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SOME TOPICAL QUESTIONS OF THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING THE HUNGARIAN LANGUAGE AS THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOCIAL ENVIRONMENT

The tasks and objectives of teaching the language of the social environment can be summarized by the fact that the teaching of this subject of instruction ought to contribute to the desideratum that students belonging to various peoples and nationalities of Yugoslavia get acquainted with one another and understand one another as fully as possible. A closer description and the definition of the notion of achieving command of the language that is being learned, i.e. of the notion of linguistic and communicative competence - which is very interesting in our case as well - have been supplied by Dezsó László, who quotes the widely accepted definition of S.P. Corder, according to whom in the course of teaching "the learner must develop the ability to produce and understand grammatical utterances; he must be able to distinguish grammatical from ungrammatical sequences, but he must also know when to select a particular grammatical sequence, the one which is appropriate to the context, both linguistic and situational. His utterance must be situation-related. Or, to put it another way, he must not only learn to talk grammatically in the target language, he must also talk coherently and to the point."[1] Defined in this way, knowledge of language certainly requires a good command of the given language, yet this linguistic competence cannot after all be equated with knowledge of the mother tongue. If the teaching of a foreign language and of the language of the social environment is to attain the above-defined level of language proficiency on the part of students, it must first solve a number of different problems, and solve them both theoretically and practically. One of these problems can be formulated as follows: What language sequences should be used at the start of the teaching of a foreign language/language of the social environment, if this beginning is really to stand for the starting-point in acquiring command of such an integral whole as language? The answer is not simple, especially because the goal is clear: after a reasonable time spent and the efforts made, the student should acquire command of the given language in accordance with the requirements of the level of proficiency described above.

The efforts of experts in this field aimed at establishing successful teaching methods that would be also easy and acceptable for the student, reflect very accurately the solutions adopted by individual schools and championed by various directions in foreign-language teaching. For instance, in a

* Original: Serbo-Croatian

grammar school foreign-language teaching was started by exercises in the pronunciation of the phonemes making up the language in question; the instruction thus began with the smallest sequence - the sound. On the contrary, the direct method began the process of teaching by concentrating on the sentence which, according to linguistic views of the time, was the largest and the most complete language unit. The proponents of this method firmly rejected all the solutions previously used by the grammar method in its teaching practice.

Even if we are unable to identify, in the history of foreign-language teaching, more instances of such conflicting views as in the case of the two foregoing methods, we must nevertheless pay attention to the views and observations relating to foreign-language teaching as a branch of applied linguistics, because it can help us pinpoint the weaknesses in the present-day theory and practice of scientific foreign-language teaching. Szentgyörgyvári Arthúr/Artur Sendjerdjvari/ points out perhaps the most topical question of all, that of the autonomy and specificity of foreign-language teaching pedagogy. In his view, "it is a fact that the state of incessant agitation and turmoil within the "basic disciplines" does not make foreign-language teaching methodology very suitable for furthering a systematic consideration of problems related to foreign languages. Next, it is well known that foreign-language teaching does not make up the core of either psychology or linguistics. Foreign-language pedagogy seems to be a child of fashion: at one time the emphasis is laid on new methods in language analysis, while at other times new views o learning processes are also being harmonized. The pendulum swings between these two points, so that the history of foreign-language pedagogy emerges a a cyclic change of new directions in linguistics and in the theory of learning."[2]

Dezsö László, whom we have already cited, in his work (1977) reproaches foreign-language teaching in Hungarian People's Republic for the failure which is reflected already in the goal stressed and in the formulation of the tasks of this teaching. To quote: "The major defect of foreign-language teaching in this country is mirrored also in the erroneously set teaching goals, the teaching being concentrated on the sentence and requiring correct wording of sentences rather than text production, even though it is well known that speech is realized through dialogues and texts and not through unconnected sentences."[3]

