

The problem of method in teaching English to Spanish Speakers

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Abstract

This paper discusses the teaching of English as a second language at the college level; it outlines a few areas of linguistic interference, and suggests the advantage of giving a limited role to the student's vernacular in intermediate and advanced courses; it heartily supports the instructor's freedom of approach and resources; and, finally, it shows due humanistic empathy for the anomie of the average Puerto Rican student in the perspective of his conflicting psycho-historical and linguistic background.¹

1. The writer's experience in teaching English and Spanish to nonnative speakers of these languages includes the Pre-University Institute at Camagüey, Cuba, 1941-1947, 1948-1960; Villanova College, 1947-1948; Villanova University, 1961-1967; University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez, 1967-1968; Florida State University, 1968-1969, 1970-1971; Tallahassee Junior College, summer 1969; and Miami-Dade Junior College, 1969-1970, and since 1971. Born in Cuba, 1922, of Spanish parentage, and a U.S. naturalized citizen, he received his Bachelor's degree from the Institute at Camagüey, 1941; a Professor of English degree from the University of Havana, 1947; and his Master's degree from Villanova University, 1965. He also holds diplomas from Ohio State University and the University of Michigan, and has studied language teaching methodology under James B. Tharp, William

Despite the foreign language teaching revolution launched more than a century ago by Henry Sweet, Michael West, Otto Jespersen, and others, a quick glance at the recent *Britannica Review of Foreign Language Education*² will reveal that no definitive method has been developed in this field, and that, apparently, final conclusions are still far from being drawn.

Many years before academic freedom was achieved, the Spaniards had the saying *Cada maestrillo tiene su librillo* (each little schoolmaster has his own little book). The implication was then as obvious as it is now because although various ways of teaching have been proposed since the birth of our Graeco-Roman culture, every teacher has continued to adhere to his preferred approach according to his educational background and professional experience.

As to the query of selecting a teaching method, nowadays instructors have adopted a pragmatically oriented attitude. It appears that every method has something «good» and something «bad», something «cheerful» and something «sad»; consequently, the cautious teacher is usually wise enough to adopt practical devices from different methods in order to combine them with his own personal approach. This eclectic position is based, perhaps, on a general feeling that nothing human is perfect, absolute, or definitive.

Science, which is supposed to deal solely with facts, has never claimed to be built on immutable foundations, nor does it offer a «royal road» to Truth. Scientific «conclusions» have been modified repeatedly in the course of time because science as a «byproduct» of the human mind is liable to make mistakes, and it can be compelled by further evidence to rectify its errors. An example of this could be seen in abiogenesis or theory of spontaneous generation, which was broadly accepted until it was pronounced invalid following Pasteur's experiments in 1862. Another example could be suggested by the original name of nitrogen, a chemical

S. Hendrix, Leonardo Sorzano Jorján, and other scholars in this field. In the spring of 1971, he became a Ph. D. degree candidate at Florida State University, pending the completion and defense of his dissertation — a comparative study and prolegomena for a thesaurus of Spanish-English prepositional phrases, under the direction of Dr. Victor R. B. Oelschläger. In addition, he is author of at least two books and numerous articles. His listings include the *Dictionary of International Biography*, *Who's Who in the East*, *Who's Who in American Education*, *Directory of American Scholars*, *Manual del Librero Hispanoamericano*, and *International Manual of Linguists and Translators*.

2. Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1970, Vol 2.

component of all living things, which was designated «azote» (lifeless) by Morveau and Lavoissier. Albumin provides a third example since it was generally believed that this protein could not be produced synthetically, until 1932 when several German chemists obtained it from coal-tar and coke.³

In the field of research for better language-teaching, the latest widespread approach has been for many years the «linguistic» method that evolved from the «participation of linguists in the Intensive Language Program of the early 1940's».⁴ This language teaching movement, begun in 1941 at the English Language Institute of the University of Michigan, and led by Charles C. Fries, represented a step forward and beyond the *methode directe* adopted in France at the turn of the century.

