

“The Development of The Audiolingual Approach”

— Trends in Language Methodology In the United States —

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I. Psycholinguistics as an Interdisciplinary Study of Linguistics and Psychology:

Psycholinguistics is a relatively new field of study where linguists, whose research centered mainly around the contents of language, sought for professional cooperation from psychologists, who were engaged in the study of the process of language acquisition as well as of the analysis of language behavior from the functional side. “How does language function?” “How do people acquire language?” Those have been the focus of psycholinguistics. This new development enabled linguists to look into language pedagogy with a deeper insight. The idea of linguistic method conformed to the theories on psychology of language has brought various switches and changes in methodology. Just to name some learning theorists and their terms in relation to their research since the turn of the century, there are: functionalists, Pavlov and his “conditioned reflex” and “conditioned stimulus,” Thorndike and his “law of effect,” Watson and behaviorists, Skinner and his “operant conditioning,” reinforcement theorists, structural linguists, and gestalt psychologists. The most recent movements are neuropsychology and the cybernetic model.

II. Introduction to the Audiolingual Approach:

Nearly half a century ago, a group of linguists known as reinforcement theorists resorted to Thorndike’s method, which was to apply

scientific methods of inquiry to psychology and education. This was first called "stimulus-response" psychology, then later called "connectionism."¹ They maintained that the acquisition of a language rested upon habit formation and that the recurrence of the sequence of the stimulus-response-reward was the key to the establishment of habit patterns. With the study of human behavior, they observed that habits were formed according to similar events co-occurring under similar circumstances, in other words, repeated actions in response to similar stimuli (stimuli and responses.) The name "reinforcement" derived from Pavlov's theory of the unconditioned stimulus which came to be referred to as the reinforcement.² They maintained that a child, in the process of acquiring his mother tongue, uttered a sound or sounds, which were approved and encouraged by his parents or whoever took care of him, and thus the habits were reinforced. While structural linguists, who were making an effort to analyze and describe linguistic behavior from the side of phonology and grammatical structure, claimed that language was a social habit acquired in the speech community where a child was growing up. The combined effort was the development of a teaching technique known as the audiolingual method. The mainstream of this habit formation technique was, and still is, the aural-oral approach, that is, listening to and speaking the spoken language first, followed by learning to read and write the written language. Quoting from *Trends in European and American Linguistics*, what William Moulton called "the slogans of the day" are as follows: "Language is *speech*, not *writing*. A language is a set of habits . . . teach the language, not about the language. A language is what its native speakers say, not what someone thinks they ought to say."³ This method gradually permeated among the foreign-language teachers of the period. Further and greater development was made during the Second World War, when the need arose for quick training of a large number of interpreters and translators of various languages to serve in the Armed Forces.

III. Four Skills and Four Characteristics of the Audiolingual Approach:

As far as the learning processes of the audiolingual approach are concerned, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four skills which should be learned in that order. According to Working Committee III of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages;⁴ "The student should understand the foreign language as it is spoken by native speakers in situations similar to his own experience . . . He should speak the foreign language in everyday situations with reasonable fluency and correctness, and with pronunciation acceptable to the native speaker of the language . . . He should read the foreign language easily and without conscious translation . . . He should be able to communicate in writing anything he can say . . . Mastery of the skills must be accompanied by familiarity with the culture the language represents."

John B. Carroll, in *Research on Teaching Foreign Languages* (Nov. 1960);⁵ pointed out four essential characteristics of the method of foreign-language teaching. They are as follows:

- 1) Items are normally presented and learned in their spoken form before they are presented in their written form.
- 2) Teaching methods rest upon the careful scientific analysis of the contrasts between the learner's language and the target language.
- 3) Stress is laid on the need for overlearning of language patterns by a special type of drill known as "pattern practice."
- 4) There is an insistence on the desirability, or even the necessity, of learning to make responses in situations which simulate "real-life" communication situations as closely as possible.

