

## Modern Language Teaching and the Teaching of Classical Languages

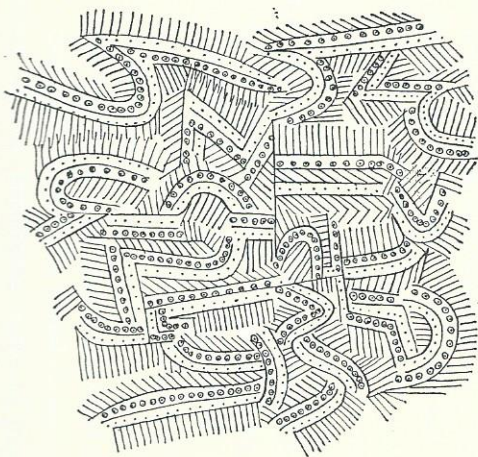
---

W. R. LEE

What is there in common between the teaching of a classical and of a modern language? An identity of purpose, without doubt, in so far as the purpose is to enable learners to read what is worth reading. We should be able to go further and add 'with enjoyment'; for the aim is a bleak one if it does not include this. Does the matter end there or is there also a correspondence in the problems to be solved and methods that can be effectively used? Can a classical language be taught by methods used successfully and enjoyably to teach a modern language?

My own experience lies wholly in the field of modern languages, and especially in the teaching of English as a foreign language. None the less we should not be so sunk in our own specialization as to have no interest in the tasks of teachers of other subjects – especially if these are closely related to our own. It would seem that there might be a mutually profitable discussion between classical teachers and teachers with my type of experience in the hope of discovering what is relevant in that experience to the teaching of Latin and Greek.

I have always supposed that one of the reasons for teaching Latin and Greek in schools is that they help (in a special way) to give a sense of the past. This can also be a reason – though a much less important one – for teaching a modern language. In many countries foreign languages (and this is particularly true



of English) are studied solely as a means of coping with the present day: what matters to the learner in the end is that he or she should be able to converse and write on business or professional matters, read contemporary newspapers and books (and, in many cases, technical books in particular), and understand the radio. A sense of the past may not enter into this learning at all; but it will become important if from a base of present-day literature the learner sets out to explore the literature of earlier days.

To teach the skill of reading a foreign language with enjoyment, and to introduce the learner to what is worth reading in it, is a task shared by classics teacher and modern-language teacher alike. Should this mean that oral work is a secondary matter? Clearly the modern world does not offer much scope for Latin and Classical Greek conversation: rare are the communities in which either of these languages is spoken. (It is true also that there are still some countries – even in the drawn-together world of today – where foreign languages are required mainly for reading, though even in such countries the desire to *speak* them is rapidly growing.)

If the language is mainly to be read, should the course be essentially a reading one, so that little time is given to oral practice? In answering this question we touch on a fundamental of foreign-language teaching method: emphasis on oral work.

As far as a modern language is concerned, if pupils are to speak it at all or to understand it at all when it is spoken, there is clearly a need to cultivate a reasonable pronunciation. Does this matter as far as Latin and Greek are concerned? Obviously again, it does if the beauties of spoken verse are to be brought out though there is no practical everyday obligation, as in using a modern language, to be intelligible.

Oral work is not to be undertaken, however, for the sake of oral ability alone. Even if the pupils, on leaving school, are unlikely to find much occasion to speak the language, but only to read and perhaps to write it, oral work still has an important part to play throughout the whole course.

Wherever it can be arranged for, a modern-language course should begin with a stage of wholly oral work. For a variety of reasons, which we need not go into here, this cannot always be done; nor can we say how long this stage should last – again, for a variety of reasons, it will vary in length a great deal. At all stages an attempt must be made to simplify the task of learning as much as possible, and few if any learners are helped by being confronted with the difficulties of speech and the quite other difficulties of print or handwriting at the same time, especially if the foreign-language alphabet is different from that of the mother tongue. The visual images of the language, moreover, are apt to have an undesirable effect on pronunciation if met with too early, for the learner will be strongly inclined to give to the letters and groups of letters the sounds they have in mother-tongue words, though this cannot happen when the two alphabets are wholly different. It is true that mispronunciations can be unlearned – but why learn them? It is better to postpone the introduction of reading and writing until some spoken fluency with simply constructed sentences has been achieved. Pronunciation will benefit and so will reading; for this will at first be a matter of *quickly* discovering in print what is orally familiar.

Again, it is hard to present meaningfully in a context the language items (sentence structures, etc.) one wishes to teach except through action in the classroom, preferably combined with pictures. To convey with sufficient clarity and liveliness the exact meaning of the chosen language-material through pictures alone would call for a very large number of pictures. Contextualisation is best supplied, at least in the early stages of a beginners' course, and perhaps even later, through actions, of course on the pupils' as well as the teacher's part, the teacher setting the example. And such contextualisation is inevitably accompanied by speech.

