

## LANGUAGE AND DISTANCE LEARNING

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In a survey conducted by the present writer during the Postgraduate Diploma in English Language Teaching Workshop held at the Allama Iqbal Open University from 7-19 September, 1985, various assumptions about language and distance learning were considered with a view to improving language learning and teaching skills. Although many of the following observations reflect the general concensus of opinion among the participants (teachers of English language and literature in Islamabad, Rawalpindi and Northern Areas), the scope of the paper has been broadened to include the wider question of language learning in open systems and related factors.

It is generally felt that language learning through distance methods is problematical, and that self-instructional texts (with or without supplementary audio-visual material), and occasional tutor-checked assignments are in themselves an inadequate substitute for direct student-teacher communication in a system of which, as Holmberg notes, the separation of teacher and student, or what has been termed the separation of teaching behaviour from learning behaviour, are distinguishing features. In view of this, B  ath's assertion that good education can be provided through this method, and that face-to-face teaching components are not really necessary, is unusual.<sup>2</sup> In-service school and college teacher-training through distance methods forms one of the objectives of the AIU English Department and as such our Workshop group was here not to learn language (although perhaps that was implicit) but rather how to teach language in a situation where education standards generally, and those in English specifically, exhibit considerable decline. Teachers enrolled for the Diploma in order to become more effective teachers. Indeed, in the absence of any conventional Postgraduate Language Teaching course in the country, this Diploma, launched in April, 1981, has filled an important need for those wishing to improve qualifications or those interested simply in knowing more about the subject. Our PGD course has done much to create an awareness of the need for new techniques in language work.

Some twenty teachers ranging from the 9th Class to the Master's level attended the Workshop. Recognition of English as the pre-eminent world language was acknowledged jointly with regret at deteriorating standards in English and the lack of expertise in teaching methodology in Pakistan today. Given this, it was felt that such workshops provide an invaluable opportunity for face-to-face teaching on various linguistic and non-linguistic matters.

Comprising two parts, the PGD Diploma has 32 Units with 4 Units' equivalence given for the mandatory two-week Workshop. This face-to-face exchange constitutes an important link between the University and what is usually an invisible silent majority - its students. It is invaluable because the "autonomy" of the distance learner is so often inseparable from a sense of loneliness and alienation, compounded by the fact of prejudice from those used to the formal educational system. As Wedemeyer remarks perceptively:

In a society in which education is dominated by traditional institutional methods and practices, the non-traditional learner knows loneliness, not so much in a social sense, as in the sense of identity as a learner.

Back-door learning has been something of an embarrassment to traditional institutions. To learners, non-traditional learning is sometimes a frustrating kind of satisfaction, fulfilling to the self, but eliciting from a schooling and credential-oriented society an incomplete and distorted image of actual accomplishments. In ways characteristic of any bureaucracy, the viewpoints, policies, and procedures of traditional education have denigrated, dismissed, or downplayed the self-initiated and self-directed efforts of learners. It is almost as though such learners don't really exist; as though their achievements in learning can't be identified, measured, and compared with the achievements of traditional learners. Similarly, studies of non-traditional learning have, by and large, been ignored.

Most participants felt that the sole support of assignment comments from frequently tardy tutors and the occasional letter of inquiry to the Course coordinator left much scope for person-to-person discussion. Recent attempts at personalization of AIOU services such as the Enquiry Cell and

Students' Extra-Curricular Activities have helped considerably in bridging the gap between the young learner and the University, but most PGD people are hesitant to participate in these programmes for age or service reasons. Similarly, inter-teacher discussions on ELT problems are difficult because of the lack of qualified personnel in the field.

### GENERAL DIFFICULTIES

A certain malaise apparent in teachers of English stems partially from fluctuating educational policies, poorly prepared or out-moded texts and a highly unfavourable student/teacher ratio, especially in rural colleges. In cases where a single teacher deals with a class of over a 100, assembly of the class itself takes upto ten or fifteen minutes, leaving only twenty-five minutes for the actual period. Another contributory factor is the existing discrepancy between current academic realities and future plans, as for instance in the difference between recognition of the importance of English on national and international levels and the controversial attitudes implicit in official plans to exclude English as a medium of instruction in all Government institutions from 1989. It is unfortunate that the retention of English as a medium has somehow become synonymous with a surrender of religion and/or culture. As Smith asserts in a cogent analysis of English as a world language, it is readily apparent that the learning of a specific language does not in any way diminish the inherent significance of vernacular tongues.