IV. Detailed Account of the Four Characteristics in Terms of Four Skills:

- 1) The first of the above-mentioned four characteristics, from which the name "audiolingual" derived, is based upon the conviction that the

primary form of language is speech and not writing. As the name implies, in the course of learning, all the teaching materials are given in the spoken form of the target language, prior to any explanation on the structure, grammar, or lexicon of the language. This enables the student to acquire the ability to listen and speak in the same process as he learned his native tongue, eventually to induce him to think in the language and, at the most advanced level of learning, to speak with a natural flow of thoughts in the language. The emphasis is laid upon the correct and accurate pronunciation, accent, pause, and rhythm, without having any interference from being exposed to written materials. For, it is believed that any similarity in the graphic form of the two languages—the target language and the student's mother tongue—would lead to mispronunciation, incorrect accent and intonation. At this early stage, care must be taken so that the student may train his ear and tongue alone, and only after he has acquired the skill of uttering the recognizable and acceptable sound of the language he is learning, would he encounter the graphic form of what he has already learned. The conviction is that hearing is not just a passive mode of learning but requires an active mode of comprehension.

2) In the second stage, attention is drawn to the differentiation between the language the student is learning and that of his own. Stress is laid on the importance of analyzing scientifically the contrasts of these two languages so as to eliminate or bridge over the gaps the student might encounter while learning. This eventually will make it possible for the student to accomplish his objective with less time and effort. Consequently, the student will be able to discriminate more clearly between the usage of his native language and that of the foreign language. In this way, some of the interference of the native language will disappear. The conviction is that analogy provides better foundation for foreign-language learning than analysis. The underlying principle of the audiolingual method, therefore, is not analysis but analogy.

3) Politzer⁶ claims that "language is behavior...behavior can be

learned only by inducing the student to behave—in other words to perform in the language.” Hence the name “inductive method” came to be used. The above-mentioned drill is for the development of language habits so that performance might become habitual. The instructions on how to conduct the practice are stated clearly as follows: “The teacher presents a typical structure in the target language, drills the student in correct pronunciation and intonation, and then uses it as a ‘frame’ for modeling other utterances by such processes as substitution, expansion, and transformation. Each change made is minimal, and this practice continues to the point of saturation or automatic performance.”⁷ This learning method is based upon the belief that language is a vocal behavior and therefore, can be learned by actually behaving, that is, speaking. Enthusiastic supporters of the audiolingual method believe that forming the habit is the quintessence of language learning. The student is required to practice the drill until he can automatically respond. This is where the use of an audio-visual aid known as the language laboratory proved to be effective. Tireless tape-recorders can give ample structure patterns for the student to “mimic and memorize.” In addition to giving proper guidance, the teacher can supervise individual students and correct them when they mispronounce something. Unfortunately, though pattern drill and dialogue memorization are considered to be the core of the learning processes, they train the student to respond automatically in the language laboratory but not in a real-life situation. It is necessary, therefore, to provide ample opportunities for the student to vary and expand the basic structured dialogues after he has passed the primary stage of learning to memorize. “Pattern drills” are basically a process of “generalization” and “discrimination” in the sense that they are used in the behavioristic theories.⁸

4) The last, but not the least important is to induce the student to make responses in situations which are similar to those in everyday life. In the audiolingual method, two aspects—“skill” and “experience”—of language-learning are stressed. The student is exposed to an

environment where he can hear the language spoken and also is expected to speak it in order to actually communicate.⁹ The ultimate aim of this stage is the “transfer” of what has been learned in a particular situation to other situations so that the student will be able to use the language for his own purposes. Communication depends upon two acts—listening and speaking. Being able to understand what is said by native speakers, and to express oneself in their language, complement each other. For one act normally interacts with the other in communication. The processes involved in learning to communicate are described in the following paralleled schema, “skill-getting” and “skill-using,” which proceed together.¹⁰

