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Four Language Skills in One Lesson

—Intermediate to Advanced—

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Introduction: The pattern of skills to be taught.

The pattern of foreign language skills acquisition is to proceed from hearing to speaking then from reading to writing. The reason this progression has been, and still is, thought best is it most closely resembles the pattern which most people follow when learning their native language. Hence, this pattern is thought to be the most natural one in acquiring skills in another language as well. Most educators, including this writer, agree with this maxim, but the difference of language acquisition by children vis a vis by adults has forced many to re-examine their way of teaching. It has been argued by some that for the older learner, visual reinforcement can be a powerful tool in language education, and so it can, as all of us who teach young adults at university can testify to.

There are, unfortunately, drawbacks to providing the adult learner with the script of a lesson either before or at the same time that pronunciation is practiced. It is well known that somewhere between the ages of ten and fourteen the human ability to mimic decreases rapidly as rational faculties develop. This, together with the fact that written language is only an approximate representation of spoken language, leave the adult learner of a foreign language at a distinct disadvantage in developing listening and pronunciation skills. Many teachers, including myself, have attempted to experiment with various patterns of presentation of materials in order to find one that best facilitates the adult learner's progress in developing the skills in the foreign language. My own experience, however, and recent research by others, have reaffirmed the classic pattern as being the best for actually internalizing a foreign language. This does not mean, however, that the teacher need not make use of the adult learner's visual ability. For if the teacher were to do so, a valuable asset in learning would have then been neglected.

Fortunately, seldom is the visual aspect of language learning neglected. What often occurs, however, is that the language skills are taught separately, in isolation of one another. Some feel that it is quite efficient enough to teach each skill independently by concentrating on each in separate classes. Hearing and speech in conversation classes, reading in literature classes and writing in

composition classes. Unfortunately, this rather widely used approach at the university level relies upon curricula that are not coordinated to make use of the material of one class to reinforce the lessons in another. Moreover, whatever similarities in materials there may be that might serve to reinforce materials learned in a different class, the time factor between classes serves to negate any advantage there might have been, had the reinforcement taken place within a short period of time. One answer to this problem is the object of this paper, to show how all four skills may be practiced in one lesson, basing the exercises on one passage, to suggest that in a writing class, the practice of all four language skills leads to better overall performance by the students.

Before proceeding it should be pointed out that the writer teaches all four grades at university, from freshmen to seniors and, while conversation and American literature are taught in isolation of the following procedure, the writer has three writing classes, one each with sophomores, juniors and seniors. In each of these all four language skills are practiced to reinforce the students' ability to produce the final weekly product, a (hopefully) well-written composition of several pages in length. It should also be pointed out that the writer works with students who are English majors at the Faculty of Education, students whose expressed goal is to become English teachers themselves and are, with few exceptions, fairly well motivated. There are, however, together with the English majors, a number of elementary education majors who are minoring in English. Since English is not part of the curriculum at elementary schools, these students have little or no professional motivation to learn English. In fact, many become English minors simply because a minor is required and all the other departments had filled their quotas before they got a chance to get in. Nevertheless, even these English minors after six or more months of work show much greater improvement in all four skills than was the case with English minors some years ago before these skills were practiced in writing classes.

2. Selection of Materials

The selection of material to be used in any class must, of course, take into consideration a number of factors: class level, class size and the final objective of the class. In the writing class for which the exercises below were put into use, the students' level is intermediate with the exception of their hearing ability which is pre-intermediate and, in the case of some of the English minors, even lower. The number of students is generally about twenty although there have been as many as thirty two in one class. (In lower level classes there are twenty to twenty-five, while in the highest level as few as eight.) The objective of the class is to guide the students towards writing a precis of a passage and to write a short composition based upon the passage by developing a similar topic, writing

a discourse taking an opposite stance from that in the passage (this is the case in the example used in this paper) and even to write a short story. The precis is done in class, the composition as homework. Since the students are required to develop a clear, concise topic sentence for the precis, the passage itself must be reasonably clear. The example used in this paper has been taken from *Developing Skills* by L. G. Alexander (Longman) though there are a number of sources from which the teacher can select materials of equal quality. Of course, if the teacher feels ambitious and is not too pressed for time, the development of original materials which incorporate elements from the students' own lives would be ideal as then the material itself would help to motivate the students to learn.

