THE USE OF THE PRINTED WORD IN TEACHING BEGINNERS

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1. Competing techniques

In his pamphlet *DerSprachunterricht* muß umkehren (1882) Vietor recommended the following procedure:

1. A text is presented aurally. Pupils listen only.
   They take in sounds and meanings, but remain silent.
2. Reading aloud and question and answer work with books open.
3. Return to purely oral work. The support of the written text is withdrawn.

But there were more radical reformers who interpreted the priority of the spoken word in a different way. They proposed a definite pre-reading phase of purely oral work. In post-war Germany this normally lasted several weeks, others extended this phase up to two years.

Nowadays the priority of the oral word seems to be firmly established, even if there is no special pre-reading phase. No matter whether there preceded a phase of days, weeks or months of oral work, the teacher would first present a new text orally, with books closed. But the procedure would differ from the one used by Vietor. The learners would have to imitate the new words upon hearing them. Only after listening and imitiating would they be allowed to see the text, and question - answer practice could ensue. This, in turn, could be followed by retelling the text with books closed, which is still a popular activity. Reading aloud would often come at the end of working with a text, as the final crowning act.

Even from this brief account we catch a glimpse of the multiplicity of factors involved. Can we neglect the question of whether reading aloud should come before or after the question-and-answer practice? Should it be done at all? What is its function? Is it regarded as an end in itself, a desirable terminal behaviour? Does it make a difference that learners imitate only new words or word groups without visual support, instead of imitating whole sentences from dialogues? The literature of the audiolingual decades abounds with general statements on the temporal and causal priority of the spoken language. This is supposed to have "implications" for teaching methods. In some cases, these methods are sketched out, but the justification of the details of the procedure recommended is neglected.

However, the precise details of concrete techniques matter a great deal if we take a look at the various laboratory experiments carried out to measure the inhibitory or facilitating effect of oral and visual presentation. The experiments reported by Chastain (1971) have contradictory results. Some support the presentation of both an auditory and visual stimulus, others seem to favour a purely oral presentation. All these experiments use slightly different procedures, which is disguised by broad labels such as "instruction with er without the printed word", and these differences probably account for the fact that the studies reached opposite conclusions. "The little research evidence reported to date presents so much variance in the factors mentioned that no cross-study comparison is possible" (Chau Tran 1974: 152).

The issue is further compounded by the fact that there are a number of ways in which other visual aids might be given along with, or instead of, the orthographic spelling. There are courses which even in the age of the cassette recorder start right away with complete phonetic transcriptions which are gradually abandoned in favour of historical script. Imagine the

variations one could have in terms of permutation of materials if one concentrated only on the problem

of phonetic transcriptions! Experiments have been carried out where French adult learners of English used a modified version of the *Initial Teaching Alphabet* originally devised for mother-tongue teaching. This has the advantage over a phonetic system that it is much closer to the traditional script in its characters and notation conventions. lt is reported that "the procedure does indeed facilitate learning without introducing additional difficulties" (Cembalo 1976:
50). But, as yet, it has not been possible to give any evidence as to how smoothly the transition to normal written language was achieved.

Some French audiovisual courses also make extensive use of graphically marking rhythm groups and intonational contours. These same courses have devised a sophisticated transition procedure to the printed word. Over several weeks a number of basic dialogues are introduced and practised on a purely oral basis. Then this oral work is continued with a new dialogue but at the same time older dialogues reappear with the written form added. The gap between the new texts still presented in their oral form only and the old overlearned texts with the printed word added is gradually closed.

The actual procedures to be subsumed under the label "simultaneous presentation of sound and script" could be equally diverse. Witness the unconventional techniques devised by Gattegno in his method called the Silent Way (Gattegno 1969). Whereas most courses today start out with short texts as meaningful wholes, Gattegno begins with teaching the regular script-sound correspondences with colour coded sound charts called "Fidels", where like sounds are identified by like colours whatever their spellings and unlike sounds are distinguished by the use of unlike colours even if the same letter or letter combination is used. Though this procedure was originally devised for teaching reading in the mother tongue where pronunciation as such is no problem, it is also applied to foreign language teaching.

