpful suggestions for the teacher of English who conducts "conversation" sessions as part of the regular classroom procedure or as an extra-curricular activity.

Cultivate a relaxed atmosphere

A relaxed atmosphere is conducive to free expression. The skillful teacher can create an atmosphere in which the student feels enough at ease to struggle through a situation to find the words to express himself. The following approaches help to develop the desired relaxed atmosphere:

1. Learn the Student's Name. In a conversation class, it is especially important for the teacher to know the name of each student. This indication of personal interest puts the student at ease and helps him overcome inhibitions about speaking out in a group….

2. Give Praise When It Is Deserved. The teacher should compliment a student when he does well. He should make it a practice to reinforce a good performance with encouraging comments….

3. Smile. A smile generates warmth and response. The teacher should not be afraid to smile—or even to give a hearty laugh if a situation warrants it.

4. Speak Naturally. There is a tendency on the part of some teachers, in their efforts to make the students understand, to speak very slowly, increase the volume of their voice, and over-enunciate words or use artificially emphasized intonation patterns. What such teachers fail to realize is that the student will *learn* these strange practices and carry them over into his own conversation….

5. The Student Should Talk, Not Take Notes. A conversation class should give each student the maximum opportunity to *talk*…. The student should not take notes. A person does not usually carry on a conversation with a note pad and pen in hand.

6. Everyone Should Use English. The teacher should discourage the use of the student's mother tongue and should confine his own remarks to English, even if at first the students miss much that is said. He should allow the translation of words and phrases only when the conversation cannot continue without it….

Be alert and foster alertness

Since the conversation class provides practice in both *speaking* and *understanding* what is said, the teacher should stay alert and see to it that the attention of the students does not wander. When a student is not paying attention, the teacher can call him back to the conversation by directing a question to him. Or he can ask him to repeat something that has been said. Or ask him to repeat a question he has just asked another student….

Be enthusiastic and engender enthusiasm

Enthusiasm is one of the most important factors in a conversation class…. The student should be excited at the chance to use the new language for purposes of communication. The teacher must remember that enthusiasm is infectious, and that much of the impetus for expression must come through enthusiasm that he himself engenders.

Be patient

Patience, necessary in any encounter with students, is especially important in a conversation class. The teacher should put himself in the place of the student. He should think of how he himself had to struggle to express his ideas when he was first learning a new language. He should think of those frustrating "plateaus" in his own learning, when his ability to learn more seemed to have come to a standstill. He should remember the times when he himself has been afraid or ashamed to speak and someone gave him the encouragement that helped him find the proper words.

The teacher should keep in mind, too, that there is a varying gestation period involved in learning words and the ideas behind them. The teacher must, therefore, give the student the time that he needs. At the same time, he must monitor class participation, to see that no individual monopolizes the time by talking too much or hesitating too often and too long….

Be sensitive

Each session of a conversation class is different. At each session the teacher must grasp the mood of the class and consider the external factors affecting his own feelings as a teacher.

The teacher must be sensitive to subtleties of speech, gesture, and facial expressions of the students, for these reveal the way in which a student is thinking or reacting to the situation….

Listen

The teacher should not dominate the conversation! He should try to get the students to speak as much as possible. With some classes, the teacher's role is merely to be a critical listener. With others, he must play a more active role in order to keep the conversation moving.

Making corrections

What should the teacher do about mistakes in pronunciation and grammar? This is an especially delicate area in a conversation class. Students tend to insist that they want to be corrected. It seems important, however, not to interrupt the train of thought of a student or the flow of the conversation with continuous minor corrections….

JANUARY 2002 | ENGLISH TEACHING FORUM

"CORRECTNESS" AND LANGUAGE CHANGE

Rex Stewart Dalzell

As a tool of thought and a means of communication, language in general and the English language in particular can never remain static. It must be dynamic, continually changing its shape to meet the demands of the moment….

Understandably, this dynamic feature of language causes considerable concern to students studying English…but far too few English programs recognize this fact. They seem to be based on the assumption that students are fully aware of the dynamic nature of the language and of all the implications that follow.

