

COGNITIVE LIFEBOATS FOR THE SINKING AUDIO-LINGUAL SHIP

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The trouble began quite innocently with Pavlov's dogs and seems to be ending with a lot of disillusioned language teachers and students. As many of us now realize, Audio-lingualism with its pattern practice, substitution drills and small tolerance of student errors has tended to stifle human creativity on the part of both students and teachers by almost entirely ignoring the human cognitive processes and human emotional needs beyond an over simplified interpretation of the concept of reward and punishment or, in other words, approval and disapproval.

Some audio-linguists speak of student motivation, but the published material itself is very seldom sufficiently motivating. Teachers desperately try to modify courses to increase interest but this motivation is usually superficial and temporary rather than coming from within the student himself.

Don't many of us, after teaching with Audio-lingual methods or its influences for some time, begin to think, "What have I accomplished? I used to feel so confident and my classes seemed to be interesting and more or less dynamic. Now my students seem restless and many of those who have been studying for years, really can produce very little when it comes to spontaneous, creative production. I must be a bad teacher." The fact may be that the confidence we once felt came from a strong and sincere belief that if we could get students to repeat a certain grammatical structure enough times (just giving it slight variation so as not to bore the students too much), eventually he or she would be able to produce that structure spontaneously and creatively. We and our students have begun to realize that this transfer is not automatic and that only a few have been able to "adapt" and learn superficial rules and speech patterns or partially escape this by unconsciously using personal cognitive strategies or seeking learning stimulation in other places. With this realization, we have become restless and begun to feel that the text book that we have most likely begun following quite closely in order to complete programme requirements is: 1) childish, 2) unstimulating, and 3) very repetitive (which it obviously has to be if it is loyal to its fundamentally behaviourist philosophy). I hesitated to use the word childish in the above description since it's a very subjective term and not always to be considered in a negative light. An example of what I mean in this particular reference could be an exercise from one commonly used textbook at the university level in Mexico where student A says, "What does a milkman do?", and student B answers, "A milkman delivers milk".

OK, we need a change, but what kind? Write our own supplementary materials? Use more audio-visual aids? Find a textbook that looks less childish, i.e., more interesting pictures and situational dialogues? English for Special Purposes? Probably what we need to do is investigate and acquaint ourselves with the real advances made in our field over the past few years. We could try to attend all the conferences, congresses and courses being offered and it still may mean that we are only just becoming aware of the great deal of study

and work we still have before us. If we are to give credibility to our field and ourselves as professionals within it, we owe it to ourselves to do the best work we can at a given time. To do this we must set priorities and use some economic measures to insure that we are doing the best we can at the present, while preparing for the future and its possibilities for improvement. This is a constant process. It is dynamic and has no end, especially in some fields where advances are being made so rapidly.

This paper concerns itself with both the present and the future of a particular situation: realizing that a change must be made, but for some reason not being able to make that change at present, nor being satisfied with the changes made. Reasons for this may be

1. Your particular institution is not willing at this time and possibly needs a little more persuading and tangible results or facts in order to be convinced.
2. You, yourselves as teachers, may be afraid or unready for a complete, sudden change at this time and could well profit from some sort of "transition" period. (learning/trial)
3. Maybe you're not even sure where or how far you want to go with this eventual change.

The S.S. Audio-lingual Ship is sinking fast while many of its unsuspecting passengers and crew still think it safely afloat (though admittedly making little headway). Have no fear! The lifeboats are being lowered and our only word of caution on the way to the nearby shore (maybe The Land of Communication) is, "You probably shouldn't rock the boat too much."

But where do we start? How about slight revision of basic teaching principles or learning principles. Somewhere back there in those first days of "repeat after me" we forgot that the learner was a capable, creative, beautifully and naturally functioning human being with special needs originating far away from this little classroom and his desire or requirement to "learn English" in only three months or four semesters. We forgot about the learner and concentrated on the teacher: the method, the book, the tense, the sentence, the word, all out of context. Let's get back into context at all levels and instead of talking about teaching methods and books, talk about tools and strategies for learning. Instead of talking about a verb tense just because it follows the linguistic progression of complexity, talk about linguistic functions in a particular text or situation. Instead of defining words in isolation or with elaborate theatrics (so common in audio-lingual based courses), put it back into authentic meaningful context and show the student strategies for analysing its function there in order that the student might "discover" the underlying meaning. Recognize the fact that any learner already has sophisticated cognitive abilities and built-in strategies for learning and try to help him to use them. This is a rather new field of investigation but there is work written and being written giving ideas or examples of these cognitive strategies and how they differ among individuals and age groups. Suggested reading might include:

Teaching Language as Communication by H.G. Widdowson, published by Oxford University Press.

