LEARNING TO READ A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

F. R. WHITESELL
University of Wisconsin

The problems which face students who are learning to read a foreign language, and the methods with which they try to solve these problems, do not seem to have concerned teachers nearly as much as the problems of learning the grammar and basic vocabulary. It is strange that we are so careful to guide our students strictly according to the late or latest method for the first semester and then turn them loose to find their own tricks and short cuts for the rest of the language course, insofar as learning to read is concerned. The students thus released from guidance, turn immediately to their own traditional, one might say instinctive devices. These devices are often ingenious; they all involve a great deal of mechanical work and almost without fail, they are extremely inefficient.

Let us consider these devices in some detail. The commonest one is to write word-translations or glosses onto the page, between the lines and on the margins. Such procedure involves so much mechanical work that the student forgets to think. He no longer sees the text as such, but rather as a long sequence of words; he takes them up one by one and provides every one that he does not know with a gloss, and when the last gloss is written in he sighs with relief and puts the book away until class time. Thus his work tends rather to take him away from the text than into it, so that he has only a vague notion of what is being said. He has conscientiously looked up all the unknown words and what more can the teacher ask? he thinks. In class he reads off his translation, retaining more or less the foreign word order and idiom: thus "German is harder than French or Spanish". He reads off monstrous phrases and sentences which would deeply concern a psychiatrist and of course distress his teacher. Even if he is conscientious enough to try to attain something like American idiom and word order, he can only see a few words at a time, namely the word of the text and its gloss, and he must take things as they come. He soon gives up trying to understand the frequently occurring little words like "doch", "schon", "ja" etc. which never seem to have the same meaning twice, and skips them as often as the teacher will allow. It is thus that the classics become a bore and a torment. To such a student the conscientious teacher becomes a fussy tyrant in too too many cases. When the student must review his work for an examination, he has no way of knowing whether he understands a word or idiom or not, for he sees the translation at the same time he sees the foreign word, and it is too late to turn back when the examination tells him that he is deficient. Such an unfortunate student can react passively and dully to the result of the examination – "he is not good at languages" – or he can protest the injustice on the grounds of his hard, con-

scientious study, and develops a hard luck or persecution neurosis; in any case he will abandon the study of foreign language at the earliest possible opportunity. The loss to the teacher in the way of "business" is nothing compared to the loss suffered by the student and the community that he will later influence.

Closely allied to the interlinear and marginal glossing method, but not nearly so vicious, is the word-list. The student writes out the unknown word in a notebook and beside it he writes the gloss. Often he writes the page and line number in the margin. This method takes twice as much time as the preceeding one, but it leaves a clean page that will not distress him when he has to recite (but he will lose time and fluency in desperately looking back and forth between the text and his notebook). Another distressing error of this and the preceding method is that the student is too absorbed in his mechanical work to select the right gloss, when more than one is given; when he finally notices his error, it is too late, and he blames it onto the language instead of himself. When he comes to review for the examination he is better off than in the previous case: everything is clear before his eyes and he can tell at a glance whether or not he understands a word or idiom – he may even read the text as a piece of literature! But, as in the case of the interlinear and marginal gloss, he cannot take his little helper to the examination with him.

A third traditional method is to write out the complete translation into a notebook. The labor involved is tremendous, and it is seldom done well, but even then, the time and effort spent is not commensurate with the result. The mechanical work involved is simply too distracting to permit a thoughtful perusal of the text. As in the two preceding methods, the student has his knowledge on paper, but alas, his confidence is also on paper. Furthermore, few teachers will permit a student to read a written translation in class, and they are wise to forbid it in all but the most advanced courses in style. When it is time to review for an examination, the student reads his written translation over and over, trying to memorize it, which would not be too bad if he had prepared an excellent translation, but here again he misses the boat, because it is the foreign text that he must understand if he is to write a good examination, and he was through with that long ago. The writer recently had to fail a graduate student in an examination for a reading knowledge of German required for the doctoral degree. The student was amazed at his total inability to read German, and showed me a folder containing some two hundred neatly typed pages of translation from the very book used for the examination. It was not a difficult book, but everything the student had done was on paper and only on paper. The words had simply transferred themselves from book to dictionary to paper, and the student had done nothing that a good sorting machine

or a docile moron could not do. An extreme case, yes, but an illustrative one that shows clearly what is not so clear in other similar cases.

The last of the traditional methods that I shall describe here is the card-vocabulary or "flash card" method. Here the student writes the foreign word on a card or slip, looks it up and writes the gloss beside it, or, if he is hardy, on the other side. He sorts these alphabetically sooner or later, when repetitions and disorder become too serious a problem. Here again his knowledge and confidence are on paper and have as it were, only a chance connection with the text, and the mechanical work is even greater, for the cards in addition to the work of preparation must be manipulated for use. Here again the mechanical work simply crowds into the background the mental work of understanding.

