

The Teaching of English as a Foreign Language to  
Children: Aspects of Teacher-Training

Solange Ribeiro de Oliveira

One learns to walk by walking. One learns to swim by swimming. One learns to drive by driving. It seems obvious that one should learn to teach by plunging straight in - to a guided practice of teaching, or, at least, of watching others teach in real classroom situations.

True, such practice must be guided . It must also be connected with general pedagogical principles, as well as with underlying linguistic and psycholinguistic theory. In the case of teaching English to children, there is the added fact that, psychologically as well as biologically, the child is not the adult in miniature: some information on child psychology is therefore called upon.

It seems not unreasonable to suppose, however, that the theoretical or technical knowledge needed may and should be rooted in the practical observation of what happens in the class. All knowledge that can be derived from books or lectures should spring from facts observed in actual teaching situations.

So far as my experience goes, syllabuses in teacher training colleges do not seem to conform to such necessities. Most often prospective teachers are crammed with theoretical information on the problems and techniques of foreign language teaching. Sometimes, elements of applied linguistics are

also taught. Educational psychology may likewise be tackled but then usually turned to the adolescent rather than to the child. Not unfrequently, an attempt at teaching practice is added. This, however, is seldom adequate: the future teacher is generally led to give or attend make-believe classes, that is, lessons given by one of the group to his own colleagues, under the supervision of the instructor. The teacher-to-be thus falls in the absurd situation of "teaching" prospective teachers elementary patterns and vocabulary that they already know. He has no chance to test whether, if he were teaching actual and absolute beginners, they would understand or in any way respond to his teaching.

A slightly better approach is sometimes adopted: students undergoing teacher-training are sent to local schools for training periods.

Even then, the solution can hardly be called a very happy one. For several reasons, control of what happens to the trainees in such schools completely escapes the instructor responsible for the teacher training at the university. To start with, different groups of trainees attend different schools, with different teachers. In such experience there is no common denominator which the instructor at the university may refer to. Nor can he ensure that the experience is of a desirable kind. The practice the trainee observes in local schools may deviate from, or even contradict, sound teaching principles. Besides, he is seldom able to watch more than a few classes. He gives still fewer. His training therefore lacks continuity.

Moreover, there is rarely any chance for him to observe the process from the very first class. This proves to be a serious deficiency. The first classes are of crucial importance. It is then that the foundations of the young pupils' habits of

study are to be laid. It is then that their interest must be aroused or dulled. It is then that they must be led to understand and accept the method adopted. If the young learner does not do all this at the beginning, or if, on the contrary, he does get used to procedures which will hardly take him anywhere, the damage may well be irreparable. For all these reasons the first lessons to absolute beginners are among the most difficult to teach. Only an experienced and enthusiastic teacher should be allowed to give them. No trainee should be allowed to graduate without proper guidance on the subject. However, these crucially significant initial lessons are precisely those which the teacher-to-be almost never watches. When the turn comes for him to give them, he is left to find for himself.

In order to eliminate all these shortcomings and to give the future teacher a reasonable introduction into the practice of his craft, a different procedure from those described above is required.

With this goal in mind, I'll discuss a procedure we might call "the class within the class": a technique to launch future teachers of English into the heart of the teaching process, while at the same time providing the kind of theoretical background needed. This background, however, is always set in function of the teaching process actually experienced by the trainee.

The procedure consists basically in the following: trainees watch, and later on imitate, a single experienced instructor teaching an absolute beginners' class, following an ordered sequence. This instructor can, and perhaps ideally should be, the person simultaneously responsible for the teacher-training process. He starts teaching children at the very first class of English and moves on to the several kinds of activities and

steps needed for the acquisition of the basic skills. The beginner's group constitutes what is here called "the class within the class": the young learners are placed in front of the classroom. The trainees sit at the back, observing the lesson without interfering with it. In this way, two learning processes go on at the same time: that of the young students, who are being taught the elements of English, and that of the future teachers, who are learning an approach to teaching.

It is essential that the group of young pupils should form a regular class, operating at fixed times, so as to ensure the unity and continuity of the process.