3. The Exercises

The exercises are presented in class in the classic order of hearing, speaking, reading and writing and are both of the mim-mem and cognitive variety. Some, however, might object to any sort of mim-mem exercise. At least as far back as the 1960's the mim-mem exercises of the structural approach have been challenged, as indeed has been anything and everything to do with the structural approach, e. g., in Allen, Allen and Shute (1966) the teacher is advised to have the student listen to something which interests him/her to which the student must then produce a response which shows he/she has understood. The problem when using only such cognitive exercises, however, is that the student sometimes produces incorrect and/or inappropriate utterances which, if left uncorrected, might become habitual, making it quite difficult to correct at a latter stage in the student's learning. It is suggested, therefore, that a mix of mim-mem and cognitive exercises be utilized, to show the correct and appropriate forms, to aid the student's understanding of the material being practiced. Some scholars are now stressing that the process of communication itself vis-a-vis the final forms of the language used should be concentrated upon. (Cf J. C. Richards, 1981). However, this is easier said than done, especially in a crowded classroom. Hence, the exercises below, as mentioned earlier, are a mixture of structural and cognitive ones.

3. a. Hearing Concentration Exercise

This exercise may use almost any material if the goal is hearing alone. In this case, however, the material is taken from a reading passage upon which both a precis and composition must be based. Generally, an attempt to extract just enough sentences from the passage to give the students a better idea of the content of the passage is done, usually four or five sentences of eight to twelve or thirteen words each is the case. If much longer than this even native speakers have trouble doing this exercise.

Prior to the first exercise, warm-up questions about the topic of the day are useful to get the students' minds attuned to the right train of thought. (Note: To be effective, the material must not be introduced or even available to the students prior to the beginning of the class. They should not even see the passage until the completion of this first exercise.)

Example Questions

Where do you prefer to live?

In an exciting metropolis or the peaceful country?

Why?

What are the good points/bad points of each? etc.

After the above questions have been answered to the teacher's satisfaction, the sentences extracted from the passage (listed below) are then practiced.

1. The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me.
2. I have always regarded the country as something you look at through a train window. (this is a bit long)
3. Though most of my friends live in the city, they extol life in the country.
4. The city can provide you with the best that life can offer.
5. I cannot understand why city dwellers say they prefer to live in the country.

(The last is slightly modified from the original. See the text in the Reading Exercise.)

The teacher now asks the students to pay strict attention, listening with extreme care, looking at the teacher's eyes. The teacher then recites the first sentence and asks the class to repeat chorally.

Teacher: "The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me."

Class: "The quiet life of... country.... never me."

While the class is attempting to repeat, the teacher should be looking for the students who are doing the best job of repeating. These should be asked to repeat individually and when one has it right, that student should serve as a model for the other students who also repeat individually, this time following the model student rather than the teacher.

Teacher: (to student who has successfully repeated the sentence) "Repeat!"

Student 1: "The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me."

Teacher: (to another student who has done fairly well in attempting to repeat the sentence.)

"What did Student 1 say? Repeat it!"

Student 2: "The quiet life of the country has ever appeared to me."

Teacher: (To S 1) "What did you say? Repeat!"

Student 1: "The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me."

Teacher: (To S 2) "What did S 1 say? Repeat!"

Student 2: "The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me."

Teacher: (To S 3) "What did S 2 say? Repeat!"

Student 3: "The quiet life of the country has never appeared to me."

Teacher: (To S 2) "What did you say? Repeat!"

Student 2: "The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me."

Teacher: (To S 3) "What did S 2 say? Repeat!"

Student 3: "The quiet life of the country has never appealed to me."

Etc.

When this does not go as smoothly as the above, the teacher may have to provide the model a second or even third time. If so, however, this is probably an indication that the sentence is too difficult for that particular class. Sometimes, too, the teacher may be able to get the class to construct the model if two or more of the students are able to repeat parts of the entire sentence, though not one of them can do it alone. By telling the class that S 1 has the first part correct and that S 2 has the last part right, the teacher can ask S 3 to try to put the entire sentence together.

After a sizable portion of the class has repeated the first sentence individually, the teacher should then provide the model once again and have the class repeat it chorally. While they are doing so, the teacher is advised to look for the students who have yet to repeat the sentence individually and appear still to be having trouble. One or two of these students should be asked to repeat individually.