The «linguistic» movement has advocated a basic oral approach to foreign-language teaching—something Palmer had proposed about twenty years before;⁵ however, the novelty of the approach is colored by the fact that it is essentially eclectic and incorporates new linguistic discoveries. Like the «direct method», this «scientific» approach has adopted techniques of direct comprehension which have superseded the age-old «grammar-translation method». The «linguistic» procedure emphasizes the active use of the language taught, but it departs from the «direct method» in that reading, as an exercise, is neither introduced at an early stage, nor does it form an important part of classwork. Instead, reading is deliberately postponed until the basic *structure patterns* of the new language are firmly grasped as a result of specially designed *drills*.

Again, following in the footsteps of the «direct method», the modern oral approach eliminates translation during the elementary stage as a means of teaching vocabulary, but it does allow for an occasional use for the vernacular when it is found necessary in order to make sure that an exposition is thoroughly understood. Both the older «direct» and the newer «linguistic» methods consider the oral approach as a requisite in dealing with beginners.

3. Examples taken from my book, *Un estudio crítico del comunismo* (Habana: Cultural, S. A., 1952), pp. 82, 84.

4. Albert Valdman, «Toward a Redefinition of Teacher Role and Teaching Context in Foreign Language Instruction», *The Modern Language Journal*, Vol. XLVIII (May 1964, No. 5), pp. 275-284.

5. Harold E. Palmer, *The Scientific Study and Teaching of Languages*, ed. by David Harper (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), pp. 29-30. (First published by George G. Harrap & Co., Ltd. in 1917.)

As a teacher of English to non-native speakers, I have been aware of the effectiveness of this technique for quite a few years. In 1950 I subscribed to the recommendation that from the third day of English instruction the teacher «should, without delay, begin to use English in the classroom all the time,»⁶ and that he should use neither Spanish, nor translation.⁷ Notwithstanding, I have never believed this to be a *sine qua non* in dealing with intermediate and advanced students. Furthermore, experience has convinced me of the inadequacy of applying such an approach indiscriminately to large, advanced classes.

It is an empirically proven fact that a student's native tongue provides channels for both positive and negative transfers in his attempt to learn a new language; yet a recent study suggests that interference during learning is not necessarily detrimental when the learning conditions encourage the student to overcome such interference.⁸ For this study, two vocabularies were compared in terms of learning achievement as well as in terms of immediate and delayed retention. As an outcome of objective, comparative evaluations which included a consecutive and a concurrent order of training, it was found that the latter was more effective. The group exposed to concurrent training ranked as intermediate in rate of learning, but superior in immediate and delayed retention. This finding in itself is of great interest for the development of methodology; however, the conclusions should be taken merely as tentative and incomplete since the study was based on artificial vocabularies.

Interference that stems from a student's vernacular in his effort to develop proficiency in another language is not artificial. Such interference—in which negative or misleading transfer apparently plays a significant role—is generated by well embedded patterns of linguistic habit, and is must not be ignored by either the textbook writer or the teacher. This postulate implies, of course, that in order to facilitate the learning of English as a second language specific troublesome areas should be carefully surveyed and properly identified beforehand.

6. Cited from my *A Handbook of Competitive Examinations for Teachers of English* (Habana: Editorial Luz-Hilo, 1950), p. 48.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

8. Grace H. Yemi-Kosmian, and Wallace E. Lambert, «Concurrent and Consecutive Modes of Learning Two Vocabularies», *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 6: 204-215, 1969.

It would not be feasible to enumerate here all the troublesome areas that can be encountered in teaching English to Spanish speakers. Some of these areas have been pointed out and discussed by Stockwell, Bowen, and Martin.⁹ I will, however, mention three patterns of usage which are contrastive in Spanish and English, and for which I am offering my own interpretation.

The noun+adjective word order common in Spanish prose (*hombre alto, animal manso, bola roja*) may suggest a cultural attitude, i. e. that a person or thing (subject) comes first in importance as compared with its qualities (attributes).¹⁰ The opposite attitude may be reflected in the adjective+noun order used in English (*tall man, tame animal, red ball*). It is an interesting observation that the two suggested attitudes are concomitantly reversed in the poetic word order of both languages; the connotation here would be that realism and idealism are conceived at different levels in the Hispanic and Anglo-Saxon cultures.