“Skill-getting”

Cognition (knowledge):

1. Perception (of units, categories, and functions)
2. Abstraction (internalizing rules relating categories and functions)

Production (or pseudo-communication):

1. Articulation (practice of sequences of sounds)
2. Construction (practice in formulating communications)

“Skill-using”

Interaction (or real communication):

1. Reception (comprehension of a message)
2. Motivation (to communicate)
3. Expression (conveying personal meaning)

V. Analysis of the Basic Concept, Belief, and Efficacy of the Audiolingual Method:

The concept of what the nature of language is differs greatly among linguistic scientists. There seem to be two distinctions of thought—by the linguists, language is regarded as distinct sets of arbitrary vocal symbols, and by the psychologists, as systems of habits acquired through conditioning. At least for the behavioristic school, observable physical

manifestations of language are the only probable object of their analysis.

The original belief of enthusiastic supporters of the audiolingual approach derived from the Skinnerian theory that language is a verbal behavior and that it can be acquired through habit formation. According to this belief, "pattern drills" of "mimicry-memorization" are arranged and also language laboratory practices are organized so that automatic responses are developed but the need to understand grammar, structure, and lexical meaning are minimized. The emphasis is drawn to the process of theoretically producing habits for acquiring a foreign language most effectively.

There have been different viewpoints as to the effect of the method, according to the varied stands that the different schools of psycholinguists have taken. Judging from the exhaustive investigation conducted by G. Scherer and his colleagues at the University of Colorado from 1960 to 1962, reported in *A Psycholinguistic Experiment in Foreign-language Teaching* (1964),¹¹ it is obvious that students who are trained by the audiolingual method are superior in listening comprehension and speaking to those who are trained by the traditional grammar-translation method, whereas students of both methods learn reading and writing skills equally well.

VI. The Evolution of the Language Laboratory:

The audiolingual method has given rise to the development of the language laboratory, where students can concentrate on listening and repeating materials, tape-recorded by native speakers and chosen to meet their level of progress. In the meantime, a teacher can devote his time to supervising and correcting students' errors individually. It is necessary for the teacher to motivate and encourage each student, and for that matter, the teacher's character and personality greatly influence the degree of progress the student manifests. Taped materials and audio-visual aids such as film strips and pictures have contributed to the efficacy of the language laboratory practice. In addition to the clear-cut

descriptions of techniques and procedures, the sequence of hearing-speaking-reading-writing (taught in that order), and administrative and mechanical techniques are thoroughly explained in *The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching* (1960) by Edward M. Stack.¹² He argued that "the results have borne out what is generally believed to be the effect of language laboratory practice: The more one actively practices speaking and hearing the language, the better one becomes at speaking and understanding it; if one spends more time with audiolingual work than with graphic work, one is better at speaking and understanding the spoken language." Although concentration on one type of skill may lead to lopsided accomplishment, the traditional technique of reading, writing, and translating, which are later acquired in the classroom work, combined with the intensive practice provided by language laboratory, proves quite successful in achieving all-round knowledge of the target language, as both work complement and supplement each other.

Language laboratory work is thought to be ideal, for the taped materials can supply correct responses when the student makes any mistakes, thus reinforcing better speaking habits. This idea is compatible with the fundamental belief of the early reinforcement theorists. They believed that language learning is basically a mechanical process of habit formation and that habits are strengthened by reinforcement. This proved to be true in the case of language laboratory practice where the student can have the satisfaction of hearing his own taped responses immediately followed by the taped correct utterances of native speaker instructors, thus being able to evaluate himself. Especially, if various visual aids are used in addition to auditory stimulus, a better effect on acquiring "long-memory" is ensured.