Teachers of pre-medical and pre-engineering classes face additional difficulties in teaching a tension-ridden group who, preoccupied largely with securing high percentages for admission to professional institutions, are consistently averse to compulsory English classes. Since, academically speaking, Intermediate is a kind of "great divide", it is essential that special courses be devised for this ESP category. Indeed the PGD can only be effectively implemented in the context of a thoroughly revised syllabus with emphasis — in language classes — on English as a functional language. While everyone agreed conceded that teaching could be enriched by supplementary material such as pictures, maps, charts, overhead projectors slides, cassette and radio, most teachers are reluctant to use personal material in the absence of institutional help in providing them. It was suggested that PTV screening of relevant films

on texts used in the English literature curriculum would facilitate the teacher's task by familiarizing students with a different cultural perspective. This may, perhaps, be more readily possible with the commencement of a second television channel.

Teachers labour under a number of social and psychological constraints and are often trapped, as it were, between the Scylla and Charybdis of education and society. Accorded merely lip service on one hand to the "nobility" of their profession they are, on the other, sensitive to their relatively insignificant, socially peripheral position in a power-structured society such as ours. To this pervasive uneasiness may be added several other factors. This has previously included insecurity regarding actual equivalence of Diploma/degrees from the open system, the battle for which has only recently been successfully concluded. In wanting real as well as formal recognition by job-giving agencies and in contending with sceptical attitudes towards non-traditional learning, teachers suffer from a sense of victimization which is not entirely unjustified. Also relevant is the problem of the "psychologically absent" teacher who, caught in his present job, lacks a basic sense of commitment to his subject, work and students and who yearns perpetually for greener pastures.

Many participants regretted that existing classroom conditions were not entirely favourable to the best possible implementation of PGD methodology which is centred on the four main linguistic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing. Ideally, language lessons should integrate all four aspects, but candidates were quick to point out the difficulties of doing so. Discussions on developing more constructive teacher-attitudes evoked the following responses.

### LISTENING

Traditional emphasis on 'obedience' in the student is, if anything, counter-productive to good learning. Classroom routine tends towards an increasing monologue situation in which the teacher speaks unceasingly and students listen in a semi-hypnotic state. Listening becomes a passive condition with little feedback from the listener. In such situations it is not possible to gauge the extent of comprehension when listening has deteriorated into a totally passive encounter.

Listening comprehension can be enhanced by the regular use of pictures, charts, films, cassette players and radio.

## SPEAKING

Possibly the most problematical in the current Pakistan context, the speaking skill is considered by most teachers to be extremely difficult to teach. Except for a tiny vocal group, the majority of the class are reluctant to speak for several reasons. Unfamiliarity with the language outside the classroom, fear of censure and actual ignorance of speech patterns all fall into this category. Extroverts tend to talk better and introverts to read or write well. This may be a generalization, but as Rivers suggests:

Since conversation is essentially interaction between persons, comprehension plays a role, as well as skill in expression. The student may have acquired skill in expressing himself in the new language code, but have had little practice in understanding the language when spoken at a normal speed of delivery in a conversational situation. He therefore makes a noncommittal acknowledgment of the fact that he has been addressed; he has not comprehended sufficient elements in the message to be able to make a further contribution to the discussion, or to be stimulated into a meaningful rejoinder. The conversational gambit lapses, and in a classroom situation the teacher finds himself obliged to initiate another possible chain of interaction along new lines. Students need much practice in listening to the language before attempting sustained conversation. They also need practice in seizing on the elements of a preceding utterance which will provide them with the breathing space necessary for the formulation of their own contribution to a continuing verbal exchange.

