

***DESERET LANGUAGE
and
LINGUISTIC SOCIETY***

PROCEEDINGS

SIXTH ANNUAL SYMPOSIUM

27-28 March 1980

Brigham Young University

Provo, Utah

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edited by Royal Skousen

Department of English

Brigham Young University

We are very grateful to the College of Humanities
at Brigham Young University for their generous
financial support in publishing these proceedings.

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1980

Deseret Language and Linguistic Society

Stevenson's Genealogical Center

230 West 1230 North

Provo, Utah 84601

1980

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LEARNING A SECOND LANGUAGE:
A CHALLENGE OLDER PEOPLE CAN HANDLE

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Today there is a growing interest with many older people to learn a foreign language. Peace Corps workers, missionaries, and businessmen find a great need to be able to speak to people in a foreign tongue. While many language programs have proven effective with younger learners, often when older adults take these courses, they become frustrated, disillusioned, and lose the desire to learn. The special concerns of the older language learner is the topic of my paper today.

The other day I ran into a friend of mine who had heard I was to be giving this presentation. He was in a hurry, and asked me to tell him in 25 words or less how older people can learn a foreign language. I wish it were that simple. I wish I knew the answer! Some papers present all the answers, and other papers ask all the questions. This is a paper that asks the questions.

In this paper I will not propose a model for teaching languages to older people, but will pose some of the questions that must be answered before an optimal model can be developed. Since the answers to some of these questions may already be available, one of the purposes of this paper is to solicit input from others that can be used to develop a pilot model for teaching older people a second language.

First, I will talk about various characteristics of older foreign language learners, then discuss some of the variables that enter into learning, and finally point to some ways that learning can be maximized with older adults.

Let us look first at some basic principles to be considered when teaching older people. You will find them in your handouts.

PRINCIPLES TO BE CONSIDERED WHEN TEACHING OLDER PEOPLE

- I. Older people can learn almost as well as younger learners under ideal conditions. However, older people are more easily distracted or disturbed, which interferes with learning.
- II. The problem is not age, but inappropriate teaching strategies. "Older students are more affected than younger students by poor teaching practice and style" (Davies, 1973, pp. 185-187). Children learn language under quite similar situations; adults learn under quite diverse conditions.

- III. Learning methods based on imitation and memorization are generally not very effective with older learners (Davies, 1973, pp. 184-185). They can usually learn better by synthesis and evaluation.
- IV. Older people tend to have greater difficulty in accepting new ideas and methods, having practiced their behaviors over a lifetime.
- V. Older people tend to behave in a way which is consistent with what people expect of them. Because many older learners believe that they are more difficult to train, less adaptable to change, and too old to learn, they become inhibited, and learning becomes more difficult. There is a correlation between a student's rating of himself as a learner and his success in learning.
- VI. Adults often impose social-limiting factors on themselves (fear of embarrassment, set roles to defend against, ego-defense mechanisms, etc.).

With these principles in mind, let us now turn to the conditions we are up against in the language classroom and look at some of the variables that influence learning:

FACTORS THAT INFLUENCE LEARNING IN OLDER ADULTS

Characteristics of students

age
health
socio-economic status
education
background
learning habits
past experience
personal problems
personality type
emotional makeup
adaptability
disposition
preferences
concentration abilities
level of motivation
expectations
desire to learn
self-image
attitude

Characteristics of class

length of course
length of learning sessions
time spent on outside
learning activities
seating arrangement
lighting
temperature
comfort
ability to see
ability to hear
size of class
size of classroom
materials
teacher
teaching strategies

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but I think it gets at most of the factors involved. As you look over this list, you will notice that the characteristics in the column on the left, with the exception of the last five, are largely fixed, while those on the right can be altered. Carefully examining each of the characteristics can give us further insight into how a language learning program for older learners could be maximized.

Now let us look at some factors of language learning in general and see how they apply to older learners. Last October when Stephen Krashen spoke here at B.Y.U., he gave an excellent overview of conscious language learning and language acquisition (Krashen, 1979). As he described it, conscious language learning is that commonly found in language classrooms where the students are "taught" the language. Language acquisition, on the other hand, is a subconscious, natural way of learning similar to how children learn language. There are no grammatical explanations or rules to memorize, and the student may not always be aware that he has learned something.

