

What Every Foreign Language Teacher Should Aim For

ADALBERTO MORALES GARCÍA, UNIVERSIDAD AUTÓNOMA DE CHAPINGO¹

I have been intrigued since I started teaching a foreign language--English--in how the student arrives at the learning of it. In trying to present a somehow plausible conclusion on what the foreign language teacher should aim for, I have found it necessary to touch on the subject of how people learn a foreign language, or, should we say, anything?

The Greek philosopher Aristotle, and centuries later some medieval thinkers, stated that nothing is learned unless it is through the senses; that is, sight, hearing, smell, touch and taste. How true is such an epistemological position? Volumes have been written pro or con concerning the matter. Suffice it to say that, overall, such a theory bears lots of truth.

In our present times, the Input Hypothesis set by Krashen (1981) states that language acquisition occurs through the understanding of messages. But how are these messages offered to the learner? Through *perceptive behaviors*, answers Krashen. (I highlight the words *perceptive* and *behavior* because they immediately bring to mind the Aristotelian axiom mentioned before, for how could it be otherwise if the mere terms imply something sensorial?)

Those perceptive behaviors, continues Krashen, are given to the learner mainly through listening (hearing), reading and video (sight). (The three other senses: smell, taste, and touch are irrelevant to the point in question.) And the more input knowledge given, the more the learner is liable to acquire the language.

Such an empirical position has already been challenged since Plato with his *Ideas*, Augustine with his theory of *Illumination*, Descartes with his theory of *Innate Ideas* and most recently by the Cognitive Psychologists when they take into account the interaction of all the processes involved in the act of learning.

¹ The author can be reached at the following address: Zootecnia #12, Dr. Gilberto Palacios, 56230 Chapingo, Estado de México.

The Output Hypothesis brought forward by Swain (1985) states that the input only is not sufficient for the acquisition of the language. It is necessary to take into account productive language use, speaking, the oral communication factor, and verbal interchange to test the acquisition of language.

It is quite often the case that intellectually, in one's mind, the belief that such and such a term, expression or sound has already been mastered--acquired--just to find out the minute we externalize it that this is not the case.

To put it in an axiomatic format, the *Output* does not necessarily follow the *Input*, and less when the later is considered to be the correct model.

Why is this so? Simply because the brain's understanding does not imply the mastering of that *understanding* by the speaking organs (vocal chords, tongue, palate, nasal passage, etc.). Thus, our hearing sense perceives certain sounds which the brain clearly identifies, but when the aforementioned organs try to duplicate them, the outcome does not match that held by the brain.

But, continuing with the Input/Output theories, and in order to illustrate that both processes are necessary for the acquisition of a foreign language, I would like to make a comment on something that frequently happens. "My students have finally understood the use to the auxiliary *do/does* in interrogative and negative sentences," we teachers often like to say. In the long and arduous road to the acquisition of a foreign language that is half the journey, the mastering of the *Input*; the more difficult part, the productive one or the *output*, is yet to begin.

The language teacher should aim towards the acquisition process by first presenting, modeling, explaining, etc. the *Input*; but once this has been accomplished, then the student must strive to put that same content into practice.

Undoubtedly, the first phase is important and even becomes indispensable for the second one, but the quality of its nature in being the culmination of the whole process makes the *Output* valuable in a special way. The importance of the *Input* lays on its priority in time; the importance of the *Output* on the finesses of the process.

Not infrequently, we teachers, are fond of showing a preference for the shredding--so to speak--of the language, dwelling too much on grammatical explanations, perhaps either to unconsciously hide our ineptitude for/towards the *Output* element, perhaps too, to show our greater knowledge of the subject; in either case, the outcome is a crippled one, to use a metaphor.

I find it imperative to stop for a minute in our daily teaching activities and ask ourselves if we are giving too much weight to one process in detriment to the other, or just giving all our efforts to only one of the two. Should that be the case, then it is never too late to introduce amendments.

If the promoters of the slogan “aquí hablas o hablas” mean the emphasis is on the *Output* rather than on the *Input* then it is indeed a philosophy and an ambitious one, I should add. Perhaps they might be thinking that the mastering of the *Output* necessarily implies the mastering of the *Input*, which in a sense is a logical conclusion to make; however, I am in favor of a balanced approach rather than leaning heavily towards only one aspect. With too much emphasis on the *Output* we build a giant with weak legs; the other way around, we build a strong being, but a dwarf.

Another issue that is of the concern to all of us foreign language teachers is the feasibility of carrying out the acquisition in practice. Experience has shown me that it is indeed a difficult task to accomplish, although not an impossible one. The learner needs an insurmountable amount of effort, motivation and perseverance in order to succeed. To think that learning English is an easy task, is to deceive ourselves. Nothing is farther from the truth. As a matter of fact, I find the pre-set idea held by students that English is an easy subject to be quite disturbing. And, come to think about it, maybe that is one of the reasons they do not learn it. I wish there were a way of opening their minds and telling them that it is not so. As a matter of fact, I find it to be perhaps an even harder subject than math or any other. And one can easily corroborate that by realizing that at the end of many years of studying math the student has learned a great deal; whereas in English, he spends years and years of study, just to come to the awareness that very little of it was really mastered.

It is, then, imperative that we set about the task of destroying that pernicious myth that the learning of English is an easy endeavor.

It is also very frustrating to realize over and over again how difficult it is to extract the *Output* from our students. No matter the amount of enthusiasm, energy and effort the teacher gives, the results are more than discouraging. I have encountered more than one teacher on the verge of becoming a language juggler in order to make the students put more effort into their learning, but to no avail.

On the other hand, I have also come to the conclusion that we teachers are not completely at fault for their lack of assimilation of the language, and that the learner--the student--is more at fault than we are. Perhaps we should accept what the German axiologist, Max Scheler (1927: 262) used to say about the intellect being "blind" to appreciating values. He said that the intellect was indifferent towards the beauty of a masterpiece painting, sculpture, piece of music, or towards the value of the Holy, the respect towards their own parents, elders, etc. because that area belonged to the sentiment. The sentiment is, he said, "a form of experience whose object is completely inaccessible to the intellect, that is blind as the ear to colors" (*My translation*). And thus, paraphrasing him, we would more than gladly say there are many people "blind" to languages, justifying in a sense, the inability--to use the correct word--of some students to master English.

And if this bears a grain of truth, perhaps then the empiricist theory that "nothing is learned but through our senses" is an incomplete one; that is, not all of what we learn comes through our *Input* and *Output* processes, but that there is something more to that.

References

- Augustine. IV Century A. D *Soliloquia* and *De Trinitate*.
- Descartes, R. 1647. *The Principles of Philosophy*. Rule 10 and ensuing.
- Plato. IV Century B. C *Dialogues: Phaedo and the Republic*.
- Krashen, S. 1981. *Second Language Acquisition and Second Language Learning*. Oxford. Pergamon Press.
- Scheler, M. 1927. *Der Formalismus in der Ethik*. 3rd Edition. Spanish translation: *Etica I* (1921), *II* (1942). Cited by N. Abbagnano. *Diccionario de Filosofia*. Fondo de Cultura Económica. 2nd Edition. Mexico, 1974.