VII. Advantages and Disadvantages of the Language Laboratory:

On the part of the student, one of the indispensable points of foreign-language learning is to overcome the shyness of hearing his own

awkward utterances in the presence of other students in the classroom. To avoid or lessen this probable barrier, the language laboratory is an ideal device to be utilized when the student is being trained by the audiolingual method at the early stage of learning. Each student is isolated in a booth, away from the rest of the class, not to be bothered by any such feeling of embarrassment. Furthermore, quite often, the language laboratory is so equipped that the student can be on his own to practice according to his own degree of progress, or, after reaching a certain level of learning, he can even choose the material best suited to his ability.

On the other hand, this very idea of being isolated can become a disadvantage when it comes to the student's ability to converse. Since the primary objective of the method is for the student to use the foreign language as a means of communication, practice in the language laboratory alone cannot equal the actual situations that the student may encounter. In order to fulfill this requirement, utmost care should be taken on the side of the teacher to supply ample opportunities for the student to perform in dialogue participation drills. It is advisable that, after having memorized enough situational dialogue, the student be encouraged to act out in suitable skits, plays, games, or even singing to try out his skill of manipulating what he has already learned.

VIII. Criticisms against the Audiolingual Approach:

Though enthusiastically supported by the majority of foreign-language teachers since its inception, this use of mechanical drills has been criticized and even rejected by some teachers, on the ground that the automatic "mim-mem" drill has not enabled students to become automatically fluent when it comes to real-life situations. It was found necessary for students to prepare to really communicate. Flexibility was required for students to adopt and apply what they learned in drills. Also, it was emphasized that creativity was necessary in order to express oneself spontaneously. How to cope with these problems became the

center of the concern of learning theorists. The need for visual representation of what students are practicing to accompany oral materials was recognized. Once again, the value of explaining semantics, language structure, and grammar-translation was stressed.

IX. A New Concept:

The 1960's turned a new leaf on the audiolingual approach. A new concept was introduced and various modifications were adapted. Norm Chomsky, at the Northeast Conference in 1966, cast a doubt on the accepted learning theory dependent on the belief that linguistic behavior was habitual and that skill could be acquired through practice. He declared, "Language is not a habit-structure. Ordinary linguistic behavior characteristically involves innovation, formation of new sentences and new patterns in accordance with rules of great abstractness and intricacy," and stressed the "creative aspect of language use." He maintained that human beings come into the world with innate language-learning abilities in the form of a language acquisition device which proceeds by "hypothesis-testing." His principle is that language use is a "rule-governed" behavior which enables speakers to create new arbitrary sentences which conform to the rules they have internalized. "I am, frankly," he said, "rather skeptical about the significance, for the teaching of languages, of such insights and understanding as have been attained in linguistics and psychology." "It is possible—even likely" he continued, "that principles of psychology and linguistics, and research in these disciplines, may supply insights useful to the language teacher. But this must be demonstrated and cannot be presumed. It is the language teacher himself who must validate or refute any specific proposal."¹³

X. Aspects in the Future:

In the future of the audiolingual approach, there lie a great many problems to be encountered and many difficulties to be solved. What the

future outcome will be depend greatly upon the actual application of the method and endeavour of the foreign-language teachers who are actually in the theater. More revisions may be necessary as the situation varies. Nevertheless, the most important thing to make the audiolingual method more successful, as the present writer sees it, is to prepare more individualized progressive method of teaching best suited to the student's real needs and abilities.

The development of language pedagogy, as Dr. Rivers puts it, is a "spiral development."¹⁴ In summarizing the conclusion of her lecture on "Foreign-language Pedagogy", she said, "if you take one part of this method, and compare it with that of ten years ago, it may seem like two extremes. But if you look back upon what it was half a century ago, you will know that the fundamental theory wasn't really so different from what it is now, except that the terms may be different. After all, we human beings are quite the same everywhere in many aspects, so the process of language learning cannot be too far apart, so as the pedagogy."

