A PSYCHOLOGICAL METHOD FOR LEARNING LANGUAGES

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Owing to the rapidly increasing facilities for travel, and to the growing cultural and economic interrelations between individuals and nations, the need of knowing foreign languages is becoming increasingly widespread and urgent.

Yet to many, the learning of a foreign language proves to be a long and laborious ordeal, the results of which are often by no means satisfactory. This fact is particularly obvious in public schools. Countless young people go through years of study of foreign languages and duly pass their examinations only to find that they have no real command of those languages when put to the test of speaking them during a visit to the corresponding foreign country. Consequently most of the time and energy devoted to that study have been sheer waste.

This state of affairs appears still more surprising and shocking when contrasted with the easy, spontaneous learning of one's mother tongue, which is the accomplishment of every normal child. It is such a universal happening that we do not stop to realize how wonderful it really is. A small boy with a rudimentary mind, just beginning to have command of his senses and organs of expression, accomplishes, without the help of any objective means of interpretation or explanation, the miracle of understanding a rapidly increasing number of words and phrases. And this he does without any apparent effort, as if in play and with evident delight.

This contrast indicates that there must be something basically wrong with the current methods of teaching languages, and that the elimination of the present incalculable waste of time and effort in this field demands, not mere improvements, but a radical, even, one might say, a revolutionary change. It is to modern psychology with its recent developments that we must look for an explanation of the failure of routine methods and, moreover, for a formulation of the definite principles on which to base more efficient and fruitful techniques. The key thus provided will reveal the fundamental importance of the existence of the subconscious, its nature and its laws. This will be obvious if we realize that memory, on which the knowledge of any language is founded, is a function of the subconscious.

Without entering into a technical discussion of the theories of memory, it is evident that all the impressions we receive from the outer world via the senses remain for a very short time in the lighted field of our consciousness; and then apparently vanish into nothingness, superseded by other sense impressions or by the spontaneous activity of mind and emotions. Yet these impressions have not vanished, like passing shadows on a wall. Somehow, somewhere, certain traces have remained in us, and these have the power to recall or evoke, under suitable conditions, the original impression or sensation in our consciousness.

It is irrelevant to our purpose to discuss here whether these "mnemonic traces" are of a physiological or psychological nature; what is of practical moment is the consideration of the conditions and of the laws which determine the production, the preservation and the evocation of the original impressions

Two great lines of psychological investigation and application, namely psychoanalysis and suggestion, have established the following facts:

1. Disagreeable and tiresome impressions tend to be forgotten or removed from the consciousness into the unconscious by a definite act of repression (Freud's *Verdrängung*)
2. Every effort is inherently more or less disagreeable and is very apt to arouse resistance, wandering of attention, lack of receptivity or fatigue. The greater the exertion, often, the stronger is the inner opposition and the scantier the result. This is a psychological law which has been formulated by Baudoin as the "Law of Reversed Effort."

3. External stimuli which are not intensified by an active interest or by an emotion of a pleasant and positive nature, can make only superficial and dull impressions which are easily obliterated by others of a more vivid character.

The constant violation of these three fundamental principles by the current methods of teaching languages patently constitutes a condemnation of the latter. What could be more dull, tiresome or uninteresting for boys and girls with their active, restless minds, and their even more active, restless bodies; what more discouraging for the minds of adults occupied with the serious problems of life, than to have to plod laboriously through the dry rules of grammar with their countless exceptions, or to conjugate quantities of wickedly irregular verbs? Is it not inevitable that the subconscious of the victims should violently or slyly resent such maltreatment and oppose it with all its powers of resistance?

And even when we succeed by means of violence or insistence in making an impression upon the subconscious, compelling it to register and reproduce the words hammered into it, they are apt to remain a kind of dead weight or a series of static impressions, like phonograph records, instead of something vitally incorporated and assimilated. The result is that while we can perform the feat of reciting a series of grammar rules and the correct conjugation of verbs, we cannot understand what the waiter says to us in the restaurant, or express intelligibly to a foreigner our practical needs or our ideas.

What, then, is the alternative? It can be stated in a very simple way, yet one which has far-reaching implications: *We must learn foreign languages as we learned our mother tongue by becoming again "as little children."*

Let us see what this means and implies. The child learns almost exclusively through the capacity of the subconscious to "absorb" without deliberate effort, without "studying" and without worry or haste. Therefore, we should try to recapture, so far as we can, that childlike state of pure receptivity, of relaxation, of eager assimilation of those strange and amusing sounds we hear, welcoming everything new with a happy smile. Our inner attitude should be one of joyous discovery of a wonderful land full of surprises.