The above procedure is continued until all the sentences extracted from the passage have been practiced. Then to reinforce the ideas in these extracted sentences, the teacher should repeat each one again, in sequence, having the class repeat chorally after each sentence is given by the teacher. As an optional step, after the above is finished, the teacher might then ask the class to guess what they believe the passage to be about. (Note that during the above exercise, the teacher must continue to insist that the students lock eyes with him as they attempt to repeat the model he has given. When the class is used to this exercise S 2 can be asked to lock eyes with S 1 as S 1 provides the model and as S 2 attempts to repeat it.)

The rationale for this exercise is that eye contact forces the student to concentrate on what was heard and does not permit mental translation. Since the ability to pronounce correctly comes primarily through the learner's own ears

(or so it is becoming to be accepted by many ESL teachers) an exercise such as the above is important as it forces the learner to use his ears alone. To those who continue to object to this mim-mem exercise it can be pointed out that the previous warm-up exercise was cognitive in nature as is the Reading Exercise which follows below.

3. b. Reading Exercise based upon the Cloze.

While at the TESOL '80 Convention in San Francisco, I was fortunate to attend Carol Brownscombe's (instructor at Sacred Heart College, Belmont, N. C.) presentation entitled, "A Technique for Teaching Reading as a Group Activity". This is essentially the use of a cloze exercise (1) to force the students to think about the content of a given reading and (2) to provide the teacher with immediate feedback of the class's understanding of the reading exercise.

The classic cloze exercise or test omits every fifth, sixth or seventh word, but this tends to be quite difficult. In the exercise below only those words which the teacher feels his students have a fair to good chance of guessing at have been omitted. As the teacher and the class read the passage aloud together, the students in the class try to fill in the blanks. The teacher should be ready to accept almost whatever word the class agrees upon for a given blank. More often than not, as the class proceeds through the passage, they usually get enough additional clues from the context which indicate whether or not a previous choice was appropriate or not. In other words, the teacher should give the class every chance to make their own corrections. (Note: while copies of the passage can be handed out to the students for choral reading, it is better to use an Over Head Projector, an OHP, as the teacher can then maintain a more uniform pace as he/she uses a pointer on the screen.) The example below is Lesson 41 in *Developing Skills* by L. G. Alexander.

{The quife life of the country has never appealed to me.} _____ born and city bred, {I have always regarded the _____ as something you look at through a train window,} or something you occasionally visit during the weekend. {(though) Most of my _____ live in the city,} yet they always go into raptures at he, mere
 5 mention of the _____. Though { _____ extol} the virtues of the peaceful {life,} only one of them has ever gone to live {in the _____} and he was back in the _____ within six months. Even he still lives under the illusion that country _____ is somehow superior to _____ life. He is forever talking about the friendly _____, the clean _____, the closeness to nature and the gentle pace of
 10 _____. Nothing can be compared, he maintains, with the first cock crow, the twittering of _____ at dawn, the sight of the rising _____ glinting on the trees and pastures. This idyllic pastoral scene is only part of the picture. My _____ fails to mention the long and friendless winter evenigs which are interrupted only by an occasional visit to the local cinema—virtually the only form of _____. He says
 15 nothing about the poor selection of goods in _____, or about those unfortunate

people who have to travel from the country to the _____ every day to get to _____ . Why _____ are prepared to tolerate a four hour journey each day for the dubious privilege of living in the _____ is beyond my _____ . They could be saved so much misery and expense if they chose to live in the _____ where they rightly belong.

20 If you can do without the few pastoral pleasures of the _____ , you will find [the city can provide you with the best that life can offer.] You never have to travel miles to see your _____ . They invariably live nearby and are always available for an informal _____ or an evening's entertainment. Some of my acquaintances in the country come up to _____ once or twice a year to visit the theatre as a special treat. For them this is a major operation which involves considerable _____ . As the play draws to its close, they wonder whether _____ will ever catch that last _____ home. The _____ dweller never experiences anxieties of this sort. The latest exhibitions, films or plays are only a short bus _____ away.

30 Shopping, too, is always a pleasure. There is so much _____ that you never have to make do with second best. _____ people run wild when they go shopping in the city and stagger home loaded with as many of the necessities of life as they can _____ . Nor is the city without its moments of beauty. There is something comforting about the warm glow shed by _____ on cold wet winter nights. Few

35 things could be more impressive than the _____ that descends on deserted city streets at week-ends when the thousands that travel to work every day are tucked in their homes in the _____ . It has always been a mystery to me why _____ dwellers, who appreciate all these things, obstinately pretend that they would prefer to live in the _____ .

