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WHAT IS THE "AURAL-ORAL" APPROACH IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH AS SECOND LANGUAGE?

DEFINITION OF "HEARING" AND "SPEAKING"

IT WOULD be easy to answer the question, "What is the 'aural-oral' approach?" by examining the common meaning of the words that describe the approach: *aural* and *oral*. *Aural* means "through the ear" or "hearing;" *oral* means "by the mouth" or "speaking." Thus the "aural-oral" approach would be the approach to language learning through hearing and speaking. But, if we want to go deeper into the meaning of "hearing" and "speaking" in language learning, then we find it necessary to examine these terms more carefully. "Hearing" will also mean listening with understanding or comprehension; that is, being able to grasp the meaning of the stream of speech or the sounds which are uttered by a native speaker. The following example will perhaps illustrate better what the writer

really means by "hearing": When we listen to two Puerto Ricans talking to each other, we can readily grasp what they are saying, so much so, that if their talk happens to be a very personal one, they will rather stop talking than let us hear what they are saying. On the other hand, if we hear two Japanese talking we will not be able to understand anything out of their conversation unless we happen to know the Japanese language. We may perceive, it is true, certain emotional tones in the conversation such as anger, fear, surprise, etc., but beyond this, the sounds that we hear make no sense to us. For our definition of hearing, then, we may say that we are able to "hear" the conversation of the Puerto Ricans because it has meaning for us; but we cannot "hear" the Japanese because their conversation conveyed no thought to us.

Now, let us define our term "speaking." We are going to consider here two levels of speaking: one is *imitative* speaking; another is *free* or *spontaneous* speaking. *Imitative* speaking is that level of speaking at which we limit ourselves to producing or repeating after a given model or models. This type of speaking is characteristic of babies and children who are learning their native language, and of people who are in the initial stage of learning a second language. *Free* or *spontaneous* speaking is characteristic of the adult or child who has already mastered certain portions of his native language. His speech comes out fluently, freely, spontaneously, without his having to exert any effort as he speaks. These two levels of speaking are, in a way, parts of a whole, but we have to realize that imitative speaking eventually leads us up to free speaking and that at the initial stage of language learning we must start with imitative speaking.

Learning a language through "hearing-speaking," then, should result in the ability to understand the meaning of the sounds of a language as they are uttered by a native speaker of that language; and the ability to utter these sounds approximately as the native speaker does. The "aural-oral" approach to English must therefore mean learning the English language in

such a way as to enable us to understand the stream of speech of the native American speaker, and to enable us also to produce this stream of sounds accurately.

Why do we approach the learning of English this way? There are several reasons for this approach, the validity of which you will be able to test at the conclusion of this study. Some of the most obvious are: first, this approach is, in the long run, the most economical and most efficient way of teaching and learning a language; second, this approach is the closest to the way in which we learn our native language, and therefore, the most natural and approximate.

If we take some time to think about the way we have learned our native tongue, or to observe children going over this process, we then may be able to justify the above mentioned approach to the study of English.

Language learning is an extremely complicated process. No psychologist or linguist has been able to give us a completely satisfactory explanation of this process, and for this reason the writer will not attempt to do so here; but the following passage quoted from Lawrence E. Cole and William F. Bruce, in *Educational Psychology*, is very revealing of what may go on in the child when he starts to talk:

The intricate ability to talk lags a few months behind that of walking. Its intricacy involves the complex mechanism of the mouth and the tongue but also depends upon hearing, upon auditory perception... It is a product also of the organism's adaptable speech mechanism with stage-by-stage maturation. There seems to be a characteristic sequence of stages in the advancing control over sound and the utterance of words, and these appear to wait upon the maturing of the organs to speech. In its earliest stages—from the third to the sixth month—there is much babbling, vocal play, repeating sounds over and over. William James' description of the world of the infant as a 'big buzzing blooming confusion' would fit the 6-month-old child's world of oral speech. Visualize him playing about the house

surrounded by adults or older children, from whose mouths words come tumbling in rapid succession, who at the same time 'talk' to each other with gestures and movements. *The process of discriminating single words from this torrential stream* would be difficult enough in itself, but add to it *the need of attaching the meanings of words, and of groups of words, to corresponding gestures of the face, limbs, the whole body, and you have a 'blooming confusion' indeed.* This is the kind of social world in which the year-old child is learning his first 'foreign' language.¹

The word *foreign* at the end of this quotation is very significant: learning the native language must be an experience similar to that of learning a foreign language. There are two other significant things that should be noted from this quotation. One is the unconscious process of elimination by which the child is able to grasp only those sounds which are characteristic of his native tongue; the other is the need of the child to attach the meanings of words and groups of words to certain situations or gestures. This action, sometimes called association, seems extremely significant in learning a language. Henry Sweet, once President of the Munich Philological Society, in his book, *The Practical Study of Languages*, states:

