

What Foreign Language Teaching Should Aim At

Naomi AIBA

Abstract

Foreign languages have been taught since the beginning of education at school. However, the goals of language education have been changed as time passed; sometimes getting information of ancient authors was emphasized, sometimes analyzing sentence structures was considered important, and sometimes the speaking ability was believed to be almost everything to acquire. Sadly, however, it has hardly been thought that goals were achieved whatever they might be. The main reason for this failure is that we do not understand the differences between mother tongues and foreign languages. In this paper, it is clarified what we should aim at in foreign language education at school.

1. The Aim

Foreign languages have been taught at school for so many years; in the past the main purposes were sometimes the acquisition of information from great authors in the past, sometimes the analyzation of sentence structures, and sometimes the conversation skills. Unfortunately, people have seldom thought that any one of these missions has been achieved. In this paper it is clarified that educational programs have not offered enough time for foreign language teaching and that the current emphasis on speaking does not bring any fruit to students.

2. What Foreign Language Teaching Aimed at in School

From the beginning of foreign language teaching to the early 1960's, Greek and particularly Latin were taught as main subjects in Europe and students were expected to acquire knowledge from great ancient authors through read-

ing. It might be possible even to say that education at school was the teaching of Latin and Greek. In Japan, reading Chinese classics was extremely important until the late 1800's, when English suddenly took the place of Chinese classics. In the past, probably all over the world, getting knowledge and information through reading was the main purpose of foreign language education and at the same time analyzing skills were considered to be improved through reading foreign languages.

In those days, translation from the target language into students' mother tongue was almost always the main activity in class. The translation work, which tends to be avoided in class these days because it does not help students improve the foreign language, is considered to have improved students' mother tongues to considerable degrees. This is at least part of the reasons that it is sometimes said the abilities of students' mother tongues have recently deteriorated.

In the early 1960's, however, people expressed complaints that the languages they learned at school were useless; they insisted that education be overtly effective—**namely, that students acquire skills of communication.** Since Latin was no longer used in everyday situations, it was thought in Europe, it was useless to teach it and instead those languages which were widely used in everyday situations and in commerce should be taught. In Japan people started to say that the English which had been taught at school so far was nothing because students could not “speak” a word in English. In those days, it was often said that society demanded overt knowledge and skills of students; students were expected to use (particularly speak) the languages they learned at school, and they were far more interested in present-day languages than dead ones and thus they would study harder if they were offered practical languages. As a result Latin lost its place at most schools in Europe, and modern languages were introduced with emphasis on the conversation skills. Unfortunately, however, the results of teaching “practical” languages at school have hardly been satisfactory. Japan tried to, and in many cases did, put the oral part in class work, but the time for the oral work is often considered to be just a recess time. In the United States of America practicality is always extremely important in anything. What is learned (at school or anywhere else) must be practical. Language learning is no exception; the oral work has not been ignored in class. In spite of that, the U.S.A. does not necessarily have good results.

Overall, very few countries seem to be successful in foreign language teaching. (Scandinavian

countries are said to be quite successful in foreign language (or English) teaching. It should be noted, however, that their mother tongues and English belong to the same language family—Indo-European.)

3. Expectations and Disappointments in Foreign Language Teaching

When students start learning a foreign language at school, they almost always expect too much; they unconsciously expect they will be able to particularly “speak” the language in a few years, or even in a year without working so hard judging from the fact that they did not study their mother tongues but have no problems speaking them in everyday situations. As soon as they begin to learn a foreign language, they notice that there are incredibly large numbers of things to learn ahead of them, and in fact, their language abilities do not improve at all in a year or even in a few years. They realize that their past efforts contributed nothing to their language studies and consequently give up serious studies.

Teachers should tell students first that language learning requires enormous amounts of time and effort and that they should not expect they can learn a foreign language the way they acquired their mother tongue. The reality is that teachers do not let students know the difficulties of foreign language learning, fearing that the knowledge of the hardship may dampen students' enthusiasm.

4. When Foreign Languages Should Be Taught

Most students almost all over the world, in re-

ality, fail to learn foreign languages, even though everyone acquired their mother tongue without conscious efforts. Naturally, people started to think anyone can learn foreign languages as well as mother tongues if they start learning early in their childhood.

