REMEDIAL WORK WITH MULTI-LINGUAL STUDENTS

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Much of the literature on foreign language teaching assumes that the teacher is firstly teaching a language to students who have no previous knowledge of that language, or secondly, is teaching at some stage higher than this to students who, all along, have been carefully guided in their knowledge of that second language and have, therefore, had the minimum opportunity for developing bad habits in that language. Both these approaches can be called the clean slate approach. They assume that the raw material, the student, has been unspoiled by prior contact with the target language, and has not developed ingrained habits of faulty pronunciation, or faulty grammar.

Another assumption frequently made is that all the students in the group have similar linguistic backgrounds, so that the class consists of a fairly homogenous group who are at approximately the same stage of development and who have approximately the same problems.

It is suggested that literature which makes these assumptions has limited value for those concerned in remedial work.

In this paper I shall classify work which needs remedial treatment, as work which has been imperfectly learned. It has been presented before but has not been absorbed, and is now being used incorrectly. The errors are well rehearsed, and before the student can correct such an item, the incorrect form has to be cured.

Circumstances which promote the development of this incorrect habit formation, are those in which the foreigner is obliged to use the target language frequently in circumstances which are not controlled; as say when a beginning student of French spends considerable time in France and may develop bad language habits from the desire to communicate. The element of control which is provided by the teacher in the classroom is not present and the imperfections may not be corrected. In time they may become habits.

It is considered that remedial work in a target language is perhaps a more pressing issue in the country where the language is spoken natively, than in countries where the target language is a second language. Thus the problems of remedial German are perhaps more relevant in Germany where the non-native speakers of the language have more opportunity for developing well rehearsed faults, than say in Australia, where German is spoken as a foreign language by a few, who although they also have the ability to develop well rehearsed faults, are usually under the close supervision of an instructor during most of their practice periods. So in Australia the problems of remedial English are probably greater since they involve greater numbers, than the problems of remedial French, German or Italian.

In the native country of the target language, there are always groups of non-native speakers who come from a variety of countries, and for someone specialising in remedial work, it would be unwise to assume that all the students in a group will have the same difficulties. A class in remedial work in English in Australia may contain students from Indonesia, the Philippines, Pakistan, Germany, Italy and so on. The students will have different linguistic backgrounds and very likely they will have different problems in learning the target language.

Most of the observations made in this paper are based on teaching remedial English to students with a variety of mother tongues, who are at the University of Papua and New Guinea, but many of the remarks are applicable to situations elsewhere when remedial work is being given to students with differing linguistic backgrounds.

The students at the University are mostly Papuans and New Guineans, and the majority of them have to do compulsory courses in remedial English until such time as they gain exemptions from it. They have a variety of mother tongues and in an intake of approximately 120 students this year in the preliminary course, there are about sixty-five different mother tongues.

Very little is known about many of the languages, and little has been done by way of linguistic analysis on them. It is not fully known to what extent the languages are related and to what extent many of the languages are mutually intelligible, so that even

the number sixty-five which I have just given you is a rather arbitrary one. In addition to mother tongues, most of the students speak at least one of the two trade languages, Pidgin and Police Motu. Many speak several other languages in addition. There is one student who speaks seven languages.

Apart from their mother tongues, trade languages and other native languages, the students speak fluent but inaccurate English. They have been learning English for between eight and eleven years, prior to starting University. In the primary school they were usually, but not always, given their lessons in English, usually by an indigenous teacher. In secondary school, all the lessons were given in English. Secondary school is boarding school for most students. They leave their villages and attend one of the Mission or Administration schools which act as centres for students from all over the Territory, and they only return to their village once every year, or once every two years, depending on the distance of the school from the village, and also on the type of school. Administration schools pay leave fares more frequently than Mission schools. The teachers in the secondary schools are usually Australians or other native speakers of English.

These facts I have given as way of background to illustrate that the students have very diverse linguistic backgrounds, although the majority have gone through the same educational process. Approximately 20% however, have spent between two and five years in boarding schools in Australia. These students are usually the better students. They were selected for education overseas on the basis of their scholastic achievement, and so one cannot categorically state whether it was their superior intelligence, or their education in Australia, which is responsible for their generally higher performance in the preliminary year.

The staff faced with the selection of material for these students have to decide the basis for their selection. Primarily the work is remedial. One can assume that most of the items, apart from vocabulary items, have been presented some time during the eleven preceding years, though whether this assumption is justified is questionable. But at least it provides a guide line, and a basis for material presentation. It enables the teacher to ignore elementals such as detailed discussion of the difference between say countables and uncountables and continue with a lesson on these items without spending too much time

on familiarising the student with these concepts.