The whole process of hearing a language is one of forming associations. When we learn our own language we associate words and sentences with thoughts, ideas, actions, events.²

The writer will explain here what she feels may go on in the child as he is going through this associating of words or groups of words with actual situations. Let's take a child who is hungry and does not know how to talk. When this child feels hungry, he must feel a discomfort similar to the one we feel when we have the same disturbance. This uncomfortable feeling persists especially in his stomach. From previous occasions he knows

¹ Laurence E. Cole and William F. Bruce, *Educational Psychology* (New York: World Book Co., 1950), my italics, pp. 82-83.

² Henry Sweet, *The Practical Study of Languages* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1899), p. 103.

that when he cries his mother brings him a bottle containing a white liquid that eventually calms his disturbance. So he cries until his mother appears with a bottle and some liquid in it. He hears his mother say *leche* every time that she presents the bottle to him; so that the disturbance in his stomach, the white liquid in the bottle, and his mother's utterance of the word *leche* always coincide. The same situation takes place time and time again until the child says the word *leche* in any one of the following instances: (1) he sees his mother with the bottle and says *leche*; or (2) he sees a white liquid in the bottle and repeats *leche*; or (3) he feels a certain discomfort in his *stomach* and says *leche*. When he finally utters the sounds in *leche* and he gets the desired response from those around him, he has learned the word; that is, he uses the word in expressing something or trying to communicate something to others. In similar ways and through a series of associations like the one mentioned, the child continues to learn how to use the sounds of his language and how to arrange these sounds into longer and more meaningful sequences. Very early in his life the child is able to understand the stream of speech of adults and at the age of five or six he has already learned how to use the basic sounds and significant arrangements of the sounds of his native language. We can then say that the child knows his native language.

At the age of five or six the Puerto Rican child enters first grade or kindergarden. From the first day of school he begins to meet a series of new situations and experiences. One of these experiences is his first acquaintance with some strange sounds that perhaps he has never heard before and which his teacher calls English. The problem now is, how is he going to learn these new sounds? How is he going to begin using them? Does he have to start all over again?

If the previous explanation of how a child learns his native language is at all valid, then we are safe to say that he must start all over again; that is, he must approach the new language in the same manner that he approached his native tongue; but

this time he has some advantages. When he first started to talk, he had to find for himself, in the great maze of sounds that he heard, those sounds that were significant and basic to his language. He also had to learn how to arrange these into meaningful sequences, and to find how these sounds were used. But he managed to learn this. He had people around him whom he heard and imitated, and he could finally make them understand him. In school, when he begins to get acquainted with the foreign language, circumstances are different. He has a teacher who can guide him and who can make him conscious of those sounds that he needs and of those arrangements of sounds which he must produce in order to make himself understood in this strange tongue.

Now the important question for the teacher is how is he going to help the child in the study of this second language? He must understand that the key to a successful start in the language is the creation of situations which appeal to the child and which at the same time give the pupil the basic sounds and the fundamental structures or arrangements of these sounds which convey meaning to the hearer. In order to be able to do this the teacher must have a thorough knowledge of the language that he is teaching.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "AURAL-ORAL" APPROACH

In his book, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, Dr. Charles C. Fries, Director of the English Language Institute of University of Michigan, mentions several characteristic of the "aural-oral" approach:

1. Emphasis is put upon the actual use of the foreign language rather than upon the memorizing of paradigms or forms out of context.
2. Translation is eliminated as much as possible, but it is effectively used to check up comprehension.

3. The students are never assigned a lesson in advance for silent study or home work. Whatever study is done outside of the class is always in repetition of the matters already practiced orally under the initiation of the model or teacher.
4. Special attention to reading skills is deliberately postponed until the structure of the new language is firmly grasped.
5. Satisfactory materials are selected and arranged in accord with sound linguistic principles.
6. Generalizations or conclusions concerning the structure of the language are regular features of this approach.
7. A variety of devices and techniques which may help in establishing the language as a set of habits for oral production and for receptive understanding of same are welcome to this approach.³

For a period of three years the writer experimented with the "aural-oral" approach at the Luis Muñoz Rivera School in Río Piedras, and at the University Elementary School, and the above mentioned points were observed by both teachers and student teachers in charge of English classes. The following are some of our experiences in observing the above mentioned characteristics.

1. *Emphasis upon the use of the foreign language.*

The use of English was emphasized. From the very start in learning the English language the children were encouraged to hear and to use the foreign language.