The greatest virtue of oral work, however, is that it saves time. There are differences between the spoken and the written form of a language, but these are not nearly so great as the differences

between learning one language and another: the basic and important patterns are common to the two forms. Thus in learning the language in its spoken form one is in the fullest sense learning the language. Moreover, if oral work is well conceived and well conducted this is the quickest way of learning the language, because it is the means by which the language-items being learned can be *used* the greatest number of times in x minutes. By comparison, written exercises are slow. If it be objected that a written exercise gives the advantage that every pupil in the class is using the language simultaneously, the answer is that oral work is not necessarily individual work. Oral work, indeed, must often be collective. Speaking in unison is essential for more than one reason, but above all to ensure that the basic patterns of the language become familiar through plentiful repetition. Individual speaking is, of course, necessary as well, if only to ensure that a reasonably good standard of pronunciation is kept. In the early months, and even years (with a class beginning early), most of the oral work, taken along briskly, will resemble a musical performance, with solos and choruses alternating. Everyone should have the maximum opportunity of opening his mouth to use, i.e. to practise and acquire, the language.

Some of these points would seem to apply to the teaching of classical languages and some would not. While, as we have said, the manner in which Latin and Greek are pronounced is undoubtedly of some importance, since the beauties of verse are evident mainly in the hearing of it, pronunciation by itself does not supply enough reason for making initial work wholly oral; although oral work then and later must, for pronunciation's sake if for no other reason, be given adequate attention. If there is a case for a wholly oral beginning to a classical-language course, it rests on the view that the difficulties of early speaking (for this is essential) and early reading taken together are greater than the difficulties of one of these alone, and this seems undeniable even in the extreme instance of Latin for English-speaking learners, where in the language being learned there is almost a one-to-one correspondence between letter and

sound and where also the two languages are written in the same alphabet: but even here the sequence of visual forms is, of course, strange.

Admittedly learners of Latin and Greek are not expected by the end of the course to have conversational facility. If, however, our principal argument in favour of oral work – that it is a time-saving means of language-practice – is a sound one, then oral work justifies its claim to an eminent place in any language-course, whether conversational ability is an end or not. It justifies itself as an economical means of acquiring familiarity with the essential patterns of the language.

The point about easy contextualisation would seem to apply also to the teaching of classical languages. Once a certain level of command has been reached, it is print itself which supplies the context: the paragraph, the page, the whole descriptive or narrative piece charges sentence, clause, or word with meaning. Pictures and history are of special value in giving context to Latin and Greek, and should start the course off as well as guide it along its way, but it would be foolish to exclude gesture and action, which are the natural accompaniments of oral work, leading on to dramatisation slightly later. Words alone are something to be avoided: they have little definite meaning or substance apart from sentences. Sentences on their own are to be avoided also: out of context they are little more than ghosts. The recital of paradigms, the use of conversion exercises and mechanical grammar-drills, whether easy or difficult, give a specious type of knowledge which is apt to be knowledge *about* the language rather than ability to use it in any way.

In any language-course the meaning of what is said or read can be superficially given by translation, and this may seem to be a quick means to an obviously desirable end. It is a pity, however, to spend many of the limited and therefore precious minutes of foreign-language lessons on use of the mother tongue. Nor does meaning thus given sink in very far. More vivid and much more penetrating is that which emerges from appropriate use of the language in situation, visible or imagined. In the early stages it

seems most reasonable to use language-material the meaning of which can be visibly demonstrated with ease. Thus the teacher should introduce the names of common or interesting objects which can be handled or illustrated on the blackboard, and tense-usages which refer to actions performable or depictable in the classroom. There is no lack of such material, through which a number of the basic patterns of a language may be taught. It will serve as a broad foundation on which later teaching can be based. Subsequently translation will doubtless be needed now and then to avoid circuitous and laborious explanations of abstract terms; though in later stages, if the foundations have been well laid, the learner should be able to read simplified material with a certain ease and enjoyment without translating it, often guessing the meaning of a new word from the context of its occurrence.

To begin with translation, and to make translation a regular and time-consuming part of the course, is, furthermore, to encourage the idea that between the mother tongue and the foreign language there exists an equivalence of meaning which in fact does not exist, each language being a different way of looking at the world. There is in fact little or no genuine translation in the absence of an advanced command of both languages. Translation, especially from a language the structures and background of which differ markedly from one's own, is no easy matter. Exact equivalences are rare, and in school courses the mental acrobatics involved in grasping the difference between x in the foreign language and y in the mother tongue may be irrelevant to the acquisition of a command of x. This is again learning about the language rather than learning the language. If we can cycle and want to be able to ski, we do not bother overmuch about comparisons between cycling and skiing, interesting though these may be, but take to our skis and begin, under instruction, to use them<sup>1</sup>. That is, we take the most direct route to our goal.