A more recent development is an initial pre-speaking period such as that advocated by Asher (1967). This is a further complication. Here we are dealing only with the role of the written word from the moment that oral production is required.

From these few remarks we can see that the problem of when and how the written word should be introduced and how undesirable interference between spelling and pronunciation can be avoided is enough to keep a number of researchers busy for a lifetime, if they chose to test all the possible techniques in field experiments. The answers obtained could still be different for different pairs of source and target languages, and must certainly be different for languages that do not use the Roman alphabet.

2. The simultaneous introduction of the printed word: empirical evidence for a well-defined technique

In such a situation it would be foolish to pretend that the proponents of the *Mitlesverfahren,*a procedure where the printed text is presented simultaneously with the oral utterance (Dodson 1967), should have found *the* solution to the problem. No one has as yet tried out and measured the various effects of all the different techniques conceivable. Many variables are notoriously resistent to any adequate experimental controls. Some of the variables might not only go undefined, but even remain unobserved. Thus there will certainly be constellations, particularly at primary school level, where the technique recommended here would not be feasible.

Yet it seems that the *Mitlesverfahren* is a viable alternative. Both laboratory and field tests have been carried out in Wales within the framework of the bilingual method, and independent of Dodson's work in the Netherlands (Parreren 1969). Experiments and feasibility studies have been undertaken in Germany by Schiffler (1971) for the teaching of French and by Holz (1975) and Butzkamm (1980) for the teaching of English. Similar positive results were obtained in a

Swedish study by Lindell (1971). An experiment involving one hundred and thirty Egyptian seventh graders (66 controls and 67 experimentals), who were just starting their study of English, was carried out by Zidan (1982). The two treatment groups were matched in I.Q., parental demographic status, and elementary scholastic achievement. The results indicated that, after two months of instruction, on all measures the immediate presentation treatment was significantly better than the delayed presentation treatment. The *Mitlesverfahren* is not a foolproof recipe, but a proven technique.

The technique is best understood within the context of a traditional audiolingual-audiovisual method where basic dialogues containing new language material have to be imitated. The teacher may of course read out the dialogue to the class just once with books closed, so as to give the class an idea of the learning task ahead of them. But as soon as he makes the class say the lines after him, books should be open and the class should be allowed to look at the text before or between imitation responses.

There is just one proviso. The teacher should briefly explain to the students in simple terms how not to use the printed text. "Concentrate first on what you hear and repeat what you hear, not what you might see in print. If you do not repeat what you hear, but try to read aloud instead, you will get it wrong. There is usually time to glance at the text and see what the words you have just heard look like in print, when somebody else is imitating the sentence. You may or you may not look at the text. It is up to you. But you *must* listen." If the students are not yet aware of this, the teacher will also explain with a few examples why reading aloud causes mispronunciations. He will point out some of the more obvious pronunciation errors that arise when mother-tongue script-to-sound correlations are applied to the foreign language.

Thus it is essential that the teacher's or tape's auditory stimulus should remain the primary stimulus for the imitation. If not, the printed word will indeed interfere with the pronunciation, instead of improving the oral repetition. The *Mitlesverfahren* is primarily an aid to arriving at an oral command of the text.

It goes without saying that the printed word is only available during initial presentation steps, and is then withdrawn, so that in the end pupils demonstrate a purely oral mastery of the text.

At the same time the students learn how to associate foreign language sounds with foreign language script, i.e. how to read. This is a spin-off effect.

3. *Theoretical foundation*

Theoretical support for the *Mitlesverfahren* comes from the psychology of perception.

By the time we learn a foreign language, we may have unlearned how to listen closely, because in our own language we do not have to listen with undivided attention every split second of the time. "We do not hear the exact nature of every single sound uttered in sentence after sentence. Because we know the rules of our language and of our society we have a pretty good idea of what may be said, and so long as we listen enough to the general shape of what is actually said, we can devote a good part of our attention to other things, such as what we are going to say in reply when we can get a word in, or what a delicious dimple the speaker has" (O'Connor 1973: 111). We do not have to identify every single sound because we match up what we hear with what we know to be possible in the language at the higher levels of the lexicon, morphology,

syntax and pragmatics. This is a general principle in perception: we continually support and complete what we see, hear and feel with stored knowledge (Rivers 1965).[1] When we read, for instance, we often rectify printing errors without being aware of them. Or if someone stops or stumbles in a discussion, his interlocutor might, without hesitating, finish his sentence for him.