Penfield and Roberts (1959) were the first to suggest academically that there exists a critical period—namely, it is extremely difficult or even impossible to learn a language after a certain age, and Lenneberg (1967) supported their Critical Period Hypothesis. Since then, there have been so many pro-arguments (Asher and Garcia 1969; Johnson 1992; Patkowski 1980; and others) and con-arguments (Ehrman and Oxford 1995; Neufeld 1978; White and Genesee 1996; and others) published.

There are still both arguments coming out and it is impossible to conclude whether a critical period exists or not. However, the fact remains that it is far more difficult for 13- or even-7-year-old students who stay in foreign countries to learn other languages than their mother tongues. In this paper, the matter of a critical period is left open for future researches.

5. Different Levels of the Difficulty of Foreign Languages

The difficulty of learning foreign languages is not equal for everyone. Regarding difficulty levels there are three points to be considered.

The first consideration is directed to the linguistic factor—the ancestral linkage of languages, or language families. The closer the target language is to students' mother tongue in grammatical structure, the easier it is. English and German, for example, belong to the same lan-

guage family and are very close in structure; however, English and Japanese are in the different language families and are very different from each other in structure and many other points. Thus, English is considered to be far easier for German students than for Japanese students.

Secondly, the individual factor is to be taken into account. Those students who take particular interest in chanson (French songs), for example, will work harder and improve French faster than those who are not interested in any things French.

The other factor is social; those students who are surrounded with people who are well versed in a foreign language think they can, and actually do, learn it more easily than those who have no one with its knowledge around them.

It is sometimes said that 1,000 hours of class work is necessary to acquire the skills of using a target language, but it is really difficult to estimate how much time each student needs to acquire the skills of using the target language, because these three factors are intertwined in language learning.

In Japan, students learn about 800 hours in total of English at junior and senior high schools, and those non-majors of English who go to college have another 240 hours of instruction; yet, hardly any one of college graduates has a satisfactory command of English. Many people complain of the educational methods and system, but this is not a right criticism. English is difficult for Japanese students and furthermore they do not study seriously or hard enough, but they expect their little effort should bear fruit. For Japanese students, Korean is probably the easiest judging from the linguistic and social factors; if

Korean is taught at school, considerable numbers of students will succeed in getting a practical command of Korean with the same amounts of time and effort as in the case of the present English education.

6. Fallacies of Emphasizing Speaking without Grammar

As mentioned in Chapter 4, it is not known whether a critical period exists in language learning. In spite of that, in many countries including Japan, it seems to be thought that foreign languages should be taught at an early age with special emphasis on speaking. The important point here is that a particular emphasis on the speaking ability actually means to practice speaking without teaching grammar.

Language is rule-governed though there are always some exceptions whether it is spoken or written. Only a few of these rules are acquired probably by advanced students in natural contexts without being taught, and many others are extremely difficult or even impossible for ten-year-old beginners, for example, to acquire if they are not taught or consciously learned. Even if students were taught “conversations”—namely, given a small number of conversational expressions without the knowledge of grammar—they would not be able to use them in speaking or in writing. Adult language learners must always remember that language is rule-governed and that those rules are generally very difficult or even impossible to acquire in natural contexts without conscious learning practices.

Supposing that foreign language teaching aimed at every student being able to say “Hello!” in everyday conversation or to use a foreign lan-

guage (English) in shopping—in this case, a foreign language means fragments of set phrases in the language—it would be useless to teach that kind of language, partly because it would be learned in the natural contexts without much conscious effort in only a few years and partly because it could not be used in formal situations or in trading between companies; furthermore, since the broken language serves the purpose of shopping and everyday communication, it tends to be fossilized. Once fossilized (now it is called Pidgin), it is usually impossible to unlearn. Why do we have to learn Pidgin and are hindered from climbing up the social ladder? What we have to learn is a formal language, one we can use in formal situations, one through which we can improve ourselves.

7. Pronunciation

In Chapter 4, it was pointed out that there are arguments both for and against a critical period; this is in the acquisition of not only grammar but pronunciation as well. In spite of that, as far as pronunciation is concerned, most people seem to agree that students who were exposed to the target language in the natural contexts for some time in the junior or senior high school days produce native-like or far better pronunciation than those who were not.

Language teachers seem to believe that students should listen to the sound first without looking at the text. According to the finding of Catford and Pisoni (1970), however, those college students who had the articulation of difficult sounds explained without listening practices were far better both in listening comprehension and in sound production on the test given after a

one-month training session than those who were exposed in the listening practice to the same sounds. This finding is convincing according to the experiences of the present writer.