This assumption is false. Though students may understand and accept the notion of change in their own language they frequently fail to transfer this awareness to their study of English. As a result, in their search for precision they often become dissatisfied when they hear, in reply to their queries, such assertions as: "This alternative could be right and so could that one, depending on the speaker's intention." Or: "Some authorities say this is right, while others say it is wrong." Or: "This is generally accepted as correct now, but language is changing and it may not be considered correct in several years." Before students come to appreciate the validity of such statements and are able to get down to the serious business of really learning the English language, they often experience unnecessary frustration and are caught up in fruitless argument.

The first step toward the solution of any problem is to recognize its existence, and nowhere is this more true than with the problem of change in the English language. As an introduction to the English course, and before we begin specific language instruction, we should help the students realize and accept the fact that the English language is indeed dynamic rather than static, depending for its continuing effectiveness on its ability to adapt and modify according to the demands of the times. When we have successfully established this idea, we can make a more detailed examination of its implications. I suggest the following points for discussion.

The concept of change

Change in a living language is both inevitable and desirable. It may consist of a change in vocabulary or construction or both (putting aside, for the present, changes in the vocal aspects of language). Basically, this change results from the processes of addition, deletion, and adaptation. New discoveries, new ideas, new situations, new developments demand new terminology to give precision to meaning. The inevitable result is an expansion and adaptation of the vocabulary. Scientific advances have given birth to such words as *antiseptics, antibiotics, nuclear fission,* and *radioactivity.* A sailor of the skies becomes a *cosmonaut* or an *astronaut,* and an improved system of cargo handling leads to *containerization.*

Concomitant with vocabulary change comes constructional change, and it is here that we find the greatest area of difficulty. We can discern a definite trend toward an economy of words, and rules of grammar no longer enjoy an unchallenged dominion. *I'll write to you soon* becomes *I'll write you soon,* and *we shall* and *we will* frequently are accepted as interchangeable….

A positive relationship appears to exist between the vitality of a language and the extent of its area of change: the more effective it is as a medium of expression for contemporary needs, the greater the area of change.

What is grammar?

Unlike mathematics or any physical science, the English language is not based on an unchanging set of empirical truths. It is not a carefully delineated rigid structure, limited by pre-established conditions, but is an amorphous thing, changing its shape according to the whims or fancies of those who use it. Unfortunately, this inescapable and indisputable fact is frequently overlooked by those studying English as a second language—indeed by many studying it as a first. As a result, they may form a completely erroneous idea of the nature of grammar. They ascribe to it an illusory quality of permanence, and it becomes to them a reference to unchangeable laws which language must unquestionably follow if it is to be judged correct. This misconception must be dispelled and grammar understood for what it is—namely, a description of how language is used. Undoubtedly grammar does exert a considerable influence on language in action, but ultimately it is the *use* of language, not the *description* of it, which determines its "correctness." Grammar has no mandate to exercise judgment. It is simply the codification of the patterns of language that have evolved through usage and are accepted as correct.

What is "correct"?

This question of correctness requires careful consideration. In general terms, it is usage, or the rule of the majority, which determines the correctness or the incorrectness of the language being used. More specifically, a particular language pattern is correct if the majority of competent mother-tongue English speakers accept it as such. When change is taking place, however, it is very difficult to measure the extent of that change and hence to know in fact if it has been accepted by the majority of competent mother-tongue English speakers. At such times acknowledged authorities on contemporary usage are likely to be at variance with one another, and written descriptions of accepted usage—that is, grammar books—because of the lag between change in usage and corresponding change in texts describing this usage, are least helpful. In the absence of suitable statistical techniques to determine rapidly what in practice is common usage, this area of indecision is likely to remain an inevitable accompaniment of language change….

THE ART OF THE LANGUAGE LESSON

Lois McIntosh

USA • 1971

Discussions and papers concerning the teaching of English as a second language emphasize more and more the contributions of various branches of science. Somewhere in all this we seem to be overlooking the art in language teaching—which must be present if really effective learning is to take place.