Have you ever worked in Britain? You may have heard *work,* but you know you ought to have heard *worked,* so you simply rectify yourself. We can always partially predict the utterances we hear, because we know how to exploit the redundancy of language.

Noch ein Beisp.... : every speaker of German will easily complete the sentence. He knows the word *Beispiel,* and other linguistic and textual clues tell him that this makes sense. Though there may be other ways of finishing this sentence, they will not even come to mind, because they are too far-fetched. But the learner who does not yet know the word and has only a scanty knowledge of German grammar - and thus, of transitional probabilities in German - must rely on his sensory input and see or hear the full sentence before he can reproduce it. This unaccustomed dependence on the ear alone can be particularly trying for the beginner who has no substantial experience with the language, and put a great strain on him. The stress is enhanced by the fact that we have to train our ear to discriminate where it did not have to discriminate before. Thus Germans find it difficult to discriminate between the vowel sounds in *pat* and *pet* and usually substitute /E / for the /ae/ in *pat*. It is difficult for them to hear the difference and, as a result, to make it. Auditory discrimination could obviously be aided by the printed word which in many cases provides the learner with unambiguous information: *cat, apple, gas, mat,* or *get, red, peg, pen,* etc. An equally clear case is <č> and <ć> in Serbocroatian, such as in *č evapč ić i:* the diacritical symbols establish a clear visual difference where many non-natives would find it hard to discriminate aurally.

Or take the double consonants in Finnish which speakers of many other European languages find hard to distinguish by ear alone. "Have I heard *kauppa* or *kaupa?"* the learner will ask himself. "Is this new word käyttö or käytö" Conversely, Finns who want to learn English or German must make a deliberate effort to acquire the distinction between /f/ and /v/ and /b/. If they do not know the word yet, they will be wondering whether the speaker said *pet* or *bet, very* or *ferry.* Even if they know the word, they often cannot tell whether they heard *wife's* or *wives, life* or *lives,* because their grammatical competence might not yet be good enough to help them. The printed word could supply the information needed. Collections of listening mistakes such as the one by Bufe and Dethloff (1972) for German speakers of French emphasize how difficult it is for learners to rely on their ears alone. Listening mistakes include not only the frequent failure to distinguish between individual phonemes, for instance / ə / and /e/, such as *reseau* instead of *réseau* and confusion of *le* and *les,* but also of morphemes, such as *ministériel* or *administériel* instead of *interministeriel* or or *je vais vous dire, je voulais vous dire, il faut vous dire* instead of *je peux vous dire.* Thus it has often been reported that learners, especially adult learners, feel the strain of a purely oral approach, openly Protest against it and are relieved once the printed word is made available (Möhle 1974).[2]

Can we ignore such complaints as coming from the ill-formed and linguistically naive? lt is claimed here that if in an initial phase where we re-train our ears the fleeting sound image could be reinforced by the stable script, learning could be made more effective.

But what are we to make of such cases as <th> representing /Θ/ or /□/, and <sh> representing /ʃ/, which are fairly regular in English, but cannot be applied to other languages? How much of a learning problem is the trigraph <sch> representing /ʃ/, which is probably unique to German? We have found that the initial difficulty of recognizing that <sch> stands for one sound /ʃ/ is outweighed by the help

one can later get from the knowledge that whenever one sees a <sch> one must have heard a /ʃ/ sound. Similarly, the Dutch spelling-to-sound correlations such as <oe> → /u/ as in *boek* or <u> - /y/ as in *Rubens* would baffle a German only at first sight, but would from then on provide a safe clue for identifying Dutch sounds correctly. The problem is to devise a technique which maximizes the possible pay-offs in that sounds can be reinforced by graphic support, and minimizes the risks of interference.