A language learning model based on conscious language learning is typically a structured approach involving grammatical rules and a variety of classroom practice activities. This approach teaches the student to think about rules, form and correctness. With this approach, it is not uncommon to find that older learners know the grammatical rules of the language but don't use them in speech. In other words, they have been consciously learned, but not acquired. This type of conscious learning does have a function, however. The optimal language user refers to conscious language rules when they do not get in the way of communication (usually in written language and in prepared speech). It can be used for polishing the language, but in the end language must be acquired before fluency can be obtained (Krashen, 1979).

A language acquisition model of learning does not concern itself with a hierarchy of linguistic concepts which must be learned in sequence. Instead, it lets the student immerse himself in the language at the outset. This is how a child learns language. It could be compared to how we use an encyclopedia. We don't sit down and begin reading with page one of volume one and continue through page 3,000 of volume 36. Rather, we want a smattering of knowledge--an outline. We skip over things which do not interest us at the moment and get only the most pertinent information. We can fill in the holes with more detailed information as it becomes important to us. Likewise, a language learner need not learn every single thing about present tense verbs before learning some things about the subjunctive, for example. He can learn the basics about several concepts, then fill in the details as needed, easily picking up irregular verb conjugations and the like as times goes on.

A language course based on an acquisition model is a natural communication situation which does not use grammar as a teaching device, but lets the students speak through acquired competence. Rather than teaching the language, it lets the students learn it. In this approach, the teacher communicates what he thinks the student might understand by providing extra-linguistic context. He focuses on the

message rather than the form; he focus on WHAT he says rather than HOW he says it. All this may be through listening or reading, and comprises what Krashen calls comprehensible input.

There are a variety of methods that can be useful in providing comprehensible input for the student and it is not my purpose to describe them here. One that has meet with great success is Total Physical Response. At a night school German class for adults, it was shown that 32 hours Total Physical Response was as good or better than 150 hours of standard instruction, and Total Physical Response exceeded the standard instruction in comprehension (Krashen, 1979). Silent Way techniques are also very successful in providing good comprehensible input.

The question, however, is not "Which methodology is the best or the most effective?" The question is "How can we best use each methodology to enhance learning at each stage of the student's progress?" A student's progress may be enhanced at specific stages by using Community Language Learning (Council Learning), Suggestology, Total Physical Response, Silent Way, or other methodologies. This morning Dr. Wilga Rivers emphasized the need for conscious language learning, and I don't propose this be overlooked by any means. An optimal language program must include conscious language learning. The literature supports the view, however, that discovery learning is also a very effective teaching strategy for older learners (Davies, 1973).

Outside the classroom there are also many ways of providing good comprehensible input through the use of computer or machine assisted instruction, structured readings such as Cloze or Burling readers, communication games, and so forth. The list is as endless as the imagination of the teacher.

On an internship with B.Y.U.'s Department of Instructional Science, Dane Chapman and I have been working with the Missionary Training Center (MTC) in research and experimentation with the Spanish classes for the missionary couples. One of the approaches we are trying is similar to the "natural approach" classroom used at the University of California at Irvine as described by Tracy Terrell yesterday. The main objective of the class is to give the students as much comprehensible input as possible, through the use of Silent Way, Total Physical Response, and other conversational activities. The students are free to respond either in English or in Spanish, and errors are not directly corrected. The homework consists of studying written dialogs and readings, learning common phrases and expressions, reading grammar explanations, etc. The homework should give their language a more polished look, and has not been found to conflict with acquisition in the classroom. It is our hope that through this approach, the students will learn the necessary tools to acquire the rest of the language from native speakers in the country when they leave the MTC.

As important as comprehensible input and language acquisition are, the most important single determiners of success in language learning are psychological. Attitude is to language acquisition what aptitude is to conscious language learning. In conscious language learning

situations, there is a correlation between aptitude and how well the student learns the language. With language acquisition, the correlation is with attitude. The affective situation must be optimal for the student to overcome learning barriers and take full advantage of the input. In teaching literacy in Guatemala, a man once told me "Quiero aprender, pero no voy a aprender". ("I want to learn, but I'm not going to learn.") This man has gone through several teachers who have tried various approaches to teach him to read, but, as you can imagine, have been completely unsuccessful. This "I know I can't, but I'll try" attitude destroys the possibility of learning.