The organization of this class may create a practical problem. A solution which I have attempted with a fair amount of success is to have an agreement with some neighbouring elementary school, which "lends" the university one of its regular classes. In this way it is ensured that the trainees have the chance to watch as homogeneous and realistic a group as possible. There are several advantages to this sort of students: to start with, none of the young pupils knows any English; then they are of approximate ages; they are already used to working together as a group in normal learning situations; in the first grades, most of them are barely literate in the mother tongue; so lessons have invariably to concentrate on the listening and speaking skills only. (If the children have already had a satisfactory introduction to reading and writing, they may be given elements of these skills in English)

This is a further advantage: it gives the prospective teacher the chance to observe lessons concerned mostly with listening and speaking—precisely the ones he usually finds the most difficult to tackle.

The fact is that the practical contact with actual children in real classroom situations with a sequence in time proves the best way to make future teachers not only intellectually grasp but, most important, feel, the problems involved.

Before each session with the class within the class, the instructor tells the trainees what he intends to teach to the children, which techniques he is going to adopt, and why. So, as the future teachers watch the class, they know exactly what the instructor is about. (Even occasional deviations from the original plan will be useful to the trainees: they will be able to see how often the pupils' interests or difficulties - give the class an unexpected turn. They begin to feel the need for the flexibility and skill, as well as the speed in decision-making-which any teacher needs, to deal with these eventually necessary changes in the strategy of his lesson.)

After the session, the class should likewise be commented on by the instructor and the trainees: the results achieved, the alterations made, the techniques adopted may all be discussed in as objective and simple a manner as possible.

To complement the process, it is indispensable that each trainee, after watching a given number of classes, should give a few himself, continuing the work done by the instructor up to that point. These classes can be planned with the help of the other trainees and of the instructor.

Thus, from actual practice and observation, the first broad foundations for teaching EFL are laid. From these, the underlying psychological, linguistic and pedagogical theories can later be drawn. The discussion of the work done after each session is instrumental in this respect. Of course, the theoretical aspects will most probably be better dealt with by specialists. But the first general principles can, and perhaps should be, acquired from the instructor. The future teacher must see,

integrated in the unbroken whole of the practical lessons, all the theoretical and methodological principles which it is unfortunately only too easy to atomize under the names of different academic subjects. Having watched and given a number of lessons actually taught to young pupils, the teachers-to-be will find the theoretical background, when it comes from the instructor or from a specialist in connected matters, firmly grounded on their actual experience. Such information may then become of the only kind that is not immediately forgotten after exams. Here, as in several learning situations, the inductive method is the best .

The class within the class technique has been used in my college several times, with myself as the instructor responsible for teaching the children and for the teacher-training-course. The circumstances varied. The trainees, for instance, were sometimes undergraduates taking a teacher-training-course to get a licence for teaching. Just as often they were elementary and secondary school teachers of English, with varying backgrounds and different degrees of ability, taking summer crash courses to brush up their language didactics. With both kinds of trainees the class within the class proved the most successful initiation I have experienced so far. Not the least thing it did was to convince trainees that it is possible to teach a lot of English even in the most adverse circumstances - and that they themselves were able to do this teaching.

Having by now outlined the general ideas and practice underlying my experience with teacher-training, I feel in a position to discuss the more specific points of the teaching to children to which it seemed most necessary to draw the prospective teacher's attention. Each of these points was successively dealt with in comments and discussions before or after the children's class.

From this point of view, students undergoing teacher-training had to realize that they were not only teaching English; they were teaching children English. Before any English was taught, the way had to be carefully paved, and in a manner which suited the children. In the very first class, three things had to be done:

- to convince the children of their ability to learn spoken English, while at the same time enjoying it
- to arouse their interest
- to make them accept the method used.

To start with, the trainees' attention had to be drawn to the fact that nothing can be done that has no roots in the children's own experience. In order to learn, the child, even more than the adult, has to "live" the situations associated with the material taught. And this has to be done in an atmosphere which is as cheerful and affectionate as possible.

The materials used with the pilot classes I mentioned belonged to a conventional audio-visual course, similar to those made popular by the early Didier courses or those of the Hachette "Passport to English" series. Slides, film strips and flannelboard cut-outs were then to be among the main vehicles of instruction.

