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by Mr. L. J. BIEBUYCK

Director of Education Natal Education Department

IT is possible for any owner of a radio to-day to hear the language of his choice at the turn of a button — the more languages he is able to understand, the wider his horizon and the greater his grasp of world problems. Wherever possible we should avoid the cold douche cast by an interpreter on conversation between people who do not know each other's language. Tradutorre — traditorre say the Italians, Translator — traitor. No interpreter can reproduce nuances of meaning and voice inflections. Literal translations are often soulless and misleading.

In South Africa our pupils learn the second language from the age of eight until they matriculate. Yet at the end of that time, while they may have made sufficient progress to pass the final examination, very few are able to engage in fluent conversation with a garage mechanic, a shop assistant, a newspaperman or a fellow traveller. There are many factors to account for this: a measure of arrogance ("It's up to the other man to learn my language"), diffidence, self-consciousness, the fear of making ludicrous errors and being laughed at, lack of practice and self-confidence and sheer mental lassitude. When we bear in mind that, with the best will in the world, the teacher can give each pupil about three minutes' active participation in a lesson, we can appreciate the difficulty subsequently experienced. It is only when these pupils are thrown into an environment where the other language has to be freely used, as in the army, that they develop fluency and confidence.

We as teachers have also been at fault. We have been too concerned with grammar, syntax and traditional methods of teaching Latin and not sufficiently with the living language. That is how French was taught in English schools. Schoolmasters scornfully remarked that they were not teaching prospective head waiters, but people able to read the French classics. P. G. Wodehouse describes the feeling of insufficiency that comes over the man who has spent years learning French in this way: "Into the face of the young man on the terrace of the hotel at Cannes there had crept a look of furtive shame: the shifty hangdog look which announces that an Englishman is about to talk French".

With the introduction of the direct method of foreign language teaching we found a new phase. From the very beginning instruction is given in the language to be taught. Teachers have to develop a line of pantomime. One teacher of Afrikaans complained that she could manage "Ek maak die venster oop" and "Ek maak die deur toe" quite easily but found "Die hond snuffel teen die muur" rather undignified. The direct method does get people talking in the language and listening to it spoken. Pupils are expected to associate objects and ideas directly with the appropriate words and expressions without first translating them. It is probably as close as we can get in the normal classroom to the natural way of learning a language.

We have also had the linguaphone records, intended mainly for self-tuition, and the tape-recorder, which enables a student to hear himself speak and to compare his enunciation with the correct version. These aids are limited in their usefulness and insufficient in a large class.

Now we have the language laboratory — a very modern teaching aid which overcomes most of the problems experienced in learning a foreign language — the pupil works on this own and, having no fear of making mistakes and being laughed at, and none of the frustration of not being able to keep up with the bright boys or being retarded by the dullards, he speaks and reads aloud with confidence, the monitor is able to give him far more individual attention, his errors are corrected immediately and he soon appreciates the phonological differences between the foreign language and his own.

You will soon see the laboratory in action. It will not by itself teach anyone a language nor is its possession any guarantee of success in turning out competent linguists. It does enable each student to work actively during the language laboratory period and to practise the language in privacy. And it is fun — I don't think it can ever become boring, as language lessons are apt to do on a hot summer's afternoon. The student has a sense of achievement if he can hear himself and assess the progress he is making in approximating to the sound made by the master.

Your intention is to use the laboratory mainly for Afrikaans. You wish to ensure that boys leaving

Kearsney will be able to follow spoken Afrikaans readily and effortlessly, a first essential in a bilingual country such as ours. I have frequently to receive deputations or conduct meetings in which both language groups are represented. Usually each person speaks his own language and is readily understood by the others. There should never be any need to repeat what has been said in the other language.

I am particularly pleased that French has been introduced as a third language at this school: here too the laboratory should be of inestimable value. At your Speech Day a plea was made for French by Dr. Birley, who made particular mention of the vast African continent where French is spoken in many states. I think also of the cultural value of the language, which has had so powerful an impact on English and which is to-day increasingly being used in our commerce. Let us not delude ourselves into thinking that you can get along anywhere with English. You can at expensive restaurants and shops which cater for tourists — but few places elsewhere. French speakers are equally convinced that you can get along anywhere in French — as you can along the Mediterranean seaboard. I know virtually no Spanish, Portuguese or Italian. Yet on a trip through the countries where these languages are spoken, I found that people gazed at me uncomprehendingly when I spoke English but responded readily in French. Somehow every cultured South African should acquire a knowledge of French — and how can he do so more pleasantly and efficiently than by means of the language laboratory?

I am sure the English master will wish to use the laboratory to improve the speech of his pupils. I am not concerned about what is called the South African accent, any more than is a Scot or an American about his accent. But the vowels should be clear and the voice not strident or nasalised. A South African in London gazed uncomprehendingly at the porter, who on taking his luggage said to him: "You left a pie"! There was no pie in evidence. Gradually it dawned on him that the porter meant: "You'll have to pay"! He then made sure that his own vowels were beyond reproach before laughing at others.

Kearsney now has a joyous and absorbing method of learning languages without unimaginative, unpalatable and stultifying drills. Soon we shall expect the school to produce boys able to speak fluent English, Afrikaans, French and eventually Zulu. You are in the forefront of what may well be a linguistic revolution. I wish you well and have much pleasure in declaring the language laboratory formally open.

With Best Wishes
from
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