In a class group, the teacher must be alert to recognize personality factors which are affecting participation in foreign-language discussion. Some students are talkative, other are shy or taciturn. These characteristics affect student performance in the oral part of the lesson. Nida noted among missionaries that the talkative extrovert learned the language faster than the quiet, studious person. Some students are, by nature, cautious or meticulously careful; still others are unduly sensitive, and therefore easily embarrassed

or upset if found to be in error or not understood. Students in each of these categories often prefer to say nothing rather than run the risk of expressing themselves incorrectly.

Elsewhere, Rivers speaks of the dangers of negative teacher attitudes. Classroom exchanges, debates and a generally supportive atmosphere will obviously help the student develop better speech skills. Frequent use of overseas radio programmes give an idea of correct pronunciation and helps the teacher who is himself uncertain of difficult words. The notoriously difficult question of the definite and indefinite article and such factors as intonation, rhythm and so on. In a stressed-timed language such as English the learner (used probably to a syllable-timed vernacular) will, if unchecked, become virtually unintelligible. Sports programmes are useful for teaching the Present Simple tense and news listening will provoke discussions and foster awareness of world issues. These strategies will help reduce the number of students who despite years of language learning are unable to speak with any accuracy or ease. Teachers should encourage questions and spontaneous expression by maximum participation among the class rather than repeated reliance on a few articulate favourites. Oral skills should ideally precede writing ones, but an emphasis on rote-learning means silent reading and memorization rather than speech.

### READING

The PGD units on the psychology of processes in reading are useful, but in an examination rather than learning-oriented system, there is persistent and unhealthy emphasis on 'mechanical' reading and verbatim reproduction of material under examination conditions. The gap between effective reading and comprehension/assimilation is therefore not encouraged to read material beyond prescribed texts. In actual fact students disregard even basic texts in favour of the ubiquitous guide key "substitutes". Good reading habits are inseparable from adequate library facilities. However even where available as in urban areas these are seldom fully utilized, while those who wish to do so cannot in rural areas lacking such facilities.

### WRITING

Again, the emphasis on memorisation and repetition means that organisational skills in proceeding from word to

sentence, sentence to paragraph and paragraph to page, and so on, are ignored in favour of repetitious textual matter. Still in wide use, the outmoded grammar-translation method has failed to ensure the correct application of grammatical structures in actual writing. Even students of "advanced" English are frequently unable to write simple, error-free letters or applications. Recurring errors of punctuation, spelling and vocabulary indicate the absence of good dictionary habits. The situation is often worsened by lack of teacher-interest in failing to provide feedback through promptly returned writing assignments.

It should not, in conclusion, be surmised that the mood of the Workshop was consistently negative. On the contrary, almost all participants benefited from the formal lectures and found the informal discussions very useful, despite the recognition of problems of language learning/teaching through distance methods. It might be salutary, at this juncture, to cite an encouraging view of the immense potentialities inherent in the non-formal teaching system. In this regard Ronald Gross wishes:

... to call attention to the passionate pursuit of truth beyond academe, by all kinds of people in all kinds of realms: the hard sciences from microbiology to astronomy, the humanities from history to metaphysics, the social sciences from demographics to environmental activism; other realms of knowledge denigrated or undreamt of by the academy ..... utterly voluntary, proactive, self-directed, autonomous, idiosyncratic, non-institutionalized, productive, innovative, and joyous.

## Notes

1. Cited in Desmond J. Keegan, "On Defining Distance Education", in David Sewart, Desmond Keegan and Borje Holmberg, Eds., Distance Education, International Perspectives, Beckenham, Croom Helm, 1983, p.8.
2. "The concept of distance education", Distance Education, pp. 3-4.
3. Charles A. Wedemeyer, "Back Door Learning in the Learning Society", Distance Education, pp.128-129.

4. Larry E. Smith, "EIL versus ESL/EFL: What's the Difference and What Difference Does the Difference Make?", Forum, XXIII, October, 1985, P-6.
5. Wilga M. Rivers, Teaching Foreign-Language Skills, Chicago, 1968, pp.192-193.
6. ibid., p.194.
7. Ronald Gross, "The Converse of MCE (Mandatory Continuing Education)". Second Thoughts, 2, October, 1979, p.11.

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