APPENDIX

Behaviorism

Behaviorism is a school of psychology that developed around the time of World War I and has influenced most psychological study since that time, particularly in the United States. Proponents of this school insisted that psychologists study behavior that could be observed objectively—muscle reactions, for example—rather than states of mind or feelings. As employed in psychology the term "behavior" seldom carries the popular meaning of good or bad deportment toward others but almost exclusively denotes the actions and reactions of an organism toward its environment.

Watson, John Broadus (1878-1958) American psychologist. The school of objective psychology, called behaviorism, was originated by Watson at Johns Hopkins with the publication of his paper "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views It" (1913). In it, he argued against the old school of introspection and mentalist concepts and proposed an objective, functional, and experimental method of psychology which would study the relationships between environmental events (stimuli) and behavior (response).

Skinner, B.F. (1904-) American psychologist. After conducting research on training pigeons in World War II, Skinner developed the "Skinner box," a device in which animal learning behavior could be strictly controlled and measured. His studies led him to the concept that the learning process is basically a matter of stimulus and rewarded, or "reinforced," response.

The Cybernetic Model

Application of the principles of control systems in machines to human behavior patterns. The central concept is that of "feedback," as a thermostat registers the results of its operation, compares these with the original instructions, and adapts its operation accordingly, so in many phases of human activity the organism seems to adapt its performance according to "feedback" or information on the results of its previous performance.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Thorndike, Edward Lee (1874-1949) His system of psychology—earlier called stimulus-response psychology and later connectionism—became a dominant influence on American teaching procedures. His work in the measurement of mental ability and achievement stimulated a half century of research. *The Psychology of Learning* (1913).

- 2 Pavlov, Ivan Petrovich (1849-1936) Russian physiologist. For his researches into the physiology of digestion, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1904. His most famous work was concerned with the conditioned reflexes. *The Work of the Digestive Glands: Lectures* (1902) in an English translation. Pavlov made his important discovery of the conditioned reflex while studying salivary reflexes in dogs. He discovered that after a number of occasions when a certain phenomenon (e.g., the ticking of a metronome) had preceded the placing of food in a dog's mouth, the salivary reflex, which is a natural reflex in response to food in the mouth, would appear in response to the ticking of the metronome. This learned reflex he called the *conditioned reflex* (CR), and the abnormal stimulus which aroused it was called the *conditioned stimulus* (CS). The food was the *unconditioned stimulus*, as it would normally arouse the salivary reflex (the *unconditioned reflex*), and this unconditioned stimulus came to be referred to as the *reinforcement*.
- 3 William Moulton wrote an account of "*Linguistics and Language Teaching in the United States 1940-1960*" in the report prepared in 1961 for the Ninth International Congress of Linguists, *Trends in European and American Linguistics 1930-1960* (Utrecht, 1961)
- 4 NEA (1960), pp. 17-19.
- 5 John B. Carroll listed four essential characteristics in "Research on Teaching Foreign Languages," prepared for the *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (November, 1960)
- 6 Robert Politzer devoted a chapter to "Some Psychological Aspects of Language Learning" in *Teaching French: An Introduction to Applied Linguistics*, Ginn & Co., Boston (1961)
- 7 Wilga M. Rivers, *The Psychologist and the Foreign Language Teacher* (The University of Chicago Press, 1964), p. 15.
- 8 Ibid., p. 117.
- 9 "Values of Foreign Language Study" in M.L.A., "FL Program Policy" (1956)
- 10 Rivers, Wilga M. & Temperley, Mary S., *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English: As a Second or Foreign Language*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964)
- 12 Edward M. Stack, *The Language Laboratory and Modern Language Teaching* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971)
- 13 Noam Chomsky, "Linguistic Theory," *Language Teaching: Broader Contexts*, ed. R. G. Mead, Jr., Report of Northeast Conference on the

Teaching of Foreign Languages (New York: MLA Materials Center, 1966), p. 43.

14 Wilga M. Rivers, Lecture on "Methodology" at Sophia University, Tokyo, July, 1979.