Another teaching problem is highlighted by Fésüs András, who analyzes the teaching of vocabulary. He believes that "both the contents and the course of teaching and learning a foreign-language vocabulary represent that component of foreign-language instruction which has been worked out least consciously." Further, "foreign-language instruction solves the problems of pronunciation and of the teaching of grammar of the given language, whereas questions of vocabulary teaching are put off until the time when the language learner is leaving school, i.e. leaving the site of organized teaching, so that the theory and practice of foreign-language teaching place these questions beyond their framework, thus seemingly not encountering them at all."[4]

On the basis of these facts we can conclude that the main feature of the theory and practice of foreign-language teaching up to now

has been its incompleteness. The reason for this state of affairs should be sought primarily in the very fact that this scientific branch of linguistics and of pedagogy belongs in a group of applied social sciences, and that the theory of foreign-language teaching has either been too imprecise or has failed to be exhaustive enough in describing and defining those scientifically characteristic elements of theory and practice which emphasize the specificities of this branch of science. In default of such landmarks, those active in the field have tried to improve and promote both its theory and practice by analyzing scientifically both weighty and less weighty problems; unfortunately, their approach to questions of foreign-language teaching (due to the state of affairs in this field as described above) has been fragmentary, so that e.g. questions of pronunciation and questions of the teaching of grammar were discussed as separate wholes, each in its own right, and the same was true of the other questions too. Instead, all the questions relating to foreign-language teaching should have been analyzed as component parts of the all-inclusive grammar within foreign-language teaching.

Naturally enough, since interdependencies and interrelations permeating the questions in this field of scientific research were ignored, the results of research studies and practical work did not converge. Had they converged, however, it would not be possible now to conclude that scientific investigations associated with the teaching of foreign languages virtually passed over a major and significant component, that of the teaching of the vocabulary of the language being learned. The existing opposition can also be perceived between the objectives of this instruction and the volume of language materials which should help the student master the language concerned. That is to say, according to the practice that still prevails in the field of foreign-language teaching, the learner is taught to form sentences in the target language while being expected to have full competence in terms of writing as well as speaking.

I believe that a way out of this situation could be sought on both theoretical and practical planes. As to theory, a closer definition ought to be devised of the specific features of foreign-language teaching as a scientific subfield of applied linguistics, while the practice of teaching itself should not be restricted to elements and sequences of language, but should rather start the teaching process with language at large, i.e. with the text, thus qualifying the student for the creation of spoken and written texts in the target language. I am using the notion of "text" in accordance with the definition provided by Deme László: "Text is the sequence of the individual's mental substance, which has been objectivized in language form and presented in that extensiveness and formedness which enables it - in the given situation - to create, while playing a general and/or informative and/or influential role, also the impression of integrity and completeness."[5] He ascertains and describes also the features in terms of which texts can be categorized. Here we cannot go into the presentation and evaluation of the elements which the author draws on for setting up those criteria with the aid of which it is possible to establish very clearly and precisely differences between and levels of the individual categories which are: **text, constructed text, literary text, and poetic text.** From the point of view of the teaching of foreign

languages/ the language of the social environment, this classifi-
cation of texts is very interesting and useful not least because
of the divergent views of the application of literary texts in
such teaching. According to some views, a literary text can be
made use of already in the earlier phase of foreign-language
learning, while on the other hand Robert Lado, for example,
believes that "Literature must become a subject of instruction
after the student has achieved that level of language proficiency
and of the grasp of the culture in question which makes it possi-
ble for him/her to experience it not unlike the native reader."[6]
A.A. Hill also points out that "...there exists a very real
difficulty in the application of literature, because the literary
language in many instances represents a departure from the lin-
guistic structure being taught. It can be archaic, as in
Shakespeare's poetry."[7] For this reason, he suggests "...that
literature used in language teaching be: (1) contemporary or
almost contemporary, (2) written without deviations from everyday
language, and (3) such as to offer a genuine insight into
cultural values of the foreign culture. When all of these condi-
tions have been fulfilled, I think that our selection of texts
should be - or perhaps even can be - restricted to only those
which are of great esthetic value." I believe that we need not go
into the question of whether there are any opposite elements in
the criteria proposed by individual authors. However, there are
conflicting views related to such questions, the reason in my
opinion being that the authors cited above as well as many others
employ the term literature - like a terminological unit - as an
expression of the concept of integrality and oneness, as though
they were oblivious of the fact that the literature of each
nation at the same time stands also for diversity, even in the
case of the expression "contemporary literature" denoting the
literature of today. The quandaries about the utilization of
texts and types of text in the teaching of foreign languages/the
language of the social environment, can be resolved by our accep-
ting the thesis that there exist different categories of texts,
and that therefore texts of a pedagogically appropriate complex-
ity will be used in various stages of language instruction.