As a first step, the pupils were shown film strips that had nothing to do with English. They only contained the elements of a story. The class was asked questions about what was "happening" in each picture, then asked for a sketch of the story. After this had been successfully done, the children were asked how it was possible for them to understand the story, if nobody had told it to them. The obvious answer was given: they knew what was "happening", because they saw it in the pictures. It was then suggested to them that, if they could understand a

story without any words, they would also be able to understand one told in a foreign language.

A first few points were thus made to the observing trainees: nothing can be taught to young learners that bears no relation to their experience. In the case in point, this relating bridge was their familiarities with "silent stories" in cartoons, comics, etc. On the other hand, something essential was to convince the young learners of their ability to learn the foreign language. With the pilot class mentioned here, the convincing was done by reminding them of their capacity to understand stories through pictures alone, so that the pictures could act as interpreters for what was said in the foreign language .

The third obvious point was to make the children interested in learning. This was also done in the first class. As the material to be used had to do with the story of a trip to the moon, pupils were shown pictures of the characters in the story: a robot and two children. After the names of the three "heroes" were given, the children were asked what they knew about robots, space-ships, astronauts, actual trips to the moon, etc. Then they were asked if they wanted to learn English while at the same time being told a story about the children and the robot going to the moon. All this, of course, was done in the mother tongue. After a time, the children were genuinely interested in the story - if not yet in the English. With the prospective teachers, a comment was made, later on, as the necessity to use only materials that really interest the young learners and appeal to their imagination. An allusion was made to experiments of teaching English through well-known stories. The chief one mentioned was Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. This famous story, which is now shown on television in the USA every succeeding Christmas in the Judy Garland film version, is reported to have found its way into



the teaching of English in at least two countries: India and the Soviet Union. (FORUM, Vol VI, n° 6, 11-12/68, *To Please a Child. Americana: Behind The Language The People Speak*)

Only, this time, the story is closer to the interests of modern children: the story of how man first set foot on the moon-and the disillusion associated with it - may well become the modern myth. Like the children of Mäterlink's *The Blue Bird*, we had to travel a long way in order to discover that happiness may well be at home.

The next step, to which the trainees' attention was called, was to make the young pupils accept the method to be used. They were told that they were going to be shown a series of pictures. Only, this time, the pictures talked. Which language would they talk in? The children themselves answered: English! Did they think they were going to understand what the pictures said? Yes, the children answered. And why? Because of the pictures. Well, then, the first time they were going to be shown the pictures only to have a general idea of what was happening. Then the pictures would be shown again, one by one. This time, each picture would be "explained". By explaining, the children were told, was meant doing something, or making a gesture, which would make the meaning clear. For instance, they were shown the picture of a girl pointing to herself and saying *I'm Pam*. Suppose the teacher pointed to herself, with a similar gesture, and said *I'm So and So*. What would she be saying? Her name, the children answered. Well, something like this would be done for every picture. If they had only a vague idea of what some of the pictures was saying, it did not matter. It was not necessary for them to understand every word, but only to have this general idea. Later on, many things would become clearer. After every picture had been "explained", it would be shown again. This

time, the children would listen even more carefully to what the character in each was saying, in order to repeat it. Would they like to repeat in chorus or individually? The class answered: in chorus. So this would be done. Next the pictures could be shown again. Would any of the children like to repeat individually? A few volunteers presented themselves. Others were called upon to repeat. Well, the children were then told, now we can talk in English a little, using only the things you learned in this class. You are going to be asked questions, or be told to ask one another similar questions, etc.

At this point, one can see that very simple language, close to that of the children themselves, had been used to make them accept the initial steps of a classical audio-visual method: introduction, explanation, group repetition, individual repetition, fixation, exploitation, etc.

Then, the young class was dismissed, and the prospective teachers were led to the conclusion or the review of what had been done:

- a) Children's interest had been aroused.
- b) They had been convinced of their ability to understand spoken English,
- c) They had been led to understand the way and the sequence in which material was going to be presented - in short, to accept the method used.

