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1965
Johannesburg College of Education
https://hdl.handle.net/10539/27456
Van Aswegen, I.G. (1965). The development of a language course for commercial and industrial requirements. Symposium: A Journal of Education for Southern Africa, pp. 94-96

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THE DEVELOPMENT OF A LANGUAGE COURSE FOR COMMERCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL REQUIREMENTS

As presented by I. G. VAN ASWEGEN of Shell South Africa (Pty.) Limited at a conference on "The Language Laboratory and Language Learning" held at the Johannesburg College of Education on 26th September, 1964

SHELL SOUTH AFRICA (PTY.) LIMITED decided to introduce courses in Afrikaans as from early in 1963 in order to assist staff members in becoming bilingual. This decision followed the success achieved by Shell International Petroleum Company Limited, London, who have been using a language laboratory in the teaching of Indonesian since June, 1960.

It was decided to introduce a course in practical, spoken Afrikaans with special reference to oil industry terminology. The broad objective of the course was to provide each course member with a vocabulary of 1,500 words, which he will be able to understand when reading or when hearing the spoken word. Secondly, to enable each course member to carry on an everyday conversation in Afrikaans thereby making as many of the 1,500 words part of his personal, "active" vocabulary as possible.

The course is of four weeks' duration, i.e. 20 working days giving 130 hours of tuition besides the time devoted to private study during the evenings and over week-ends. The daily programme consists of a $1\frac{3}{4}$ hour session followed by a $\frac{1}{4}$ hour morning tea break, a $1\frac{3}{4}$ hour session followed by $1\frac{1}{4}$ hour lunch break. In the afternoon a session of $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours is followed by 15 minute tea break and a $1\frac{1}{2}$ hour study period. The morning sessions are devoted to work on the tape, e.g. the learning of grammar and applying knowledge by working through exercises. During this period vocabulary is also built up, especially the oil industry terminology. The duration of a spell in the cubicles is approximately 45 minutes which is followed by a $\frac{1}{2}$ hour or 20 minutes in the class, as a group. The afternoon period of $1\frac{1}{2}$ hours is spent in practical work and spontaneous speech. The last period of the day is for revision and consolidation of all work done during that day as well as the preparation of assignments for the following day.

Classes are completely informal. Students and instructor use first names in addressing each other, thereby avoiding all stiffness and formality. This informality provides a close association between the instructor and the students and it enables them to draw upon the personal experiences which they have gained in their own language background.

Courses consist of only eight students and this ensures personal attention by the instructor and individual assistance wherever it may be necessary. Students are virtually under an Afrikaans quarantine during a course as they are requested to use only Afrikaans during their tea breaks, during meal hours and at all times when they are socially together, besides the time spent in speaking Afrikaans in the class.

The purpose of the practical sessions is to enable the student to use the knowledge which he has learnt on the tapes spontaneously. During this period the students are encouraged to talk about matters that interest them and on topical matters and thereby accuracy and fluency of expression are promoted. The subjects selected for discussion are ones in which the students have a vital interest and in which they are eager to voice their opinions. The aids to stimulate discussion are of various types and a great deal of use is made of films, as well as newspapers and magazines and company publications, roneoed extracts from books and photographs. The photographs place the student in the situation that is desired within the oil industry and provide the visual link with the learning of terms commonly used within the oil industry.

The depicting and enacting of situations by means of role plays such as mock meetings, mock interviews, mock board meetings or mock sales demonstrations are found very useful. During the role plays tape recordings are made and these are played back and discussed. Errors are pointed out so that the student can learn from errors made by himself and by others during such discussions.

Debates are also useful in stimulating spontaneous discussions by bringing emotion into play and thus reducing the artificiality of the situation.

All aspects of the course are considered important and vital to success. It cannot be said that the tape work is more important than the practical periods or that the practical periods could be of more benefit than the tape work. Together they form an integral whole and the one is complementary to the other. Both are essential in ensuring final success.

The students attending these courses are all adults, and they have a strong desire and have reasonable motivation to learn. They are men who have a broad background and a rich experience based on their home language and this experience can be utilized in the teaching of a new language. It is not like the situation with children where the frames of reference are limited.

All nominees are first tested orally and in writing and are then graded into three categories. The Grade I category is for those who are absolute beginners. Grade II is a course for those who have a very elementary background and Grade III for those who have a reasonably strong background but who have not used Afrikaans for a number of years.

It is found that the general need for Grade I and II courses is less than for the Grade III courses. Approximately 22 per cent of the nominations fall into the Grade I category, 23 per cent in the Grade II category and 55 per cent in the Grade III category. The majority of the courses are therefore at the higher level where a reasonable background in Afrikaans already exists and thus rapid progress can be expected. The intensity of the course enables dynamic results to be observed.

The three courses cover a primary and secondary phase. The primary phase consists of 34 sessions and the secondary phase 17 sessions. The Grade I students start with session 1 in the primary course and work gradually through to the end of session 34. Grade II students do only a brief revision of sessions 1 to 4 of the primary course and work through to session 34 and in addition do a number of selected sessions from the secondary course. Grade III students do a brief revision of sessions 1 to 11 of the primary course, they work rapidly through to session 34 and thereafter concentrate on the full secondary course.