Taking due account of the foregoing questions, as well as of some
other - perhaps less important - unsolved problems in the theory
and practice of the contemporary teaching of foreign languages
and of languages of the social environment in Yugoslavia, I have
adopted certain novel solutions[8] in my teaching of the Hungarian
language as an optional subject at the Faculty of Arts in Novi
Sad. In principle, the most salient points are the following
ones:

(1) that I start and conclude each lecture with a text;

(2) that during the lecture the student participates actively in
the work, encountering as she/he does texts of varying degree of
sophistication;

(3) that all the categories of text are utilized in the process
of practice, acquisition, i.e. in furthering the student's skills
of mastering the language (pronunciation, writing, reading,
comprehension); and

(4) that the system of exercises makes use of the vocabulary appearing in the texts, and successively follows the complexity of the texts.

Because of the brevity of the teaching period (the Hungarian language is taught in the first two study years, i.e. four semesters in all), the students deal with with texts belonging to the following categories on Laslo Deme's scale:

(a) **text** (children's songs, ditties)

(b) **constructed text** (reading matter from mimeographed course materials, folk songs of love, folk tales, newspaper reports covering a variety of topics and genres) and

(c) **literary text** (selections from the Hungarian lyric poetry of the 19th century and of the beginning of the 20th century).

My course in Hungarian begins with the text used for mastering the pronunciation of the phonemes making up the Hungarian phonological system, and for presenting the alphabet. I teach this by using children's songs accompanied by clapping (**tapšalice**), one song for each sound of Hungarian (except for the sounds **dz** and **dzs** [dž] as well as **ly** [lj]). I have selected the songs in such a way that each contains many instances of the sound being practised. After this practice, mimeographed course materials are used where a string of words are given in which the same sound appears in various positions (initial, intervocalic, final). Practice lessons in the case of any given sound usually end with one or several sentences featuring prominently the sound being practiced. Naturally, in learning and practicing the pronunciation of the Hungarian phonemes by way of these texts, the learner acquires also the prosodic features of the language. Since the words of these children's songs are on the elementary level, the learner finds it easier to have to pronounce, in the initial phase of the process of language acquisition, short and simple words that are also basic, than having to cope with more complex texts with strings of words and more lengthy sentences containing more complicated and derived words. It is on this simple word stock that practice texts are based intended to present the system of noun endings (case endings), conjugation of verbs, and comparison of adjectives. The broadening of the learner's knowledge represents a prerequisite for work on more difficult texts, mainly short news reports. The vocabulary found there is the vocabulary for communication, and the language learner "acquires those concepts which she/he needs to communicate in the context of universal communication." (R. Lado, p. 145). Work on these texts is performed together with chapters in Hungarian word-formation. Examples for exercises in word-formation are furnished by the texts, and the corresponding basic word stock is supplied by the vocabulary of the children's songs referred to above (**tapšalice**), and of the strings of words and sentences included in the first part of mimeographed course materials, i.e. in the exercises designed for the acquisition of the Hungarian phonological system. In this manner, knowledge of words already acquired is further strengthened; what's more, the learner's vocabulary in Hungarian is enriched thanks to the practice in the word-formational process of suffixation. The latter is achieved in a comparatively easy way, because suffixal