In Spanish, a person never refers to ache or pain as something hurting just a part of the body, but as a feeling which affects and involves the entire self. *Me duele la cabeza*, for example, means literally that my head is giving me an ache; the implication is that the whole ego is suffering though the source of the discomfort is the head. In English we say, *My head aches*, where *aches*, being an intransitive verb in the third person singular, refers obviously to *my head*, not to me as a whole.

The two preceding examples represent different psychological levels of language, and it would be most interesting, and perhaps revealing, to pursue the issue further through comparative psycholinguistic studies.

A third example of contrastive patterns of usage in English and Spanish not only illustrates a possible interference, but also gives an inkling for a corrective approach based on an equivalence of patterns in the two languages. If we consider such intransitive English verbs as *to lean, to lie, to sit, and to stand*—each one expressing a state of existence or position, not an action—and

9. Robert P. Stockwell, and J. Donald Bowen, *The Sounds of English and Spanish* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965); Robert P. Stockwell, J. Donald Bowen, and John W. Martin, *The Grammatical Structures of English and Spanish* (same publisher and year).

10. It goes without saying that limiting adjectives and epithets usually precede the noun in Spanish, and that certain Spanish adjectives can either precede or follow the noun depending on their semantic restrictiveness.

we compare their usage with their Spanish equivalents, we will notice a consistent contrast. The sentences that follow serve the purpose in illustrating opposite forms of usage.

The	rake	is	<i>leaning</i>	on	the	fence.
El	rastrillo	está	<i>apoyado</i>	en	la	cerca.
The	patient	is	<i>lying</i>	in (on)	(the)	bed.
El	paciente	está	<i>acostado</i>	en	la	cama.
The	child	is	<i>sitting</i>	on	the	bench.
El	niño	está	<i>sentado</i>	en	el	banco.
The	policeman	is	<i>standing</i>	at (on)	the	corner.
El	policia	está	<i>parado</i>	en	la	esquina.

Each of the above pairs of sentences shows the same semantic orientation (direction), yet the verb patterns in each pair are comparable to opposite courses of notion (vector). Each pair is an example of equivalence of lexical units, including the participles, but while English employs the active participle (-ing), Spanish uses the passive (-do). Consequently, each English-Spanish pair of sentences represents, so to speak, a «directional» parallelism of lexical meaning, and at the same time a «vectorial» parallelism of grammatical forms, or in other words, there is a semantic similarity, but a morphological contrast.

Forms which constitute an exception to this parallelism of negative correlation are the Spanish participles of *descansar* and *dormir* for they can be used in either the active or the passive; however, the choice of one form instead of the other entails a semantic difference. To illustrate this, let us consider the following sentences:

El	paciente	está	<i>dormido</i> .
El	paciente	está	<i>durmiendo</i> .

Dormido here means that the patient has fallen asleep as opposed to being awake; it may even imply that he fell asleep outside his regular sleeping hours, or perhaps after the strain of a sleepless night. On the other hand, *durmiendo* means that the patient is in the process of resting unconsciously with the possible implication that his sleep is normal. Another possible im-

plication could be that of the time elapsed since *dormido*, through an association with the idiom *quedarse dormido*, might be a hint that the patient has been asleep for only a short while whereas *durmiendo* could indicate that he is in the middle of his sleep. The English translation of these sentences, in their order of appearance, would be *The patient is asleep*, and *The patient is sleeping*.

A similar semantic criterion can be applied to the participles *descansado* and *descansando* as it can be inferred from the following illustration:

El	paciente	está	<i>descansado</i> .
El	paciente	está	<i>descansando</i> .

The semantic difference is somewhat greater here. *Descansado* means that the patient is in a condition of being rested. Conversely, *descansando* means that he is resting by either sleeping or lying quietly in bed in order to recover his energy. In consequence, it can be said that *descansado* is a physical and mental state which follows *descansando*, a physical and mental process. Their relationship is one of cause and effect. Again, it is obvious that the respective English renderings would be *The patient is well rested*, and *The patient is resting*.