This phase of mere receptivity should be allowed to continue undisturbed until there arises spontaneously the urge to reproduce the sounds one has heard. Every premature attempt at reproduction involves strain, and the consequent reaction of the subconscious occasions a serious waste of energy, and delays, rather than promotes, the desired progress. The length of this receptive period varies considerably according to individual psychological types. Some people of an active motor type feel the urge to repeat at once what they hear, and it is good to give this impulse free play. Others of a more passive, introverted type, emotionally timid and uncertain, need a longer period before the subconscious becomes so saturated, so "soaked," as to be ready to give out the knowledge acquired.

I can quote an extreme example. A little Italian girl, very shy and nervous, had had an English governess for years but could not be induced to speak English. She was considered hopeless until one day she started of her own accord and has spoken English ever since without hesitancy!

There is an interesting arid significant analogy between this method and that of the Montessori system in which, as is well known, small children are allowed to observe at leisure the material at their disposal and the use made of it by other children until they feel a spontaneous urge to use it actively themselves.

These inner psychological rhythms must be acknowledged and respected. Their discovery in each of us and our adjustment to them constitute one of the most important aspects of the fine art of living. Similarly, the process

of learning to read arid write a foreign language can be greatly assisted by the application of knowledge of the subconscious and its laws. Here are some of the most important rules to be followed:

1. Vividness and Charm of Visual Impressions
The importance of these is well recognized by advertisers who make a point of printing advertisements in ways which strike the eye, and use attractive and cheerful illustrations designed to make a pleasant and lasting impression on the reader. Why should teachers of languages be poorer psychologists than businessmen? Should they not take advantage, as they easily could, of these inducements in order to make the task of their pupils easier and more pleasant?

2. Association of Various Types of Impressions
Sense perceptions of different kinds, when closely associated, create deeper and more easily reawakened mnemonic traces. The teacher should avail himself of this circumstance by aptly associating visual, auditory and motor impressions. The simplest method of achieving this is to pronounce a phrase which is being exhibited in large letters on a poster or blackboard, asking the pupils to focus their attention alternately on listening and looking, while the phrase is repeated several times. This they should always do in a leisurely way, without being concerned about remembering what they have seen or heard. Immediately afterwards they might copy the phrases several times, repeating them aloud, thereby adding the motor to the visual and auditory sensations.

3. Repetition and Persistence of Impressions
Repetition is needed in order to build lasting impressions capable of withstanding the rapid stream of stimuli constantly pouring in upon us in modern life. Aggressive salesmen, amongst others, are well aware of its effectiveness arid use it systematically.

The same objective necessitates the impressions being made slowly. The phrases must be pronounced distinctly and the written text left for a while before the eyes of the pupils, who should be allowed to copy it at leisure. The visual and auditory techniques can be exploited by means of a device which is being increasingly used of late, in the shape of phonograph records or tape recording. These can be employed to associate hearing and reading, and the impressions can be renewed ad libitum. To this extent they are good and constitute a helpful subsidiary means, but they cannot be claimed to embody a complete and satisfactory method, lacking as they do some of the other essential requisites, as indicated by what follows.

4. Imitation
The importance of imitation is a well known and indisputable fact, but it is not adequately utilized in the study of languages. It forms the basis and with amazing results—of the teaching of the deaf and dumb, who learn to pronounce correctly through close observation of the mouth of the teacher while he or she talks. By a process of unconscious imitation such observation produces the ability to repeat the teacher's movements, and the pupils thereby become able to enunciate clearly and correctly. Adopting this simple and easy means, one can soon acquire a good pronunciation of a foreign language—an accomplishment ordinarily considered to be difficult and to require much practice.

On the basis of the principles we have mentioned it is advisable to attend lectures and theatrical performances, and to be present at conversations in the tongue we wish to learn, even if we understand practically nothing. We can rely upon our subconscious to absorb and then imitate, particularly when we assist it by adopting a conscious attitude and mood of easy relaxation, devoid of any strenuous effort to understand and any impatience or sense of inferiority.

5. Synthetic Grasping

Contrary to what one might expect and at variance with the current procedure used in teaching, recent psychological research has proved that the spontaneous and natural way of grasping and retaining is by taking in the whole and not the part. A word or a short phrase are both auditorily and visually perceived as a "whole," as a unit. The subconscious is synthetic and not analytical; just as it is irrational and not rational. Our frequent mistakes in many fields, including that of language, are due to the neglect of these and other fundamental differences between our conscious and our subconscious mind. Thus this principle of synthetic grasping endorses the use of short phrases or even longer sentences without stopping to analyze their component parts and their grammatical peculiarities—a dry and tiresome labor which tends to sidetrack the attention and confuse the impressions.