Error Analysis edited by Jack C. Richards and published by Longmans.

Reading by Frank Smith, published by Cambridge University Press.

Memory Meaning and Method by Earl Stevick, published by Newbury House.

Piaget and Knowledge by Hans G. Furth, published by Prentice Hall.

Psychology and Language Learning by Elizabeth Ingram and Adult Theories, Child Strategies and their Implications for the Language Teacher by Ruth Clark, both contained in The Edinburgh Course for Applied Linguistics Vol. 2 edited by J.P.B. Allen and S. Pit Corder, published by Oxford University Press.

We can think in immediate terms of "letting the student learn" rather than blocking the process with very limiting teaching methods. Language learning and learning of any kind are natural processes. Reading, by Frank Smith, is an excellent book for insights into the learning process. Among the many thought provoking ideas contained which we can apply directly to our own reevaluation of our teaching is that learning is as natural as breathing, that we don't have to motivate or reward learning in other individuals, and that boredom is a device that indicates a situation where there is nothing to learn or where what is supposed to be learned comes across as nonsense.

Reading is an area that has been largely ignored by audiolinguists who give primary importance to oral repetition and production of isolated phrases, and short dialogues which, like most of the reading selections contained in an audio-lingual text, are usually contrived of the isolated fragments previously practiced and little resemble real speech or written material. The reading passages are usually followed by "comprehension" questions that like the passage itself, are restricted to certain grammatical structures. If, as Frank Smith states, comprehension is a personal matter based on the questions one asks oneself, with the ultimate test lying in the elimination of one's own uncertainty, these questions can only be limiting. It also becomes obvious that there is a definite confusion between teaching and testing; testing is the only purpose these questions serve, and their effectiveness in that is even doubtful. An alternative use for a text of this sort would be to let the students read the questions before reading the text. This way they would serve the purpose of indicating what information the student is expected to extract from the text, thereby allowing him to use strategies for efficient extraction of information from texts. Ideally the text should be authentic or only slightly adapted so as to represent language as it is truly used (once students understand strategies there is no need to limit exposure to only those grammatical items previously studied). Follow up questions can be valid if they lead to further understanding or clarification of contextual relationships. Exercises should always strive to promote strategy type learning. Certainly any extra materials and activities should have definite cognitive strategies in mind, i.e., using context or native language to help decipher texts.

Teachers in restricted situations can begin to implement strategy building activities and incorporate them into audio-lingual programs. Although the solutions must be different for each situation, there are a few general suggestions for classroom activities, program planning and bibliography.

Probably the most basic area and the one to begin with is program planning, referring to the planning of teacher activities as well as student activities. Teachers can try to obtain time for planning and refuse to modify courses in cases where there has not been ample time for at least beginning research into the various alternatives and the real needs of the students. So often programs are made without any direction in mind and in ignorance of advances that have been made in the area of language teaching. The area of LSP, or Languages for Special Purposes, covers the investigation of how to limit our goals in order to aid learning of what a particular group of students really needs to learn e.g. reading in a special area. A basic book to beginning investigation in this field is English for Specific Purposes edited by Ron MacKay & Alan Mountford, published by Longmans. General English courses, by not limiting goals and demanding linguistic perfection, create a wide open abyss into which many students and teachers have fallen as they realize that they cannot possibly learn or teach it all. By limiting our goals and expectations for perfection we create a less threatening atmosphere which actually promotes more learning.