We all know from experience that the written word can be a help as well as a hindrance. Can it be made to be more of a help than a hindrance? This is exactly what the *Mitlesverfahren* sets out to do: the teacher presents the text in its oral and written form simultaneously in such a way that interference errors can be kept to a minimum whilst the visuals symbols can assist the learner in the oral mastery of the text. The mutual support of script and sound will outweigh possible interference effects.

4. The problem of interference and overloading.

The printed word is made available from the very beginning of the imitation step. Interference errors can be avoided if two conditions are met. The students must be aware of the script as a source of errors. And they must know that their first job is one of listening and repeating: they *may look* at the text, if they feel like it, but they *must* listen. Thus a readiness is created where the learner expects help from the written word, but, when in doubt, will always refer back to what he hears.

In an audiovisual method there are at least three types of visual information available to the student: 1) the gestures, facial expression and lip-movements of the teacher; 2) the pictures; 3) the printed text. Can the learner be expected to deal with so much information simultaneously? Is that too much to contend with at one time?

There are general processing constraints imposed by the organization and limitation of cognitive resources such as attention, memory, and motor control. Yet not all information has to be attended to simultaneously. Because the student knows that he is expected to imitate the sentence as closely as possible, this is allotted processing dominance. Other tasks may run at reduced rates or be postponed till there is time for them. There is usually time enough to glance at the printed word and see what the words just heard look like in print whilst other students are repeating. Processing dominance can be shifted about very rapidly.

Note that perception is always a temporally extended activity. We do not perceive in an instant, but over time. Neisser (1976) coined the term "perceptual cycle" to describe perception as a continuing process of exploration and information pick-up. The student will glance at the printed text with a clear acoustic image of the sentence in his mind. For instance, the fact that he sees the printed words spelt out one after another on the page with spaces in between, may help him to identify or retain the structure of the sentence. Yet, the acoustic image is so strong that he will still produce the words in a stream rather than one at a time. We assume, of course, that the teacher presents the sentence in a natural, suggestive intonation which makes it difficult for the pupils to ignore the rhythm and flow of the utterance.

Since the learner can hear others repeating the sentence at the same time, together with the teacher's corrections, acoustic image and script can mutually reinforce each other. The fact that the students need not look at the text and can ignore it also explains to some extent how they can handle this situation. The student can scan the printed text for clues to help him identify and remember the sounds. If he sees no help, he can leave it and shift attention to something else. Or he may choose to glance at it a second or third time. It is important to realize that perceiving is a skill that can be trained. As the learner modifies his schemata during successive associations of foreign

language sound with foreign language script, he will be able to pick up more and more useful information from the script.

We assume that at first the beginner will only become aware of the most prominent features of the text, such as the segmentation in words, punctuation, and consonants in initial position. Again, these stimuli might not be absorbed singly, one by one. For the beginner the imitation task is far from simple. As long as the learner is unskilled in this task, he will be unable to absorb all the components of the input. Parts of the input, however, might not simply be ignored, but

could become intake by way of peripheral, semi-conscious perceptions. We can see out of the corner of the eye. The beginner who has just heard /ai/, /u:/, or /ʃ n/ and sees <igh> <oo> <tion> respectively in print, need not be confused but can simply dismiss the printed information, as it provides no help for the imitation task. But a few repeated encounters in words like *right, night, roof, boot, nation, information* will certainly induce him to hypothesize an invariant relationship between the graphemes and the sounds. Most of the rules of English spelling-to-sound correlations will thus be acquired unconsciously, without explicit teaching.

Thus there are three factors which explain how the *Mitlesverfahren is* psychologically possible: 1) the learner's freedom to break off the scanning of the printed text at any point, to ignore "weird" combinations of letters, in short, the principle of selective perception; 2) the general ability to shift about processing dominance very rapidly in the time available; 3) the mechanism of peripheral perception.