6. Emotional and Aesthetic Factors

Some philosophers and ethnologists have maintained that poetry is the natural and original expression of human language. Certainly the first verbal manifestations of our remote ancestors, prompted by vital needs and emotional outbursts, could not be called prose in our cold, matter-of-fact sense. In any case it is certain that poetry, through its combination of charm and rhythm and rhyme, and song with its beauty of melody, carry a special appeal and, therefore make an incomparably deeper and stronger impression than does a mere succession of prosaic phrases.

I sometimes rake an amusing and convincing experiment along these lines. When foreign friends express to me their desire to learn Italian, while at the seine time confessing their lack of confidence based on previous unhappy attempts with this or other languages, I reply that languages are not difficult to learn and that the fault lies not with then but with the current methods. I claim that I can prove it then and there by demonstrating to them that in about half an hour or even less they will be able to understand a sonnet of This assertion gives them a pleasant and greatly arouses their interest, which serves as a good preparation. Then I proceed to recite to them the wonderful sonnet inspired by Beatrice:

"Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare
la donna mia, quand'ella altrui salute" etc.
(*Vita Nuova Sonetto XV*)

If we compare such poems with the phrases which make up the exercises in the current grammars—such as "the cat of my aunt is smaller than the dog of my uncle," or "My grandmother's umbrella is old," etc.—it is easy to see how superior poetry is in every respect. Yet today in thousands of public and private schools all over the world, tens of thousands of bored pupils reluctantly or obstinately try to hammer into their heads 'Where is my uncle's penknife;" "I like celery but I do not like cabbage;" and many other such stimulating and inspiring phrases.

In all this I am not to be taken as asserting that the study of languages should be based on famous poems only, disdaining all subjects of common and practical interest. My point is that, contrary to current opinion, poetry is easier to remember and more agreeable to the subconscious than dull phrases, and that it is, therefore, both preferable and practical to start with it in order to lay a good foundation. After coaxing the subconscious into a good humor, one can undertake the less attractive parts of the study.

In this first phase of learning it is profitable to induce the willing cooperation of the subconscious by using not only famous poems, but also simple nursery rhymes and little verses for children. This is altogether in accordance with the fundamental principle we have stated, namely that in this work we must become again as little children.

Another valuable means of facilitating the study of a language is a bond of sympathy between teacher and pupil. Modern psychology has rightly emphasized the great importance of emotional and irrational factors in all aspects of human life. But these have as yet received no adequate recognition and utilization in education, and little attention is paid to them in the teaching of languages. This does not imply that a special personal bond or affective relationship is needed between teacher and pupil, although, when it exists, as in the case between mother end child in learning the mother tongue, it is very helpful. What should be established is a happy, friendly relationship, vivacious and informal, quite different from the stiff, reserved, or professorial attitude which is the rule.

Much can be done towards establishing this atmosphere by enlivening the teaching with the frequent interspersion of humorous and witty phrases, puns, verbal tricks and absurdities. The funny makes a very special appeal to the subconscious, creates a very clear-cut impression on it, and is correspondingly remembered with great ease.

Surely the time has come to abandon the stupid idea that study must always be accompanied by solemn and laborious drudgery. Let us turn it into a lively, attractive, happy activity. Let us, far example, turn our attention to the possibility of introducing another influential factor: the general and vivid interest aroused by play and sport. It should be easy for the teacher, who is not a mere automaton harping on grammar, to propose puzzles, little genes, end competitions in order to stimulate his pupils to eager learning, especially of the less attractive parts of a language or other subjects. It would be well if textbooks incorporating these methods were made available far the use of the teaching profession.

In this way study and sport, instead of remaining two separate and often antagonistic activities, would be drawn into partnership; the more so because games and sports could easily be utilized for the teaching of many scientific facts, laws, and methods, from a practical standpoint.

At this juncture I should like to anticipate a possible doubt that may have arisen in some minds. Are grammars then really obsolete? Should we just consign them to the dustbin or make a fine bonfire of them? My views are not as revolutionary as that! I have a great respect for grammars and sincerely believe that they have their proper place and perform a distinctive function within the body of human knowledge. Only, in my opinion, that place and function are exactly the opposite of those ordinarily assigned to them. Grammars should net be used, as is the custom, at the start of the study of a language; their usefulness begins after one has acquired a sufficient practical command of the language. When this has been attained by the method of direct absorption, there arises spontaneously the desire to know the reason for the many peculiarities and for the origin and development of the language one is learning to appreciate. This is right and good, expressing, as it does, the desire for a scientific understanding.