Subtle points of contrastive usage, like these and others, cannot be ignored by the textbook writer and the instructor without handicapping the learner. This should make it crystal clear that the best qualified instructor at the intermediate and advanced levels of English as a second language is the one who can provide insights into linguistic mnemonics, along with a good amount of material for reflection and analysis.

I realize that some of my colleagues may take exception to my using the terms «reflection» and «analysis» since it is still controversial whether second-language learning takes place at a conscious, or an unconscious level, and through an analytical or a synthetic development. Personally, I believe the process to be a mixed one, but in any case the ideal instructor is a bilingual person. How, otherwise, could such problem areas as the phonological, morphological, and syntactical contrasts be predicted and successfully dealt with?

A few scholars who have devoted much time and effort to these

intricate problems have elucidated some of the questions at issue. The importance of the role played by the native tongue and that of bilingual descriptions have occasionally been emphasized. Robert Lado has gone so far as to say, «We simply cannot ignore the native language of the student as a factor of primary importance in vocabulary, just as we cannot ignore it in pronunciation and grammatical structure.»¹¹ Yet an instructor who does not know his student's vernacular *has to ignore* these problems, and can do little, if anything, about diagnosing specific areas of difficulty.

Today not only is the occasional use of the native language considered appropriate in advanced foreign language classes, but translation also, whenever it becomes necessary. Once again it is evident that scientific «conclusions» can change back and forth. Translation, which for so many years had been «taboo» in the foreign language class, is now openly advocated as a useful teaching device by some modern linguists. Such is the case with John C. Catford of the University of Michigan, who has made the following statement:

The old-fashioned «grammar translation» method has been widely condemned. But it is important to see that what has to be condemned is not so much the method itself as the fact that many, perhaps most, of its practitioners used *bad* grammar and *bad* translation, and used both badly. It is possible to use good grammar and to use it well, and it is also possible to make good uses of good translation in language teaching.¹²

In Soviet Russia they have taken one step further along this line since comparison of Russian with a foreign language is widely regarded as a valuable approach of the recommended process of teaching languages consciously.¹³

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11. Robert Lado, «Patterns of Difficulty in Vocabulary», *Language Learning*, 6: 23-41, 1955.

12. John C. Catford, «Sociolinguistic Aspects of Translation and Language Teaching», *Selected Conference Papers of The Association of Teachers of English as a Second Language* (Los Angeles: The National Association for Foreign Student Affairs: The University of Southern California Press, 1966), p. 44.

13. V. D. Arakin, *Metodika Prepodavaniya anglijskogo jazyka* (Moscow, 1950), and *Metodika nacal'nogo obucenija inostrannym jazykam*, ed. by I. V. Karpov, and I. V. Rakhmanov (Moscow, 1957).

In Puerto Rico, English is compulsory as a second language throughout the elementary and junior high school education as well as in the first two years of both senior high school and college. Therefore, when a Puerto Rican student is admitted to higher education, it can be assumed that he has had at least ten years of English in school. Presumably, the oral approach has been intensively utilized by English teachers at the elementary and secondary school levels long before the student takes the so-called *Basic Course in English* offered at the university. Even though in describing this «basic» course the Mayagüez Campus bulletin states that the «oral approach is used,»¹⁴ no inference can be made that the student will be exposed to English for the first time at this level.¹⁵

Assuming that the average Puerto Rican college freshman has a set of linguistic habits in English, acquired through previous training, any possible deficiencies cannot be treated at this level in a regular class of about thirty students, but could probably be corrected in small-group sessions with many intermittent hours of speech, reading, and writing laboratory practice. At any rate, the «linguistic» approach would hardly be effective in a regular class. A general criterion regarding this prognosis has a spokesman in Professor Albert Valdman of Indiana University who has admitted that the «linguistic» method is useful only in small classes where individual students are brought into direct and intensive contact with the language, the instructor providing only guidance, supervision, and insights as a key resource person while the «master voice» recorded on tape serves as a drilling machine, and the language laboratory becomes a center for programmed instruction.¹⁶