derivatives mostly preserve some sense components of base words, e.g. stol - stoLAR (table - carpenter). It is by way of exercises that the student is gradually trained to undertake the formation of syntagms, simple sentences, compound sentences, segments of the dialogue, and even the creation of shorter texts. In dealing with these - more difficult - texts, the learner adds to the elements of pronunciation, reading, writing, and comprehension that she/he has acquired previously. A many-sided treatment of texts belonging to the subsequent category, that of literary texts, should increase the level of these skills, achieving the degree of proficiency that already approaches that of the average native speaker of Hungarian.

The didactic gradualness not only enables one to apply in the course of teaching texts of different categories/levels, but also epitomized the possibility of placing at the learner's disposal many-sided information about the nation/nationality whose native language she/he has been learning. In this way, the goal of bringing together the nations/nationalities through instruction is implemented.

This paper could not even touch on all the topical questions of the theory and practice of teaching a foreign language and the language of the social environment today. Neither have I been able to outline all the elements of the solutions that I make use of in my everyday practice. I do hope, however, that I have succeeded in highlighting some of the most topical questions of such teaching. I have discussed my work because by presenting my practice-tested solutions, I have wished to underscore the compactness and complexity of the question of teaching foreign languages and languages of the social environments in this country.

Notes

1. Dezso, L., 1979, **A nyelvtudomány szerepe az idegennyelv-oktatás komplex megközelítésében** (The Role of Linguistics in its Complex Process of Approaching Foreign-Language Instruction), A TIT Idegennyelv-oktatási Csoportjának kiadványai, Budapest, p. 54; Corder, 1973, p. 93.

2. Szentgyörgyvári, A., 1968, "Jezična nastava ili pedagogija komunikacije?" (Language Instruction or the Pedagogy of Communication?), in R. Filipović, ed.,**Aktivne metode i moderna pomagala u nastavi stranih jezika. Predavanja i referati održani na 10. kongresu FIPLV u Zagrebu, 5-9 April, 1968** (Active Methods and Modern Aids in the Teaching of Foreign Languages. Papers from the 10th FIPLV Congress, Zagreb, 5-9 April, 1968), Školska knjiga, Zagreb, 1971.

3. Dezső, Ibid., p. 96

4. Fésüs, A., 1977, **A szókincs tanításának módszertani kérdései az idegennyelv-oktatásban** (Educative Questions of Vocabulary Teaching in Foreign-Language Instruction), Modern Nyelvoktatás. A felnött-oktatás tájékoztatója. A TIT Idegennyelv-oktatási Központjának Kiadványai. Tudományos Ismeretterjesztö Társulat,

Budapest, 1977, p. 55.

5. Deme, L., 1979, "A szöveg alaptermészetéről" (On the Basic Nature of Text) in I. Szathmári and I. Várkonyi, eds.,Szövegtan a kutatásban és az oktatásban, Kiadja a Magyar Nyelvtudományi Társaság, Budapest, 1979, p. 64.

6. Lado, R., 1968, Nastava stranih jezika – Naučni pristup (Foreign Language Instruction: A Scientific Approach), Svijetlost, Sarajevo, p. 173.

7. Hill, A.A., 1971, "Književni tekstovi u jezičnoj nastavi" (Literary Texts in Language Teaching), in Predavanja i referati održani na 10. kongresu FIPLV, Zagreb, 1971, pp. 399-400.

8. They appear in the following publication: Bagi, Ferenc, Madjarski jezik (The Hungarian Language). Parts 1 and 2. Mimeographed course materials. Novi Sad, 1983. Published by the Institute for the Hungarian Language and Literature and for the Hungarian Studies, with the financial support of the self-managing community of interest for higher education of the Socialist Autonomous Province of Vojvodina.