Chiefly, they had also become active in the teaching-learning process by understanding why one thing rather than another was done. For instance, once older children, who had already been introduced to reading, asked why no book was going to be used in the first class. They were told that English spelling is quite different from Portuguese: if they saw the written English words, they would have a tendency to mis-

pronounce them all.

After this initial, preparatory, class, the children were introduced to a series of normal English classes using a traditional audio-visual method. The future teachers would watch the introduction, explanation, and repetition of dialogues; of drills based on them; of the first exploitation of material learned, etc.

To start with, the important thing was to make them grasp the general approach underlying the whole teaching process, not specific techniques for each activity. The trainees must realize, from the very beginning, that the approach is structural, in the broadest sense: nothing is introduced for its own sake, but for its place in a wider whole; no activity is taken by itself, but always connected with all steps and procedures used; all activities thus relate to one another, and one leads to the next; in every kind of activity, children must be introduced to the whole first, which is then broken down into its related parts. To give a concrete example: suppose the children are going to start a dialogue. The initial thing is to let them see the pictures illustrating it. Thus, just by looking at them, and by listening to some language bits which may be already known, the class gets an idea of what the story is about. It may be, for instance, that very dramatic part of the story which is the vehicle for teaching : two children and a robot have flown to the moon. As there is something wrong with their rocket, they find themselves stranded there. It so happens, however, that they have met a moon-man who is a very nice person. The moon-man feels sorry for the children, and gives the robot his space ship so that everybody can fly back to the beautiful blue earth. The robot is so moved when he gets this present, that he cries. When he does so, he suddenly finds that he has become a man. *Only a man cries, only a man loves ,*

*I'm a man now, he says.*

Within the wider whole of story sequence, this is the first whole the children have to grasp: the understanding of the episode. They understand it because of the pictures . As this is the 19th lesson in the course, it has bits of language material already learned and intensively practised.

The future teachers must be made to realize that, exciting though it may be for the children and even for themselves, this first whole - the story - is only the on-linguist vehicle for the introduction of linguistic material . The young pupils should be wholly immersed in the situation: the exciting episode. But the teacher's business is to use this as a jumping board to make his class dive into the linguistic material. So, within the initial whole, which is the story, other wholes must be placed: the connected semantic, syntactical and phonological structures.

The semantic seems the most important layer of this union: the children, having grasped the first general meaning of the episode, because of the pictures, must be made to interpret the more specific meaning of individual sentences . Let us have a look at the dialogue we mentioned. Here, the only completely unknown lexical unit is the sentence *Thank you very much*. It can easily be explained. The teacher drops some object. As a pupil picks it up for her she says *Thank you very much*. Similar situations may be provoked, for the teacher to say the same sentence again or to elicit it from the children. The other sentences of the dialogue contain only known lexical items, which must now be reviewed and understood in the new context. The teacher acts each sentence, showing the appropriate flannelboard cut outs: the space - ship, Pam crying (for the verb *to cry*), a heart (to

suggest *love*), etc.

In the syntactical area, the new item presented is that of questions and short answers with *do* or *does*. This, of course, also conveys meaning: In the children's mind, as in language, the separation between syntax and semantics does not exist. So the use of *do* and *does* will come through in sentences which are obviously interrogative, with the respective affirmative or negative short answers. The teacher points, for instance, to the picture of a plane, and asks; *Does a plane fly?* She herself answers: *Yes, it does*. The same for a space-ship and for a rocket. Then she may point to a car, repeat the question, and answer, *No, it doesn't*. The important thing is that the future teachers should grasp that both in the semantic and the syntactic field the approach is global: it does not matter if the pupil does not understand each individual word in the sentence *Thank you very much*. What he has to get, at the beginning, is the meaning of the whole, and its relation to the appropriate circumstances. So also, no explanation is needed, and, with children, indeed, possible, about the function of do or does as grammatical tools. The thing is to make the class see that do and does are used in certain kinds of questions and answers. Later on, as the teaching expands, other texts will lead the students to understand the meaning and function of separate items: the whole will slowly break into parts, which can be put together into new wholes again.

The global, or structural approach, remains uppermost.