The next task is to decide just which items need to be remedied. The selection of these may be based on the assumption made, for example, by Stannard-Allen that there are some inherently difficult areas of language, which will be problem areas for all non-native speakers of that language, regardless of their linguistic background. This is still a fairly common basis for the selection of material in text books where the author, instead of specifying for whom the book is intended, merely states it is for non-native speakers of that language. Or selection of the material could be based on frequency of errors, so that the items which are problem areas for the majority, are the items which are dealt with. The frequency of errors could, for example, be based on the results of a diagnostic test given to the group. Another alternative on which to base the selection of remedial material is contrastive analysis. The likely areas of difficulty are predicted, and remedial work is presented in those items. This approach is feasible when most students in a group have a common mother tongue. But in situations such as that of New Guinea, and Africa this is not feasible. Nor is it generally feasible in English language programmes for overseas students in universities, where there are a variety of linguistic backgrounds. In these circumstances contrastive analysis, though theoretically sound, is impracticable, and the approach often adopted is one of frequency.

The students are given some sort of diagnostic test on admission and the work they are subsequently given is based on the most frequently occurring errors. This seems to be the basis of the selection of materials at Berkeley, and Columbia and it is the case at U.P.N.G. Shortly after enrolment the students are given a series of tests, and remedial work on the most frequently occurring items is prepared.

While this approach is more feasible than contrastive analysis and more accurate than assuming there are areas which are difficult for all non-native speakers, the frequency approach has some limitations.

It assumes that all the students in a group will benefit from additional work in the items being studied. This may be justified if the groups are homogeneous. But is not necessarily justified when the groups are diverse. There may be some errors which are more widespread than others, but it does not therefore follow that all students, regardless

of their linguistic background, will need remedial work on these items. So while the articles may be a problem for one group, they may not be a problem for another group. On the basis of frequency, if there are fifteen speakers in a class of twenty who have trouble with articles then all the group will have to do work on articles whether or not they need it. This is an inefficient way of selecting material and of conducting a lesson, and yet it is probably the most typical way in which remedial material is selected. The teacher is physically unable to conduct four or five different lessons simultaneously and has to cater for the majority.

One way of improving on this would be for the classes to be limited to groups of those with the same linguistic background. This could result in classes of one; theoretically good, but economically unsound.

Another alternative, would be to arrange the material so that the group works as individuals and not as a group. Each individual could then work on those items which are his problem areas. In order to achieve this the role of the teacher would be radically altered. Instead of being the giver of wisdom the teacher would have to arrange his information in a form in which the student can select the relevant items and by-pass those which are irrelevant.

This raises the question of how the student is to know which items are relevant and which are not. His areas of difficulty can be determined as a result of diagnostic tests. The results of the tests would provide the set of difficulties incurred by each student. While there may be particular difficulties which are common to all in the group, the tests would probably reveal that the sum or set of a person's difficulties are unique to him.

A further question arises as to how one can organise this material most effectively. If the material were programmed, and then worked at in the classroom the students would have limited opportunity for oral practice, since there would be several classes continuing simultaneously. The obvious answer to this would be to programme the material for the language laboratory. In a laboratory with library facilities it is perfectly possible to have as many different lessons as there are booths, but one would first have to dismiss the popular notion that the laboratory is to be used only for reinforcing material that has

previously been taught in class. In "The New Pattern of Language Teaching", David Harding states quite categorically that the laboratory period is not "the time for explaining new grammatical rules or forms. We must assume that every word and every structure used in a particular period in the laboratory is already well known to the class."[1] He continues, "the effective use of the laboratory is dependent on good teaching in the classroom beforehand."[2] This notion concerning the role of the language laboratory as a drill room may be justified when the students in a group are all at the same level and all have the same linguistic background. It is the concomitant of the clean slate approach; but if the students are diverse the utility of teaching to the group, and of treating them as one, is questionable. The teacher is not having maximum effect. Is there not a case for preparing the lessons on tapes which the students can then select as necessary? Instead of conducting oral classes within the classroom, the teacher would be conducting classes to be recorded. The tapes would both present, drill, review and test items, in much the manner that oral lessons are conducted in class. If the material were arranged in units, an end-of-unit test would determine whether the student proceeded to the next item in his set of difficulties or whether he selected additional material on that item. A possible classification for tapes would be into basic unit tapes, that is those which present, drill and test the item; and supplementary tapes for those needing additional work on the same item. There could also be warm up or review tapes, providing revision drills.

In many respects the scheme being suggested is similar to branched programming, but it is not identical.

Let us pause for a moment to look at the two main types of programming.

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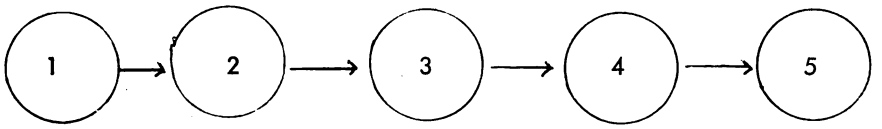
1 David H. Harding, The New Pattern of Language Teaching (London : Longmans, 1967) p. 113.