2. *The use of Spanish.*

At an early stage in language learning, especially in the first and second grades, Spanish was frequently used to check up on pupils' comprehension of a given situation. This check up was often a form of motivation for children, and proved very

³ Charles C. Fries, *Teaching and Learning of English as a Foreign Language* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1948), p. 7.

helpful; but as the children's knowledge of English increased, the use of Spanish gradually decreased. As the children moved along in the study of the language, they depended less and less upon the use of Spanish. In the fourth, fifth, and sixth grades, Spanish was very seldom used; though the teachers sometimes gave exercises in translation in order to check up comprehension or understanding of certain situations.

3. *Reading deliberately postponed.*

First and second grade English was completely aural-oral. Only in the third grade did the children start seeing written symbols for the sounds that they had already heard during the previous two years of language study. Even on this level the first part of the class was devoted to oral practice. Then the children read words, phrases and sentences from the blackboard or from flashcards, charts, etc. The startling thing about the children's reading was that it came more freely and almost fluently; and that the word-by-word reading which we all had become accustomed to hear year after year, had almost disappeared. We also noticed fewer errors in pronunciation and an improved intonation throughout the children's reading activities. This apparent facility in reading helped in furthering and stimulating the children's interest in and feeling for, the language.

We avoided the reading of English textbooks because we realized that they did not satisfy the needs of our children; but the latter were stimulated to copy the materials learned in their notebooks and to keep these neat and clean. The children's written work was carefully checked by the teachers and to their surprise, they sensed a considerable improvement in English spelling. The children's notebooks were used both as a reading device and as a permanent record for the children's study.

4. *Selection of satisfactory materials for teaching.*

The writer believes that the choice of the materials to be taught, and the sequence in which they are taught, chiefly ac-

count for the success of this approach. In the three-year experiment described here, the selection of satisfactory materials proved immensely helpful and we feel that it did a great deal to help us in getting rid of reading difficulties. In the main, we used the materials suggested by the Department of Education in its Manual⁴ or guide to teachers. Although admittedly not yet perfect, this guide has been worked out with due consideration for a scientific and descriptive analysis of the English language, and it is about the best material which is at present available.

5. *Use of generalizations or conclusions.*

We began very early to use generalizations concerning the use and the structure of the language. We avoided all sorts of technical terms and explanations, and we avoided the memorizing of rules about the language; but we were always alert to significant points in both the sound and the structure of English that the children needed to be aware of. As early as the first grade we would make such statements as: "We use *he* for *boys* and *she* for *girls!*" or, "Remember the *s* in reads." We used many other generalizations simplified to the level of the children's comprehension. Most of the time we gave these generalizations in Spanish, because we felt that they were very useful for the children and they saved the teachers a great deal of time. With grades that were at a more advanced level of comprehension we used simple explanations in English which also proved very useful.

6. *Use of a variety of devices and techniques.*

The use of a variety of devices and techniques helped a great deal in arousing the interest of the children in the different aspects of the English language.

You may have noticed that this article started with a dis-

⁴ *A Manual for the Teaching of American English to Spanish-Speaking Children in Puerto Rico*, compiled by the English Section, Technical Division, Insular Department of Education, San Juan, Puerto Rico, 1949.

cussion of "hearing" and "speaking" and that at the end other aspects of the language such as reading and writing are mentioned. The "aural-oral" approach involves all of these. It does not preclude any means or devices which may help to establish the habits of the language in the child. Any means or devices that are helpful in reinforcing the learning of the language are welcome in this approach.

This approach to the teaching of foreign languages is by no means new, and it is certainly not uniquely Puerto Rican. It has been used successfully in several parts of the world including Europe and Asia. Several famous language experts and foreign language teachers have favored this approach in their statement. Otto Jespersen, the Danish linguist, in his book, *How to Teach a Foreign Language*, maintains that

Language cannot be separated from sound... Only he who hears the foreign language within himself in exactly or approximately the same way as a native hears it can really appreciate and enjoy not only poetry... but also the higher forms of prose... The very first lesson in a foreign language ought to be devoted to initiating the pupils into the world of sounds...⁵

Experiments made in several schools in the United States also claim satisfactory results. The report of one such experiment includes the following statement:

Of all the various devices or techniques that we use in our teaching, the most efficient, the most stimulating, indeed the most essential to success, is the oral and aural use of the language. All our data show that the shortest road even to a reading knowledge of a foreign language is through a proper use of oral speech.⁶

⁵ Otto Jespersen, *How to Teach a Foreign Language* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1912), p. 145.

⁶ E. B. de Sauze, "The Cleveland Plan or the Multiple Approach in Language Teaching," *Quarterly Language Research Bulletin*, October, 1948, Vol. I, No. 3, p. 4.