<sup>1</sup>This does not, of course, mean that a comparison between mother tongue and foreign language is useless to the text-book maker or teacher, or to the really advanced learner.

A large part of the difficulty of learning a foreign language arises from the fact that our habits of listening and speaking, and also of thinking, are those we have formed in acquiring our mother tongue. Some of them get in the way as we strive to use a foreign language and this calls for the development of new language habits and an escape from the tyranny of the old. Frequent use of the mother tongue in the foreign language lesson, and especially the frequent use of translation (which sets mother tongue and foreign language expression side by side) does not give the learner the best chance of escape, but repeatedly calls him back, as it were, into his old habits. It is not by conscious analysis and comparison that these are overcome, but by constant and meaningful repetition of the patterns of the new language.

It is hard to believe that these points about translation cannot apply to the teaching of Latin and Greek. If the goal is fluent reading, it is unlikely to be attained by making translation exercises the 'meat' of the course (one is tempted to say the tough meat). A mastery of the basic patterns and of a basic vocabulary has to be given in the most economical way: translation is secondary, having some value perhaps as a quick and rough check. Whether a passage in a foreign language has been understood can be discovered, if the pupils have been well brought up, by asking simple questions in that language.

Without choice and grading of language-material congestion will certainly result and confusion is bound to set in. The root and obvious principles of grading are that as far as possible only one difficulty should be presented at a time and that mastery should be built up step by step. Nothing sounds simpler and more straightforward, yet in practice the grading of a language course is a highly skilled matter, demanding not only an advanced analytical knowledge of the language but experience of the classroom and the imagination to see how each language-item can best be contextualised and made fully meaningful there. Moreover, there is grading at more than one level. Phonetic grading cannot extend very far, but at least the main

difficulties of pronunciation can be introduced one by one and perhaps be excluded wholly from the earliest lessons: and this imposes a restriction on the choice of words. Lexical grading extends farther, since it is long before the language teacher can afford not to control the introduction of new words into a lesson. What vocabulary shall be taught? How much? We rightly rebel against rigid control by word-frequency counts based solely on adult reading-matter. Nor is it easy to say which words are the simplest, for what is difficult depends to some extent on the learners' mother tongue. Common sense has to assert itself here. A relatively unusual word should not be taught in the earlier stages if there is an everyday word which means much the same thing. Words which give outstanding difficulty (of sound or meaning) to pupils from a particular country should be avoided for a time. Above all, the impression must not be given that word-learning and language-learning are synonymous. Stuffing pupils with word-lists soon deadens interest. Vocabulary can be amassed later, after the pupils have learned to read independently. Before that a language-teacher is better occupied in laying the foundations of a command of the syntax, by drilling the basic sentence patterns in meaningful contexts. These will not be presented as illustrating a logical exposition of the phenomena of the language, but in an order which takes notice of classroom realities and enables a practical command to be built up gradually in the easiest possible way. The synthetic grading of a school course always involves exercising one's imagination about the *use* of the language in classroom conditions. The problems to be solved are (for English at least) of the kind: Which tense-form should be taught first, and which use of that tense-form? When are adjectives best introduced, and what kind of adjective? How early can the possessive adjectives come in? Should the use of any of these be taught before any use of either article? At what points are the various types of comparison best taught? etc. Questions of this sort – and there are scores to ask – cannot be answered without first deciding *how* each language-item may be taught in the classroom.

A classical-language course clearly needs to be graded no less than a modern-language course. With neither can the greatest progress of the greatest number be expected if no careful study is made of the best way in which the language-material, item by item, can be mastered and absorbed. Yet grading is badly neglected. In the teaching of some languages it is an open field for thought and experiment.

Choice of vocabulary should rest on knowledge of the pupils, taking fully into account their ages, experience, and interests. They need the words to talk, read, and write about the things that appeal to them. It is a limping, dreary course if they are regularly forced to talk, read, and write about anything else. Interest must be sustained, and the learners must, of course, have plenty to do. A language is learned actively, by having to use it for a purpose and in some activity. The younger the pupils the more they need to see, touch, and handle the things talked about, to perform actions, and to move about the classroom. They must be given opportunities to speak, pretend, and act – otherwise the language will never come alive for them and the familiarity brought by repetition will tend to breed monotony and contempt. It is unnecessary to labour this point, which must apply to any language-teaching.

W. R. LEE

is Editor of *English Language Teaching*  
He is the author of *Teach Yourself Czech*  
and was formerly Linguistics Adviser to the British Council