2 Ibid., p. 114

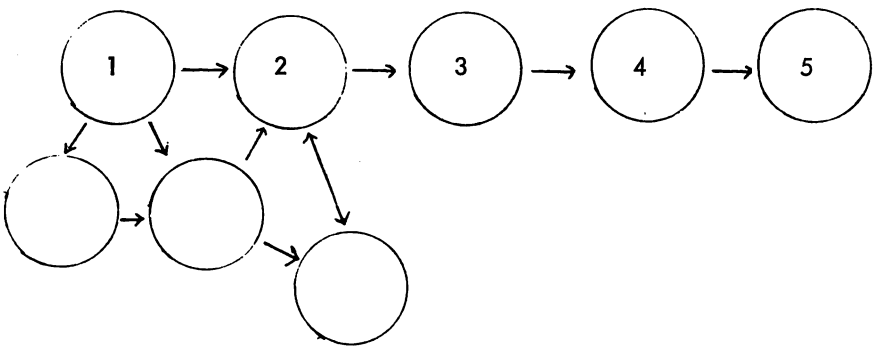
Linear programming we can represent diagramatically like this:



etc.

Each unit is represented by a circle, and all students proceed through an identical programme. The difference between the student's intelligence is accounted for by the fact that the clever ones will finish the programme faster than the less clever ones.

In branched programming the students cover every unit as in linear programming, but there are variations in the



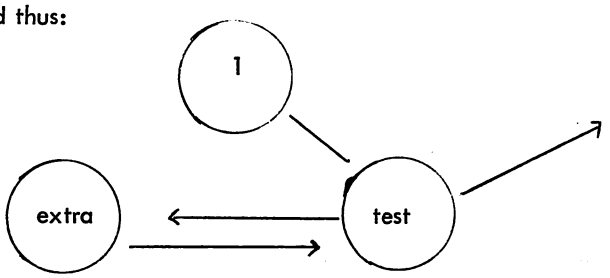
etc.

depth of coverage. Weak students will once again take longer to get from unit (1) to unit (5). The bright students can go directly from (1) to (5), or may delve deeply into the subject. But in either case the course has, like the linear course, been divided into numbered units all of which have to be completed before the subject is known.

Programming for remedial work differs from this because although the subject matter has been divided into units, the students are not expected to complete each unit. So there is no progression from unit (1) to unit (2) to unit (3). A student may need to do unit (1) but what comes after is optional. There is no progression between units that we could symbolise with arrows. Instead we have possibility of symbols.

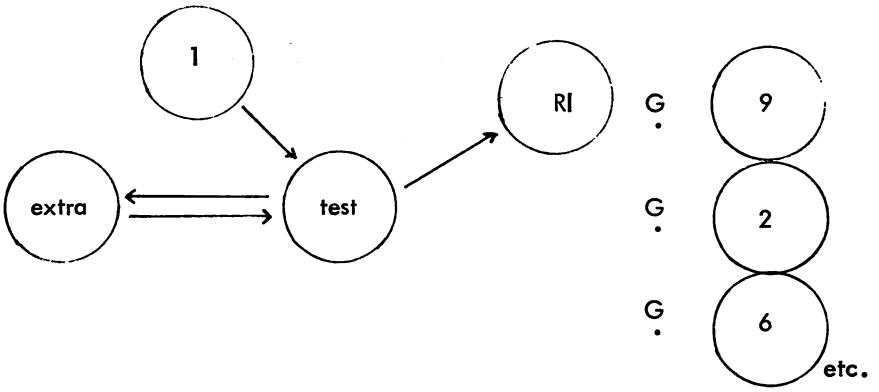
etc.

Within the unit the arrangement is similar to branched programming and could be symbolised thus:



Where the student goes when he leaves unit (1) after the test section will depend on his set of problems. He may proceed to unit (9) or unit (2), or any other unit. But prior to starting a new unit, there seems room for a review unit on the last unit he studied. This review unit would not be a link between the two units, but would be a way of ensuring regular revision, and also of allowing for warm up.

So whatever unit a student had to study next he would start the next unit with a review of the unit he had completed last.



One of the problems of self instructional material is monitoring. It is frequently argued that one of the disadvantages of the language laboratory is that items which are said incorrectly in the laboratory may pass uncorrected, unless the student spots the mistake or the monitor spots it for him. The argument usually continues that in a classroom the teacher is better able to spot mistakes because all the students are either chanting in unison and the mistake can be heard, or they are speaking individually and once again the mistake can be heard. I do not want to enter into the laboratory versus the classroom argument here, except to say that in both situations mistakes will pass unobserved by the teacher. The onus for correction must lie with the student.

The question to ask is what are the types of mistakes that pass by uncorrected? If we can tabulate them we are on the way to dealing with the problem. Not much has been written on this aspect of inability to correct mistakes. In fact the issue is often glossed over by some language laboratory enthusiasts. In our experience in New Guinea, based on recordings taken of students, unknown to them, while they were working on laboratory materials, the incorrect items that were most easily spotted were structural items such as word order, verb endings, incorrect negation and so on, and the items which were the most frequently ignored were phonological items. It was considered that these items were ignored because the students were not aware of them and material which drew the students' attention to stress, rhythm and intonation produced very gratifying results in improved ability to hear the items and consequently to correct them.