It is the same in the phonological area. It this, as in the other areas, it must be emphasized to the trainees that what matters is the whole, not the parts, or rather, that the whole, not the parts, are to be made the starting point, and the initial focus

routine of the classes, and the sequence of the various steps - presentation, explanation, repetition, etc. - of an audio-visual course.

After this general outline has been sketched, specific techniques can be illustrated and then discussed: how to teach vocabulary, introduce new patterns, drill and review them, conduct elementary conversation and oral composition, etc.

In all of these aspects, it must be insisted upon that the young learner should be kept always busy and interested. Above all, that everything should be taught in such a way that the student "lives" what he is learning. And the only way to live it is to learn it as communication. The importance of pictures, real situations in the class and similarly concrete resources cannot be over-emphasized. The young learner must be vitally involved in everything done. For instance, as the teacher shows the cut-out of the space-ship, to review *fly* (making the adequate gestures and even noises), the child must be allowed or even required to repeat the miming, and even to touch the picture. (A toy would even be better.) For the same reason individual questions should be introduced as soon as possible: *Do you fly? Does your father fly a rocket or a space-ship? Do you fly when you go to Rio? Etc.*

The prospective teacher must be made especially wary of introducing or practising patterns in a mechanical way. He must not let himself be tempted to do pattern drills by simply repeating or changing disconnected sentences in such a way that the class often ignores or even fails to understand their meaning. So, for instance, if short affirmative answers with *do* are to be drilled, the young learner may be asked: *Do you see a space-ship in that picture? Do you see a rocket in that one? Do you see a moon-man near the rocket? Do space-ships*

of attention. So, intonation, not the pronunciation of individual words or phonemes, must be correct in the first place. In the case of the dialogue presented, the rising intonation of the yes-no question deserves attention. The connected problem of stress also calls for special care in questions with *do* and *does*. The teacher has to see to it that the main verbs *see*, *fly*, *cry* get the stronger stress, and not *do*, *does*, which Brazilians tend to stress wrongly. The dialogue presented also gives the teacher the chance to point to the children the difference between connected speech (illustrated by the moon-man) and non-connected speech (illustrated by the robot). She can comment especially on the fact that the robot speaks in a suitably mechanical and toneless way, pronouncing every word in isolation - which nobody would normally do. Then, as the robot changes into a man, he changes into connected speech, which leads him to stress strongly only certain words in the sentence. Thus, without any technicalities, and in very simple language, important phonological points are made. The trainees must be made aware of the deliberate simplicity of the explanation, and try to imitate it when they start giving lessons to the pilot class. It is generally this very simplicity that the young teacher has most trouble in attaining. For this reason, the person responsible for the teacher-training must not be afraid to insist on the need to translate technical information into language children can understand and which does not distort linguistic facts, even though their full range cannot be properly presented at this stage.

The first step, is then, to make the prospective teachers grasp the necessity and importance of the structural approach, as well as its applicability to all aspects of the teaching process. This, of course, is pointed out in the very first classes, when the trainees are still learning the broad

*fly? Do rockets fly? Do astronauts fly rockets? Do children cry? Do men and women cry?* etc. The future teacher must realize the importance of doing drill in this living, situational way, not even letting the class know that the aim of the activity is to drill a specific pattern. Children must always keep the impression that they are communicating with the teacher, not doing a grammatical exercise. The attention of the trainee must be called to the fact that the teacher must develop the skill to frame, or make the students frame, sentences which require always the same structure in the response elicited, but without letting the students feel that they are doing a mechanical exercise. With this aim in view he uses every opportunity the situation in class gives him to devise structural drills on the spot, when the need for them is felt. The trainee should realize that the ability to improvise drills as the opportunity arises is something that depends largely on practice and that can be developed. He should also see the splendid opportunities given by games and songs to practice the same patterns over and over again without letting the class realize that they are doing drills. This will also prevent the future teacher from teaching children songs or games that bear no relation to what is being taught, when the same activities could be used to reinforce or even introduce teaching points. In all this, the important thing is not to tell the prospective teachers what to do. This has been done often enough. The vital thing is to make them see it done before their eyes, discuss how it was done, make them do it themselves, following their own ideas but guided by the person responsible for the teacher training.