According to the Mayagüez Campus bulletin quoted above, when the Puerto Rican sophomores take the subsequent *English Composition and Reading* course, they are exposed to «the elements of grammar and idiomatic expressions not covered in the first two levels», and the students will then have «practice in writing compositions, reviews, reports, and letters».¹⁷ At this advanced stage,

«reading of selected material and oral reports will be stressed,»¹⁸ but no mention is made of the oral approach. The *Bulletin*, therefore, implicitly disregards specific techniques at this level, and in my view it is right in doing so.

In actual fact, once the elementary stage of foreign-language learning is past, the oral approach is no longer *formative*, but, instead, either *reinforcing* or *corrective*: it has fulfilled its task of equipping the student with patterns for use in the new language. The instructor may, without detriment now, have recourse to the student's native language when necessary, and, furthermore, he may even establish comparisons in form, usage, and style between the two languages. Truly indeed, as contended by Stockwell, Bowen, Politzer, Staubach, and others, a contrastive analysis offers an excellent basis for the development of classroom techniques.¹⁹

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I would venture to say that the role of the native language in the mind of the student of a foreign language could be basically compared to that of passive vocabulary and passive structure patterns in the student's own vernacular plus interference as an extraneous variable. In this connection, and as one final example of how scientific appraisals can change, I would like to refer to another recent study which suggests that receptive (passive) language and expressive (active) speech can be categorized as two separate and functionally independent entities (dissociated behavior).²⁰ The implication that expressive speech possibly has a greater influence on receptive language than viceversa is at odds with the postulate of an «understanding» of grammatical structure as a pre-requisite to speech production proposed by Chomsky (1959) and Lenneberg (1967).²¹

My many years of experience with Spanish and English as a student, teacher, translator, and interpreter, and my readings and research in both languages lead me to formulate a hypothesis: that

14. *Bulletin of Information, University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez Campus*, 1968-1969, p. 214.

15. A similar assumption can be made with regard to international students attending a college in the U.S.A. if a standardized English language proficiency test has been administered to them as an admission requirement.

16. Valdman. *op. cit.*

17. *Bulletin*, *loc. cit.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. Stockwell, and Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. v. Robert L. Politzer, and Charles N. Staubach, *Teaching Spanish: A Linguistic Orientation* (Waltham, Mass.: Blaisdell Publishing Company, 1965), pp. 33-35.

20. Doug Guess, «A Functional Analysis of Receptive Language and Productive Speech: Acquisition of the Plural Morpheme», *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, 2: 55-64, 1969.

21. *Ibid.*

a psycholinguistic approach to teaching English to beginners who are Spanish speakers is best constructed upon phonetic, morpho-semantic, and syntactic similarities between these two languages. This hypothesis presupposes an arrangement and adoption of cognate vocabularies of parallel frequency of usage along with syntactical patterns of positive correlation.²³

As both a foundation and a supplement to this hypothesis, I wish to submit the following empirical criteria for consideration:

1. Specific areas of difficulty caused by negative transfer and interference should be dealt with in a precautionary fashion.
2. The experience of passing from the vernacular into the new language is a sort of one-way trip.²³
3. The difficulties that a student encounters in learning a foreign language neither necessarily nor systematically reflect the problems he may have in his attempt to improve his native-language proficiency.²⁴
4. Only through contrastive linguistics can the native-speaking teacher become aware of the unique features of his vernacular.²⁵
5. In cases where the foreign-language student has been neglected or misguided by previous teachers, «corrective» techniques should be applied in teaching (or re-teaching) him speech, reading, and composition.
6. Although, admittedly, language learning depends mainly on habit formation, intensive repetitive drills tend to bore the student; a practicable alternative is the introduction of carefully prepared variants at specific intervals.
7. The language laboratory (whether used for auditory comprehension, speech, reading, writing, or a combination of (these) is generally regarded as a valuable study aid; nevertheless, lab sessions should be brief and frequent in order to avoid weariness without losing reinforcement.

