

THE UNDERESTIMATED TIME ELEMENT IN THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES¹

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The time element in foreign language teaching has been, and still is, very much underestimated. It seems that we do not care, that nobody cares very much, about time and how to handle it more efficiently in the process of teaching foreign languages. By time is meant enough time, and wisely managed, so that we can accomplish the desirable objectives of our teaching.

We know that instructors of languages find themselves very limited in regard to time by factors that escape their control. But they are also limited because of factors that are within their own control, considering what goes on in the classroom. In other words, they are limited by external, as well as by internal factors.

By external factors I mean mainly what everybody recognizes but what no one has done anything about, the limited time allowed by school administrators and academic planners in the formulation of curricula, programs, and schedules. In spite of the modern world's social, economic, and political conditions, which have brought tremendous interdependence among the different countries, in the field of education little importance is given to the role played by foreign languages nowadays. On one hand, there is a growing demand for bilinguals in many different activities of our business, scientific, governmental, and cultural life; on the other hand, those who are responsible for solving the problem seem to be hardly aware of it. For a long time there has been a continuous struggle between those who decide what and how much has to be taught in the schools and those who are conscious of the problem because they are directly in charge of teaching languages in these schools. The struggle has been about the time allowed, because teachers know that the limited time at their disposal is insufficient to achieve the good results that should be expected.

We have always thought that the amount of time allotted to teaching in the schools should be distributed according to the nature and importance of the different subjects in a program, but that is not so. Even in the field of languages in general, there seems to be a paradoxical situation in relation to the mother tongue and the foreign languages: while the total curricula of our schools, from kindergarten to college levels, generously allow in every year plenty of time for the required study of our own language, which we already know before entering school, the time allowed for the difficult study of other languages is no more than an average of two to three hours a week for two to three

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school years, usually at the secondary or college levels. The results are also paradoxical in proportion to the time invested, because what the student learns of and about his own language in all his school years is less valid and less useful than what he gets in the foreign language in those two or three years. How frequent it is to read term papers full of errors by students who are about to graduate from professional schools.

I have always maintained that the study of foreign languages should be a requirement from elementary school to college, with properly distributed time, so that the target language should be learned in the elementary cycle, with strong emphasis on oral communication; in high school, the student should learn about the language and develop an acceptable written expression, without dropping his oral practice; and at the college level, he should study in the foreign language certain courses that nowadays are taught in the mother tongue unnecessarily. I am referring to courses like foreign literature, culture, history, etc. This would be an ideal situation that I doubt could materialize within a short time, but its feasibility has been proved by the few bilingual or multilingual schools that exist in this country and in the United States. Meanwhile, something should be done to break the stubborn resistance of those in charge of deciding on matters such as these, so that the length of time is increased for the benefit of improving the results in foreign language learning. Some of the professional associations in the United States, and probably here also, have been using valid arguments in this respect.

So far, it seems that I am only aiming at external factors to solve a problem in which internal factors have so much to do. So, I want to indulge in some self-criticism, because if we are not permitted to increase the teaching time by adding hours and days, at least we can make better use of the time that is allowed to us. My experience as coordinator and teaching advisor at a professional graduate school in the United States led me to the conclusion that properly managed time is equivalent to increasing it by a substantial percentage. In my visits to other institutions I could witness that poor pedagogic methods and procedures reduced the hour of teaching time as much as half. This might seem unbelievable but it is a fact, and this takes us to the issue of how we shall proceed to make better use of the limited amount of class time.

We have heard such words as "taylorism" and "stakhanovism" in regard to economic production. Taylorism is a method of scientific organization of work so as to make it more efficient through intelligent planning of the different operations, all of which result in a better and larger production per unit of time of labor. The tremendous output of the industrial countries is a result of modern methods of economic production based on last century's taylorism. In the socialist countries, stakhanovism is a method that was developed in order to increase agricultural and industrial production through a series of steps, techniques, procedures, and incentives so as to produce more and better within a unit of time. As we can see, in the two opposed economic worlds they give great importance to the value of time. I remember that I used to get valuable ideas from reading articles on psychology applied to business management, and I am convinced that with intelligent adaptations, some of those principles could be applied to our teaching.