The class-within-the-class procedure gives the instructor every chance to drive home another important point : the similarity between teaching the mother tongue and teaching



a foreign one. This happens in almost every aspect: the global principle involving the phonological, syntactic and semantic areas; the introduction and drilling of new vocabulary or grammatical patterns; the transition from the oral to the written stages ; the use of songs and games; oral composition, reading, etc. From the point of view of each of these items, the similarity can be emphasized and exploited.

To give only one example mention may be made of the use of workbooks. In fact, workbooks, are one of the points in which the teaching of the mother tongue and of a foreign language offer striking similarities. The future teacher should be made to analyse the exercises most frequently used. They can have a look, for instance, at one of the simplest types: identifying a picture according to a sentence said aloud. The pupil is shown a picture, for example, of several characters facing different objects. As the teacher says, for instance, *Pam is going to eat an apple*, the pupils draw a coloured line linking the girl and the fruit. The opposite can be done: the pupil draws the line, then he himself, or another pupil, says the corresponding sentence.

Another type of exercise one can concentrate on is matching items on the left hand column with those on the right. One can have, for instance, pictures of people on the left and of objects on the right. The child has to say the sentence suggested by the teacher's gesture. If he points to the boy Keith, and to a rocket, the expected sentence is *Keith is going to fly the rocket*. Even a small number of pictures, combined with one another, will yield a reasonable number of sentences.

Another kind of exercise uses pictures of two children with the respective pieces of clothing. The pictures are to be cut out by the pupils at home and pasted on cardboard. Then,

for instance, as the teacher points to a girl and a dress, the child says: *Pam is going to put on her dress*. The teacher says: *Make her put it on*. As the pupil does so, he says: *Pam is putting on her dress*. When he finishes, he says: *Pam has just put on her dress*. The teacher may then ask: *What is Pam wearing now?* to elicit *She is wearing her dress*. Similar sentences can be built with *take off*. This exercise provides an excellent way to review and contrast patterns with *going to*, *be + ing* and *have + participle*.

A third type would remind one of hide and seek. The child looks at a picture where several items have been disguised. Then the teacher goes on: *How many cats are there?*! The pupil answers: *There is only one*. The next question may be: *Where is the cat?* Etc.

Such exercises, always done orally, cannot really be separated from games and songs, which serve similar purposes, and which are very close to those used to teach the mother tongue. In all cases, one can hardly insist too much with the novice teacher that, even though children enjoy such activities enormously, their aim is not so much to afford some pleasurable activity, but to drive home a syntactical pattern. The examples cited have obvious structural aims. In the enthusiasm which is indispensable to the future teacher he must not be so much carried away that he loses control of the situation and forgets that the goal he has in mind is to teach a structural pattern. The similarity with parallel activities in the mother tongue should be insisted upon. The prospective teacher must be able to make his future students feel the connection between what they do in the English class and what is done when they are engaged in activities meant to improve the command of their native language. In both cases, the basic aim is communication. This fact must not be lost sight of whenever children or teachers are engaged in

any activity meant to develop language skills, in the mother tongue or in a foreign one.

Something else should be remembered here: whenever the prospective teachers are introduced to some new procedure, they should be made familiar with its technical and mechanical part immediately. All the seemingly unimportant technical details such as how to make, handle or store cut-outs, slides, film-strips posters and other visuals should be taught as soon as the trainee has seen them used. The same applies to handling a tape recorder or a projector properly. Otherwise, one will be launching into the teaching profession young professionals who are gadget-shy. We are all probably familiar with the kind of new-fledged teacher who is terribly frightened of using a tape recorder or a magnetboard because he thinks he cannot handle them properly. The moment to learn how to do so is that when they have first seen them used.

The use of the workbook is only one of the many points in which the teaching of a first and of a foreign language obviously converge. Others, and probably more important ones, have already been mentioned: the development of the skills leading to fluent, connected speech; reading comprehension; the transition to writing, etc. These will not, however, be discussed here. Our aim, in this paper, is a more modest one: to show that, by using the class-within-the class procedure, it can act as a sort of organizing centre from which every important point connected with the teaching of English to children may easily be made to flow.