On the back of your handouts you will find a list of some of the more important things that can be done to affect attitude, and provide a more optimal learning situation:

Provide instruction individualized especially for each student. Let each student progress at his own rate--as quickly as he can. Then provide the students an opportunity to evaluate themselves and receive feedback about their progress.

Present the course as being effective and successful. This will build confidence in the students and help them believe the program will work, and that they really can learn from it.

Tell the students what is expected of them. Provide a detailed description of the course and clear instructions for each activity. Much of the frustration learners suffer is not from an inability to understand a concept, but from the inability to understand just what the teacher wants the student to do.

Expect performance from the students. Provide no excuses, but don't impose upon them an overly demanding schedule. It has been my experience, however, that more often than not too little is expected from adult language learners, rather than too much. Provide tasks sufficiently challenging to adults.

Minimize preoccupations with personal problems.

Build self esteem and pride by relating to and capitalizing on the students' previous experience and knowledge, then help the students communicate their individual strengths.

Create competition only with themselves and not with other students.

Provide psychological reality by having the students communicate important things.

Focus on communicating the message rather than on the correctness of the form.

The need for continued praise and recognition often shows either that the students see no need to learn, or that they feel what they are learning is irrelevant. When this is the case, help the students

understand why they need to learn the language to be able to communicate. Help them see the relevance of the things they are learning. (Grammatical jargon, non-communicative repetitions, meaningless dialogs, and the like often appear irrelevant to students.)

In the course of learning a language, some students suffer a loss of identity. Help them accept emotionally the person they will become after learning another language. Help them accept this new person with all the bad grammar, new found habits, desires, and cultural additions.

Provide a relaxed, pleasant, low-anxiety environment. The students should know the names of all other students and feel that they are among friends. The teacher should be one of those friends.

Provide for continuous, integrated review. Learning is seldom transferable to new learning tasks until it is overlearned (Morrisett, 1959, pp. 52-55).

Provide for listening comprehension before production. If production will be required as the course begins, then some pre-course listening may be necessary.

Learning groups should be small, with occasional interaction with a larger group. The small group will allow the students to progress rapidly, and the larger group will give them a chance to interact with many other people.

Provide for continual success. "Adults are also easily upset and disturbed by failure, and are quick to feel that they are getting nowhere" (Davies, 1973, p. 190). Nothing succeeds like success.

Hours could be spent discussing each one of these points, but I hope this discussion will prompt greater thought and insight into these areas.

The traditional approach to dealing with older couples is to individualize language teaching by adapting an existing program to the student's learning rate, giving additional tutorial help where needed, and so forth. What I would suggest is not this kind of individualization, not stretching or bending a given program to meet an individual's needs, but rather having a reservoir of programs that can be assigned to any individual. Rather than individualizing a program, I am suggesting we match up specific teachers, materials, approaches, and students to produce an optimal language learning experience. Certain teachers work best with students of a given personality type; some materials may work good for one student, but poorly with another; one approach may be particularly suited to the personality of a given teacher; one student may favor one approach over another; another student may prefer an intuitive approach in the classroom and an analytical grammatical text for study outside of class. In order to do this, much research and experimentation is needed to pin down the crucial variables so that rational assignments can be made that will

provide for each learner the particular approach, teacher, and materials that will enhance his learning. The methods and materials used in the classroom, the homework assignments, and even the teacher would all be selected to give each learner an optimal language learning experience. While this may be impractical for language classes with large enrollments, this may be what it needed when dealing with classes for older learners which are not usually so large that this would be impossible. An initial interview with the students could be used to determine the characteristics of the student, then assignment could be made to give that student the teacher, the materials, and the approach that would maximize that student's learning.

To identify these variables, a multi-disciplinary research and experimental effort, drawing on instructional science, educational psychology, language teaching, and other fields would be necessary because although some of these variables have been studied, what is still lacking is application research with the practical pedagogic issues in mind.

The rewards of learning a foreign language should not be denied anyone. And there are many older adults who have a wealth of knowledge to share with people who do not speak their native language. Given a proper chance through a language course designed with their needs in mind, these adults can learn to speak and communicate very effectively in a foreign language.

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