Changes can be implemented into the classroom gradually on a trial and error basis but not haphazardly since, as mentioned before, there must always be a definite objective in mind when modifying programs, and the objective should be one to promote specific cognitive learning strategies. Care must be taken that, in some way grading systems and testing somehow parallel these modifications because, if not, the student comes out on the losing end. If the teaching program stresses communicative competence and oral production or comprehension of specialized texts, and the testing program stresses linguistic perfection and reading of discreet item questions, something is definitely wrong and a change is necessary. Few students will want to spend time on communication activities when they know they will be tested on the sounds of the "ed" endings in regular verbs or whether to use do or does in a particular isolated test item. Classroom participation and individual improvement rates must somehow be taken into account when grades are a factor. When audio-lingual texts must be covered to meet program requirements, they should probably be gone over quickly and as dynamically as possible, leaving the majority of the time and correspondingly, percentage of grade, for communication activities in specific areas. Several good activities of this type for presently general English situations en route to "something better", i.e. in transition, can be found in a book entitled Developing Communication Skills, General Considerations and Specific Techniques (editors: Joiner and Westphal, published by Newbury House). Although this book actually deals with the teaching of foreign languages within the United States and focuses on the teaching of grammatical items rather than functional, by the very fact that it has a somewhat grammatical approach, it lends itself to the kind of interim period I am talking about in this paper.

In order to recapitulate and enlarge upon what has been previously mentioned, let's make a quick general inspection of the holes in our sinking ship while, at the same time, showing the parallel merits of our modern cognitive

life boats and that possibly far away land of meaningful communication.

Audio-lingual approach (Behaviorist)	Cognitive approach
1. mental speech patterns through outside context, non meaningful repetition (product)	creative thought and learning strategies (process) always related to context
2. focus on teaching methods (external motivation) i.e. exams	focus on learning (internal motivation) natural desire to learn
3. isolated linguistic fragments used to exemplify grammatical rules	authentic contexts showing appropriate use or function of high value (for learner) language items (Widdowson: one can learn usage from use but not viceversa)
4. low value structures - motivation is only toward future needs and hopes	language has immediate, practical relevance (emphasis on content relevancy)
5. linguistic perfection required	emphasis on communicative competence and learning strategies, awareness of natural cognitive processes (interlanguage)
6. tries to develop the four abilities	specifies and limits goals based on student needs
7. focus on linguistic information provided by teachers	focus on promoting thought. Information is personal
8. use of native language is Tabu	native language is a cognitive tools. Some students can develop skills not including speech
9. non-use of native language plus the requirement for linguistic perfection create an elite of native speakers of the target language	specific goals stress other requirements for teachers
10. texts (commercial from USA or Britain) promote foreign models of conduct while ignoring the necessities of the students' country and their own forms of thought, being, etc.	students can satisfy their personal needs as well as those of their country with specialized courses

11. choice of materials limited to published texts or copies (poor imitations)	materials should be created for the specific situation
12. teacher is the authority and is always right	teacher is a facilitator and source of needed information. Is not always right
13. teachers and students are bored and tired	teacher and students creatively stimulated

Conclusions

THE INTERESTS WHICH PROMOTE THE AUDIO-LINGUAL APPROACH AND TEXTS INHIBIT FREEDOM OF THOUGHT AND PERSONAL CREATIVITY WHILE A COGNITIVE APPROACH PERMITS NO LIMITATIONS ON THE HUMAN MIND AND ENCOURGES INDEPENDANT THOUGHT.

A FEW CLASSROOM HINTS

1. Don't tell students definitions in any language and discourage the use of the dictionary. Encourage and help students find meanings from contexts (See Alcalá & Best "Developing strategies for understanding lexical items through discourse and context" in On Tesol '78).
2. Try to find appropriate uses for particular grammatical structures. If you can't find one, chances are that the structure is of low potential value to the student. Practice within the appropriate situational context.
Note: Your AL text will usually have inappropriate contexts (see Widdowson)
3. Find target language materials which stimulate student interest to learn about or express something while not straying too far from what is familiar and comfortable as a subject area. A good rule to keep in mind is to provide new information in areas that the student knows something about.
4. Let the student know about learning strategies and remember that there are often individual differences in learning style.
5. Allow students to create their own problems as much as possible and always to find the solutions. Refrain from giving answers and remember that the process is more important than the end in a learning situation. The help you give should be directed toward process (strategies). Encourage students to find help from other students but remind them that any help should be strategy type rather than solutions.
6. Organize small group activities in order to promote this type of interaction.
7. Find a "happy medium" between directed non-personalized activity and completely individualized instruction, e.g. whole group activities with follow

up individualized activities from which students can choose and work in specialized groups or alone.

8. Be very careful with evaluation which tends to structure learning to meet the needs of the exams rather than the personal needs which may serve as internal motivation. Possible alternative: allow options such as letting students choose what percentage of their grade could be applied to participation in communication activities.

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