22. Ismael Rodríguez Bou, *A Study of the Parallelism of English and Spanish Vocabularies* (Río Piedras, P. R.: Superior Educational Council of Puerto Rico, University of Puerto Rico, 1950). This work is a «must» for anyone preparing teaching materials in this field.

23. Stockwell and Bowen, *op. cit.*, p. vii.

24. *Ibid.*

25. William G. Moulton, *A Linguistic Guide to Language Learning* (New York: MLA-ACTFL Materials Center, 1970). Also, Fern Mann, «An English Teacher is an English Teacher, Right?, Wrong!», *Quinto Lingo*, April 1970, pp. 68-69.

8. Insofar as possible, the instructor should be familiar, or at least acquainted, with his student's vernacular in order that a precautionary approach may be used in dealing with phonologic, morphologic, syntactic, and idiomatic problem areas.²⁶
9. The instructor should be able —and, of course, allowed— to resort to the use of the student's vernacular, not as a systematic device, but as an occasional means to present insights, clues, and «ingenious explanations and clever pedagogy to teach one particularly troublesome point or another».²⁷
10. Measurements of aptitude, progress, and achievement should be computed on the basis of objectively constructed tests in accordance with the approaches, course objectives, and ultimate goals selected by the instructor.

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Despite the recommendations I have made above, I am well aware of the fact that no serious researcher, in any field, can pride himself upon having found «the Truth, the whole Truth, and nothing but the Truth». If anything seems to be clear in modern science is the idea of *relativity*, which is in itself perhaps the only possible reflection of «Truth». Probably the most important contribution which Einstein made to scientific progress is his modest, even humble, theory that in the phenomenological world all knowledge is *relative*, and probably nothing is *absolute* outside of that unknown reality of which space, time, mass, and energy seem to be but different aspects.²⁸

In this light of relativity, any pressure put upon a teacher or upon any other professional to make him act against his personal convictions is highly unethical, to say the least. A teacher's view may not be satisfactory to his superiors, or even to some of his

26. This criterion represents the consensus of a number of leaders in the field (cf. «Statements of Qualifications and Guidelines for Preparation of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages», *TESOL Newsletter*, September-December 1970, págs. 4-5, with a foreword by Albert Marckwardt of Princeton University, subscribed by James E. Alatis of Georgetown University, Harold B. Allen of the University of Minnesota, Beryl L. Bailey of Hunter College, *et al.*).

27. Stockwell and Bowen, *loc. cit.*

28. Albert Einstein, *The Meaning of Relativity* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1955), pp. 31, 47

peers, but academic freedom must be respected, fostered, preserved, and protected so that every teacher may practice his profession creatively, and may carry out his research work as he sees fit. It is in this light of relativity—including, of course, relativity of epistemology—that serious ignorance of universal principles must be suspected in anyone who thinks his own method to be *necessarily better* than his fellow professional's. It is in this same light that we must open our minds widely to new ideas as well as to the revival or revision of old ones. Eventually, if our disposition is both genuinely intellectual and sincerely benevolent, «when our minds don't understand, our hearts will».

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Finally, I will now turn to another problem, a very specific one, concerning the teaching of English as a second language in Puerto Rico. This time it is not a problem of method, but rather the Puerto Rican student himself, and his conflicting feeling toward this language.

It was my experience as a teacher of at least five English courses throughout one academic year at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez that the average Puerto Rican student realizes his need to learn the «American» language, but he lacks the enthusiasm or the resolution to achieve proficiency in it. The cause of his attitude may be found, I believe, in a mixed and remote psycho-historical background where the clash of two very different cultures and languages (the Hispanic and the Anglo-American), plus a sentiment of a rather obscure and undefined political destiny, have bred some degree of anomie, and even individual disorientation and anxiety. This, however, is a complicated and subtle problem which needs separate treatment.²⁹

29. I wish to offer my sincere gratitude to Professors Dorothy F. Hosken, Speech Department, and Donald M. Early, English Department, Miami-Dade Junior College (North Campus), for reading this paper in manuscript form, and for their valuable suggestions.