8. What Should Be Pursued in Foreign Language Teaching

When students learn the language which is linguistically close to their mother tongue, it seems that they do not have to learn some parts of the target language, which they understand without conscious learning because of the similarity. Judging from the fact that most language students all over the world have a lot of difficulty with their foreign languages, similarities which do not have to be taught should be ignored, and furthermore it is important to note that memorizing set phrases used in conversation without grammatical comprehension—the present emphasis on conversation—does not improve students' language skills including conversation or give them analytical training.

Language learning consists of two parts: grammar work and practice work.

Grammar work means what was usually done in class all over the world before the early 1960's. Included here are grammatical explanations, grammar exercises, translation to the mother tongue which is often called "reading," analyzing complicated sentences, and so forth. Some of these activities such as translation and sentence analyzing are often taken away from class work these days. These activities, however, are essential not only for language learning but also for analytical training. It is often said that there are very few people all over the world who understand mathematics taught at high school, but it

still continues to be taught because it is believed to give analytical training to students. Language learning is considered to have the same effect; that is part of the reasons why foreign languages have been offered as part of the general education for so many years.

This kind of work, which may be called traditional work, seems to be necessary for language learners to internalize the target language, particularly if it is linguistically different from the mother tongue. Language teachers and educators seem to consider that students grasp this part easily within a short period of time, but except for only an extremely limited number of gifted students, all students take an enormous amount of time; in reality, many high school graduates in Japan do not understand even basic grammar of English.

The other part to be considered is practice work. This includes oral practices, writing, and advance-level reading. (Reading on the beginning and intermediate levels could be included in the above-mentioned grammar work—translation to the mother tongue.) This part requires far more time and effort than the above grammar work. It is unrealistic to give all this work in class; students are expected to do so many times as much homework as class work to acquire "practical" skills. Since students do not spend so much time doing homework, they do not acquire the "practical" command.

As mentioned above, the following points should be noted, particularly if the target language is linguistically different from the mother tongue:

1. An enormous amount of "grammar work" is necessary. The present high school graduates

in Japan may not have enough time for this work at school.

2. "Practice work" needs far more time and effort than grammar work. Practically, it is difficult or probably impossible for students to do enough practice work at school.

3. Grammar work is not only necessary for language learning but useful for analytical training in education as well.

4. Only those students who can, and actually do, complete both grammar work and practice work should expect to acquire overt "practical" skills of foreign languages, and those who do not wish to, or cannot, spend enough time on both grammar and practice have no choice but to give up practical skills.

5. Even those who give up practical skills can train themselves by working on grammar—grammar exercises, sentence analyzing, translation, and so on. Moreover, if they think they need to use—speak and write—the target language, then they can start to do practice work; if they had completed grammar work seriously enough at school, they would develop and improve their practical skills faster than those who had neglected grammar work.

In conclusion, we should pay more attention to grammar work, which includes reading as mentioned above, as we did in the past at least at junior and senior high schools and probably at college as well. Conversation books widely used in class these days are not effective enough; essays and novels by great ancient authors should be included (some of them are quite complicated in sentence structure and thus they give students good analytical work).

References

- Catford, J.C., and D.B. Pisoni. 1970. "Auditory vs Articulatory Training in Exotic Sounds." *Modern Language Journal* 54:477-81.
- Asher, J.J., and R. Garcia. 1969. "The Optimal Age to Learn A Foreign Language." *Modern Language Journal* 53:334-341.
- Ehrman, M., and R. Oxford. 1995. "Cognition Plus: Correlates of Language Learning Success." *Modern Language Journal* 79:67-89.
- Johnson, J. 1992. "Critical Period Effects in Second Language Acquisition: the Effect of Written and Auditory Materials on the Assessment of Grammatical Competence." *Language Learning* 42:2:217-248.
- Lenneberg, E. 1967. *Biological Foundation of Language*, New York: John Wiley.
- Neufeld, G.G. 1978. "On the Acquisition of Prosodic and Auditory Features in Adult Language Learning." *Canadian Modern Language Review* 34:163-174.
- Patkowski, M.S. 1980. "The Sensitive Period for the Acquisition of Syntax in a Second Language." *Language Learning* 30:449-472.
- Penfield, W. and L. Roberts. 1959. *Speech and Brain Mechanism*. New York: Atheneum.
- White, L. and F. Genesee. 1996. "How Native Is Near-Native? The Issue of Ultimate Attainment in Adult Second Language Acquisition." *Second Language Research* 12:3:233-265.