In the Grade I and II courses philological subtleties are not entered into. The students should master these by themselves with the advent of fluency in real life situations. This aspect, however, is brought more into focus in the Grade III courses.

The programme for electro-acoustic instruction centres around the principle that the student's first contact with the foreign language must be that of hearing and understanding, and the second step that of intelligent imitation of what he has heard, with careful attention to accent, rhythm, intonation and pronunciation. The correct word order or commonly used expressions are established by means of dialogue on the tape. The student repeats and records the article or dialogue and thus not only practises correct pronunciation but also consolidates and reinforces the phrase, word or word pattern which is unfamiliar to him. If necessary this is followed by discussion outside the cubicles of any particular rule involved, e.g. the negative in the simple sentence. This then leads into a discussion of the rule governing the word order when an adverb or extension of time and place are involved. The student then returns to the cubicles and tests his own understanding by doing exercises involving:

(*a*) the negative in the simple sentence,

(*b*) the correct word order.

He is then able to do an exercise on the tape and can refer to the master track where the model answers are given or he could listen to the master track if he is uncertain and then proceed with the exercise. This stage is followed by several exercises in the form of short articles, stories or dialogues and comprehension tests incorporating the principle or rule under discussion.

The next stage is to develop a new facet such as the use of conjunctions. When this is being reinforced on the tape it leaves an opportunity to inject a new aspect such as the negative in the compound sentence without having explained this to the student previously. The student must now accept the correct answer on the tape but does not understand the reason. This stimulates his interest and ensures positive attention when this phase is discussed and explained to the group when they come out of the cubicles and meet in the class. He then again returns to the cubicles and works through exercises on the tape thereby reinforcing this new phase of the work, and tests his own understanding.

The advantages of electro-acoustic equipment in the teaching of languages can be summed up as follows:

1. Each student can progress at his own pace and is not too directly affected by the speed of other students.
2. He can return after the official periods to revise and work on the tapes at leisure.

3. Each student spends much more time in conversation and active participation than would be the case in the conventional classroom.

4. The instructor is free to assist each student individually as the routine, repetitive part of the teaching programme has been put on tape.

5. Self-consciousness is avoided as the student develops confidence in the cubicles before speaking in the class.

6. The student is free of frustrations as he can refer to the master track whenever he pleases and he is thus never faced with the problem of battling against a blank wall.

In preparing the tapes it has been found useful to incorporate as much dialogue as possible. The advantage of this is that it enables the student to become accustomed to more than one voice and thereby attune his ear to the rhythm and flow of the new language which he is learning. It also obviates monotony by not having the same voice on the tape all the time.

It has been found that there are approximately 1,500 words in Afrikaans which are commonly and generally used. The aim is to teach these words first and they are progressively incorporated in the work on the tapes and during the practical sessions. This is supplemented by special terms used in the oil industry of which there are roughly 150 to 200.

In teaching the terms relating to the oil industry photographs are used as has been previously mentioned but here other training aids could be of great advantage such as a back projector or an overhead projector or closed circuit television. Such pictures are useful as they not only assist in the learning of nouns but provide the stimulus for the use of verbs and adjectives.

As part of the overall picture and to aid the student in his understanding of Afrikaans and the Afrikaner, a series of talks are given during which time the following aspects are explained and discussed:—

1. The origin and history of the Afrikaans language.

2. The recognition, growth and development of Afrikaans and the work of the Suid-Afrikaanse Akademie vir Taal, Wetenskap en Kuns. These discussions are followed by two filmstrips and synchronised recordings.

3. The philosophy of the Afrikaner in relation to his religious background.

4. The growth of the Afrikaner in commerce and industry and the development of Afrikaner capital viewed in the light of the historical background.

A study of these aspects gives the student an interest in and a sympathy for the language and aids him in understanding and fitting in with an Afrikaans environment if his work requires him to do so.

Evaluation, always a difficult matter, is also a problem in these courses, but it has been found that the average number of words known by students when they leave the course after four weeks, is between 1,500 and 2,000.

At the commencement of the Grade I and II courses most students are unable even to understand the headlines in a newspaper but after completion of the course comprehension of the newspaper is between 80 per cent and 90 per cent. In the Grade III courses comprehension is between 90 per cent and 100 per cent. When students leave the course they are able to assist themselves intelligently by reading and speaking. This continued regular usage of the language is essential in attaining 100 per cent bilingualism.

It is the opinion of students that the course is stimulating and interesting throughout and that the sense of achievement inspires them, thus ensuring continued enthusiasm and satisfaction. They find that this method of tuition obviates boredom, reduces fatigue and rapidly engenders self-confidence.

The observed progress of students over a period of four weeks is very dynamic and it can confidently be stated that the results achieved with the aid of a language laboratory far exceed the results which would have been achieved if this equipment was not available.