Theavailability of the printed word can also support the acquisition of grammar in such cases as *I 'd like to go swimming* or *I'm helping my friend,* which are often changed to I *like to ...* and I *helping ....* If we were taught English spelling patterns explicitly as a system of rules, we would perhaps never learn them. However, occasionally pointing out typical spelling-to-sound relations, especially when errors occur, will prove helpful. When a pupil pronounced *knife* /knaif/, the teacher immediately interrupted the exercise: "See what happened? Peter just read the word, but he should have listened first!" thus reminding them of the correct strategy to pursue. Another teacher associated the mispronunciation /knaif/ with the German word *kneifen = squeeze.* „Ich höre schon wieder *kneifen",* she said disapprovingly. By this she intimated that /knaif/ not merely sounded wrong, but sounded German.

The tendency to pronounce mother-tongue-wise can be effectively combated, so that the facilitating effect of the printed text far outstrips its interference potential. Apart from occasional lapses due to inattention, there remains just one group of words which require special precautionary methods because carry-overs from native language habits will frequently occur. These are usually cognates that have a different stress pattern from the native language word, i.e. German - English cognates such as *Architekt / architect, Orchester / orchestra, Pullover / pullover.* The accentual patterns of the native words are so deeply ingrained that the student easily overhears the difference in word-stress. Hand and body movements, which underline the accentuated syllable, might be of help here.

5. Reading aloud

Dodson (1975: 286) summarizes the *Mitlesverfahren* as follows: "The teacher makes available the printed utterance at the beginning of the course, but ensures that the spoken foreign - language model remains the primary stimulus. Pupils are only allowed to scan the printed sentence (on the board or in course-book) whilst they are listening to the spoken model, but must look at the teacher or visual aid when making a spoken response. They therefore have to rely on a mental image of the printed word, which is sufficiently strong to help them complete their responses, yet sufficiently

weak not to diminish the sound image of the spoken stimuli or to cause interference." From our classroom observations we can safely infer that with a little practice learners can successfully combine these continuous and time-dependent activites.

Once the basic dialogue can be spoken fluently and accurately, the printed word can be withdrawn before starting on oral pattern drill or question and answer work. For every lesson cycle, classroom work must lead into oral target activities without the crutch of the printed word. Teachers should be warned that they should not make their pupils read aloud, expecially in the elementary stages of learning, "as this converts the printed word into a primary stimulus" (Dodson 1975: 287). Unfortunately, reading aloud is a popular activity for most teachers

and is usually required too early both within a lesson cycle and within the course programme. We have found that oral reading has a detrimental effect on the learner's development of oral proficiency. An in-depth study of the learning behaviour and outcomes of one subject carried out in the *Laboratoire de Phonétique* in Besançon clearly revealed that "1'exercice de lecture gêne, au moins momentanément, le développement des compétences intonatives déjà acquises sur un plan uniquement oral" (Konopczynski/Mc Carthy 1977: 237).

Lessons recorded in Aachen show that pronunciation and intonation deteriorate once the teacher asks the class to read the text aloud. Their responses compare unfavourably with those in reply to the teacher's spoken stimuli. It has also been observed that the flat, faltering and uneven speech by the pupils during reading aloud spills over to other oral exercises. Thus we seriously challenge Chastain's (1971: 178) advice that "early in the beginning course, a great deal of time should be spent in reading aloud." Instead, we agree with Beatty's (1981: 109) summary of the issue: "The author, therefore, feels that those in TESOL who emphasize oral reading are wrong: on oral reading, less time need be spent".

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NOTES

1) This principle applies to a much greater extent to lipreading as practised by the deaf, who are much more dependent on higher-level clues than listeners: "Lipreading is not simply a physical operation in which the eye has learnt to interpret for the ear, it is also an intellectual exercise. Lipreading is ninety pexcent guesswork, because while most vowels are easily distinguished many consonants are not, since these are often produced by nearly identical lip movements" (Wright 1975: 63).

2) See also Canetti's (1979) moving account on how he was taught German by his mother, which is particulary revealing in this respect.

3) A video-tape (German commentary) providing lesson excerpts for the analysis of the *Mitles-verfahren* in the teaching of English to German children is available from the author.

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