Contributions of the sciences

Certainly we cannot deny that science continues to make solid contributions to language teaching. Linguistics, for example, does not claim to be the only answer to the problems of language teaching, but it does contribute to our better understanding of what we are teaching. As we learn more about how sentences are related to one another, as we trace to the deep structure the sources that surface as ambiguities, as we derive suggestions from contrasted language systems, we know that our teaching is better for the help it gets from this discipline….

Reassured by the cognitive psychologists that the learner need not be conditioned like a parrot by endless repetition and the rewarding of an unvarying task, we can abandon mim-mem and the notion that it is the only possible way to teach languages. We do not abandon repetition per se, but we elicit it in such a way that the learner is completely engaged in the activity.

Pedagogy enjoins us to state in unequivocal, specific terms the observable human behavior that our teaching will bring about in the learner. Surely the three disciplines of linguistics, psychology, and pedagogy help us toward making language teaching more carefully and scientifically exact. Is there, then, any room for art in teaching? If so, in what does it consist?

The human element

The art in language teaching lies in remembering that language is a human activity, and that no blueprint can exactly foresee the direction it may take. We can sequence our sentences—and indeed we should. We can structure our activities to promote efficient achievement of our goals. But if we are not ready for the unexpected, if we are not eager to seize every opportunity to move ahead in language, we are overlooking a most important dimension.

When we talk about having a language lesson begin with the manipulation of structures, and have it progress through careful stages to the moment when communication takes place, we may be suggesting that every lesson will work out that way….

The art of a language lesson lies rather in detecting the first possible moment when the learners want to break out of the mold and use language for themselves. They may not be accurate, but they are using language as it should be used—to say something, to communicate. This is dangerous advice for the teacher who just likes to have her students talk. It is advice that will be ignored by the teacher who holds firmly to steps A–Z in each lesson, and does not falter. But it is true, nonetheless, that a good language lesson should have behind it the possibilities of branching out, or going back over, or going on as planned. We must not be so caught up in schedules that we lose sight of human behavior….To be specific: Lessons for beginners often suffer from the limits placed on them. There is so much grammar to be learned in lesson one, we say, that we should not crowd vocabulary into it. We identify pencils, pens, blackboards, and all the "point-at-ables" in the classroom, and the students repeat the sentences and ask and answer the simple questions.

But why not start lesson one with *people*….

Go beyond the textbook

The art of a language lesson lies, too, in keeping it open-ended. If the textbook deals, for example, with telling time in lesson three, and with renting a room in lesson four, let's not go on to lesson four until we have fully exploited lesson three. If we can take a basic structure and branch out into several related contexts, we may be contributing to the language learner's general information and powers of problem-solving….

When we go beyond the outline of the textbook we often need to add vocabulary. If we are committed to a rigid control of vocabulary for the students while they are mastering the basic structures, this will be inhibiting. I believe that if we need new words and phrases to develop a meaningful context, and if we practice the new words and phrases in this lesson and in the next and later on, we should introduce them even though they violate some arbitrary standard we may be trying to hold to. Repetition by re-occurrence is better than repetition by saturation.

If we repeat strictly sequenced sentences, using a rigidly limited vocabulary, and use each sentence only in one lesson, we have gained nothing….

The art in a language lesson lies in remembering that *language belongs to people.* It lies in beginning simply but naturally in situations and contexts in which your students can find identity and relevance. This approach offers opportunities for the learner to behave like a human being—to agree and contradict, to ask and give information. Once he has established such foundations in usable speech patterns, he can apply the language to other contexts, to different registers, to the written form and its necessary adjustments….

When we remember that language belongs to people, we do not stop with the scientific aspects of teaching: the outlines in the textbooks; the progression of statement, statement negated, and question—all repeated after a model. We begin there. Then we move deeper into experience, using as a basis the particular structure we are teaching. All lessons, from those for the beginner to those for the advanced student, can then open horizons, challenge the learner, move him on to greater use of the language.