(Note: The first four sentences of the hearing exercise have been placed in brackets in the reading exercise above. The last sentence deviates too much from the original at the bottom of the reading exercise so that brackets would only be confusing. For the teacher's own use, a marking pen can be used to indicate which sentences are to be used in the hearing exercise.)

Examples of guesses that might be quite acceptable are:

Line 5: Friends, buddies, acquaintances or even relatives.

Line 7: They or any from Line 5.

Line 11: Living or life.

Line 13: (clean) Air or atmosphere.

Line 14: Life or Living.

Line 18: Scene, picture or image.

Line 19: Same as Line 5.

Line 22: Entertainment, fun or enjoyment.

Line 23: Shops, stores or markets.

Line 25: Work, their jobs.

Line 33: Same as Line 5.

Line 34: Chat, talk or possibly party, though the rest of the sentence makes this last choice redundant.

Line 38: Planning, thinking, consideration, etc.

Line 40: (last) Bus or train.

Line 43: Ride or trip.

Line 44: Choice or variety.

Line 47: Carry, hold, haul away, etc.

Line 49: Lights, neon-signs or advertisements.

Line 51: Peace, quiet or calm.

Line 54: Homes or houses.

The blanks that have not been mentioned above are those that are quite fixed in choice. Mostly either 'city' or 'country'. And, naturally, these examples above do not by any means exhaust the acceptable possibilities that your students may come up with during this exercise.

The teacher may find that the reading exercise is a cognitive exercise not only for his students but for himself as well. The feedback this exercise provides is not limited to simply how well the class does or does not understand the passage. It can provide a wealth of information about the students themselves, their likes and dislikes.

3. c. Writing Exercise: Precis of the Last Paragraph of the Reading Exercise

The final exercise in class is a precis or summary of the last paragraph of the passage. The students are first asked to identify the subject of the *paragraph* and its topic. From these they must construct a topic sentence (S+V+C. I., or Controlling Idea in the form of one of the following: (1) An adjective, (2) An adjective plus a noun, (3) A phrase.) Next they identify the type of paragraph (accumulation of detail, exemplification, definition of term, comparison and contrast, analogy, etc.) Then they proceed to pick out the main supporting points in the body of the paragraph. An example of an outline of the precis follows below.

Topic sentence: *City life OFFERS* [the best life.]

Points: Friends—always close by

Entertainment—always available

Shopping—Convenience, variety, pleasure

Beauty—Lights, quite atmosphere on weekends

Concluding sentence: I can't understand city dwellers who say they like the country.

Finally, the students write their own preces in as few words as possible but not more than eighty. Usually no more than ten minutes are allowed in class for writing the precis. After this has been completed, several students are then asked to read their preces and the class is supposed to comment on them. An example of a reasonably acceptable precis is given below.

City life offers the best life. Though country dwellers are often lonely and have

little entertainment, in the city friends and entertainment are always close by. For city dwellers shopping is always convenient and pleasurable, whereas for country dwellers shopping in the city is an expedition. The city has beauty as well as convenience, the beautiful lights at night and the quiet atmosphere on weekends. I can't understand city dwellers who say they like the country. (76 words)

For homework, as mentioned earlier, the students are required to write several pages based upon the passage. As they progress in level their writing assignments become more and more 'free' in nature. For the lesson above, they are simply given the topic to write about and told to begin writing the evening of the day that the lesson was practiced on. They must also write a rough draft as well as a fair copy in their notebooks. After they have handed in their notebooks and their composition has been annotated by myself, their notebooks are returned to them and they must then write the composition a third time in order to earn a grade.

4. Conclusion.

This concludes the outline of four language skills based upon one written passage. With practice a teacher can use these exercises to achieve greater efficiency in helping his students develop all four language skills, but only if he is persistent in the use of these exercises for they are easy neither for the student nor the teacher, especially when first using them. I can say, in further defense of these exercises, that those students of mine who have had the opportunity to study abroad after having taken my composition classes all agree that the exercises have helped them in all four language skills and, moreover, enabled them to compose papers for their classes in the United States and Australia with some degree of competence.

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