There might be people that would frown at the ideas that I present here, believing

that all I want is to make robots out of teachers and students, or that the hidden intention is to increase the teacher's burden to the point of exhaustion, or that I am suggesting pushing the students to work harder to the point that they will develop a hostile attitude. Nothing like that is intended; all I mean is that, through intelligent organization and proper procedures, we strive to achieve more and better results in proportion to the time invested. Let us be assured that if our teaching is properly done, the students will accept being more active. On the other hand, if the instructor gets more tired, it is because his actual participation in class is more than what he should be doing. Since it may be convenient to know some of the things that could be done in regard to the problem of time, let me state here some of the recommendations that our instructors had to follow in their teaching. But first we gave the newcomers intensive training for three days, before starting classes every semester, and under each period, morning and afternoon, the old instructors acted as models and as students, and contributed ideas. Afterwards, classes were visited to see if the new instructors had grasped the idea of what we wanted them to do. Old instructors were also visited to see if they were still performing according to our methods and procedures. After class, they were supposed to meet with me individually for friendly and constructive criticism. We did not have the so called "freedom of teaching" at the elementary and intermediate levels. Here are some of the recommendations in relation to the problem of time:

1. Plan your lessons ahead of time. Be conscientiously prepared for every class, have your materials ready, and be sure you know what is to be done during each step of the teaching process.
2. Be in the classroom three minutes before time, so that when the bell rings the lesson is started immediately. Dismiss the class on time, not before. Students can always learn something before the bell rings.
3. Do not waste time calling the roll. Even in large classes you can invent a scheme in order to know who is absent.
4. Teach the class at a normal rate of speed, not too fast but not too slow. Become more dynamic, but without rushing or being tense. If the students are properly motivated, they will be more active, which keeps them more alert.
5. Omit prolonged silence and slowness when the students perform. Language learning is not a question of continuously deciphering crossword puzzles; it is a question of developing quick responses.
6. Omit unnecessary pauses between steps during the whole process of teaching. This can be accomplished in different ways.
7. Time is lost if the teacher talks more than the students, and it is worse if he does it consistently in the mother tongue, giving lengthy and awkward explanations.
8. Be sure the whole presentation of the class materials is clear, orderly, and well organized; the students appreciate it and time is saved. Speak

clearly but fluently without rushing, so that the students learn to speak fluently also.

9. Use signals instead of words in directing the class in different routine aspects. Students do not gain much by constant repetition of phrases like "Mr. Martinez, will you please repeat?"
10. Signals should be according to what the instructor wants the student to do, and by all means they should be simple, clear, and opportune.
11. Too much chorus repetition is a waste of time, especially if the repetition is done mechanically. Here, as in pattern drills, students should be conscious of what they are doing.
12. When a student is called on to perform, the rest of the students should not be passive; they should repeat to themselves in a low voice as if they had been asked, and see if the instructor corrects the student in turn.
13. When the students are performing in a conversation, they should not be interrupted; the instructor should wait until they finish and then make the pertinent corrections, applying an alternating procedure, which works against passiveness. However, correction of grammar in pattern drills is advisable at the time the error appears.
14. Do not waste too much time on individual questions that pertain to the interest of only one student; otherwise the rest of the class loses time and interest. It is better to help students with many problems individually, outside of class.
15. Whenever possible and according to the nature of the materials being studied, break the class into small groups and rotate among them to check on performance.

These are not all the suggestions that we made. We advised that the instructor himself should be objective about his methods and procedures, and the way he applied them; he should be his own critic in order to avoid wasting any time.

One objection we have heard about making the teaching of foreign languages more dynamic within the allowed time, was that the instructor who has to teach several classes a day could not stand that pace. Our answer has been that we do not want the instructor to work more by increasing his actual participation in class; what is suggested is to carry the class more swiftly and that the students' participation be more active. And we suggest that the instructor should not talk so much in class; this in itself contributes to make better use of time.

To summarize, then, these suggestions about how to handle the difficult problem of time in the teaching of English and other foreign languages, there are two principle avenues for improvement. One involves insisting with administrators and educational

planners on realistic periods of time to master foreign languages. The other approach, perhaps more fruitful because it is an internal factor within the reach of all foreign language teachers, involves our language teaching methodology and making the most efficient use of the time we are allotted to teach foreign languages.