The study of grammar and syntax new acquires am entirely different quality, becoming a medium for the satisfaction of a spontaneous and natural desire and for the expression of an inherent interest. Thus it yields a mental gratification which compensates for the exertion it requires. This attitude is not as revolutionary and singular as it might appear. A philosopher as sober and rational as Herbert Spencer wrote: “A language is spoken and many poems are written before grammar and prosody are thought of. One has not awaited the appearance of an Aristotle in order to reason well. As grammar has been compiled after the existence of language, it has to be taught after one knows it.” In this respect the current popular grammar falls sadly short of its proper purpose which is to reveal the special structure of a language, its origin, and development. Grammar should help us to lock upon a language as a living organism, and, with syntax, to discover its psychological characteristics and its expressive value.

This second phase of learning completes and crowns the first, and is its natural outcome. Such sequence in the study of languages corresponds to a general principle of evolution and growth which rules, or should rule, all aspects of human life. *First* direct experience, living contact and assimilation, *then* deliberate reflection and a clear mental grasp of the materials previously assimilated; *first*, subconscious receptivity, *then* self-conscious possession; *first* practice, *then*, theory. All teaching should aim *first* at facilitating and diversifying the pupil's experience and contacts with actual life, his "field of knowledge," and *afterwards* at helping him to harvest all the fruits of experience, knowledge, and wisdom which those living contacts are capable of yielding.

The teacher should be a bridge to experience and life, and their interpreter; not, as is generally the case, a screen preventing vital intercourse with reality. In the present school system (excepting a minority of schools which have adopted modern "active' methods) the teacher, with the best of intentions, tends to deprive young people of their right to undergo the natural processes we have described, by feeding them with pre-digested and artificially condensed tabloids of knowledge.

The harmonious, sympathetic relationship between teacher and pupil, which as we have seen, is a great help in mastering a language, should be extended to the people and to the whole nation whose language we are learning. This has not only the advantage of facilitating our learning, but has a wider and higher value of a spiritual nature. A language is the direct and distinctive expression of the soul of a people. It reveals the special inner quality of the latter, and by means of it is manifested the unique contribution which that nation has made and is making to the corporate life of humanity. It is the interpreter of the notes and chords, the melodies and harmonies which represent its participation in the great human symphony.

Therefore, if we adopt an attitude of sympathetic understanding and keen appreciation towards that people, putting our soul in contact with its soul, the study of its language will acquire for us a new and deeper meaning. It will create an inner and vital relationship which will enable us to absorb that language with surprising ease. We shall be able to rely upon the cooperation not only of our subconscious but of our superconscious, with its higher intuitive and telepathic powers, with its strong tendency to bring about a blending and identification.

The results of this appreciative and sympathetic attitude will be far-reaching. The knowledge of a language will be acquired with the least expenditure of time and effort, "sans larmes," as Reinak amusingly puts it. Moreover, such an approach confers an even more important benefit, of a spiritual—a great broadening of our mind and feelings. Many mental limitations, prejudices, and unjustified emotional reactions are thereby overcome, and we acquire a new angle of vision, new ways of approaching reality; become more plastic and refined. Thus we gradually arrive at a vital and not merely an intellectual realization of the fact that there are many points of view, all partially justified; and that, only by accepting and appreciating the contribution of each country and race, may we hope to arrive at a more complete and truer picture of reality.

This inner broadening, this growth of our power to sympathize and to understand, this overcoming of self-centeredness, have not only a liberating effect on us individually, but constitute one of the most effective and practical means of eliminating national and racial misunderstandings, antipathies, and the consequent antagonisms. Recent history has demonstrated with dramatic evidence the failure of efforts to establish international cooperation, disarmament, and peace primarily by outward means, such as pacts, legal measures, coercion, and fear. In this, as in all similar instances, the only effective solution must be worked out by the natural, and at the same time, spiritual method which operates from within outwards, from soul to body, from spirit to form.

When the real spirit of peace and general international goodwill has permeated the minds and hearts of the more influential section of humanity, the elaborate, formal leagues and pacts will become unnecessary, and in

that spiritual atmosphere the needed regulations and agreements will be easily established and effectually carried out.

In order to add our individual contribution to this great task, on which may depend the future of our civilization, it becomes almost a necessity for us to avail ourselves of the assistance offered by the knowledge of the principal foreign languages. As we have seen, it can be acquired far more easily and painlessly if we abandon the current unsatisfactory and artificial methods, and cultivate the wisdom to become again as little children. Let us open our minds and hearts to the many voices in which humanity expresses its sorrows and joys, and offers us the fruits of knowledge and beauty it has gathered through the endeavors of its sons. Let us daily participate in the effort to create a new civilization, a new expression of man's inherent divine qualities.