The study methods that have been described are widely used by students, particularly in the average and sub-average groups, who feel that they need extra assistance in language learning. They are earnest enough to go to much extra trouble to study their assignments, and it is a pity that the traditional methods they follow are so inefficient. Indeed, they are worse than inefficient: they are a positive deterrent to learning. As we have already pointed out, the considerable mechanical work involved distracts the mind from the text. The students never have more than two or three words on the surface of their minds at a time – all the rest are crowded into the background. The fine implications and meanings of the sentence, indeed the story or essay as a whole, are lost, and the teacher's explanation in class comes too late to bring enjoyment or lasting appreciation of the material. We have long recognized in our elementary teaching that words are better understood in groups – in their natural matrix – the sentence, or at least its phrases and clauses. When we isolate words, we strip them of their meaning. If anyone is not convinced of this, let him repeat a word – any word – twenty-five times aloud. Long before the twenty-fifth repetition all semblance of meaning will have dropped away. But that is precisely what happens when a student applies any of the foregoing isolating techniques to vocabulary building. We might almost set up a law: the meaning of a word pales with the square of its distance from the text – that is the effect, if not the degree. Another inherent error of the mechanical methods we have described is that the peak of efficiency is too soon reached, that is, the time soon comes when the student is working as fast as he ever will be able to as long as he follows that method. The reason for this is that no matter how rapidly his skill improves, his working speed is governed by the easily reached peak of mechanical speed of the various operatoins involved in looking words up and writing them down. Of course the time comes when the student abandons these tedious methods and begins to read like an adult, but how many of our second-semester and second-year students pass this stage, nay reach it? By the end of the second year all but a very few have discontinued

their language study without having learned to read well, indeed, there are many who say they have not learned to read at all.

The methodology of elementary language teaching has become narrower and more definite year by year, with very good results. Twenty years ago the most used beginners' grammars could be used for almost any approach – grammatical, oral, reading, or any combination of them. Now the analytical-grammatical method with its paradigms has retreated into the background and the oral approach is heavily emphasized or at least equated to the reading approach – all with excellent results. It is time to take advantage of the better training our beginners receive and make their intermediate training more effective. The drop in student enrollment in the intermediate courses has been caused by more than a loss in interest in foreign countries, the foreign countries' loss in prestige etc.; it has also been caused by the fact that learning to read a foreign language is such a slow, tedious and inefficient process, that the students cannot afford to give it more time than the set study schedules require. We can recoup at least some of our losses (and the student's losses too) by increasing the efficiency of language learning at the intermediate stage. We need only consider the reading course here: the "mim-mem" method is working very well in the conversational course.

The following suggested procedure is the result of a number of years' observation of the working methods of the better students and not a few teachers. I am not aware that any one feature of it is my own discovery. The guiding thought throughout has been to cut out all unnecessary mechanical work and to bring the student into closer contact with, and awareness of, the text. The reduction of the mechanical work to a minimum and the improvement of word-retention in the memory means that there is practically no limit to the speed and thoroughness possible; the limits, whatever they are, are inherent in the student's own faculties. There is nothing radically new or different in this method, rather an effort has been made to retain what was best in the traditional methods.

The student's first and most acute problem in learning to read any language, including his own, is vocabulary. In the second-semester college course he usually begins with less than a thousand, and must in the course of a year to a year and a half build a vocabulary of several times this size to be able to read with pleasure and profit and at a reasonable rate of speed.

I Preliminary perusal of assignment to take about one eighth of the time allotted for the assignment.

II Careful reading of assignment; putting a dot beside each word looked up – every time it is looked up. Marking of idioms with underlines, difficult passages in the margin.

III Another quick (if the previous stage has been well-done) perusal of the assignment to even up and clarify the total impression of the text.

I

Let us assume that the assignment is three pages of prose. The student should first peruse – not "read" in the exact sense of the word – the entire assignment, as rapidly as he can without hurrying, and *not looking up a single word*, but only getting what he can out of what he reads. This should take only a short time, say 15 minutes if he allots two hours for the whole assignment. Now he has a general idea, if only a general idea, of what he has read. He has a notion of what to expect when he reads the passage carefully, he has an idea of the pattern of the text and is now ready to read it carefully.

II

The student's second step is to re-read the assignment carefully, looking up every unclear word, *but not until he has read the entire clause and not until he has first made a guess as to its meaning.* When he looks a word up in the glossary, he places a dot in the margin beside the word – half a rotation with the point of a pencil with a little pressure is enough. If the word has more than one gloss, he must try them all and select the one which fits best (this is why it is so important to read the whole clause before looking the word up). This procedure is important and must be followed for *every* word looked up, no matter how often. When he looks a word up for the second and every succeeding time he puts another dot beside the first. Every phrase that cannot be given a fairly smooth literal translation is either an idiom or an idiomatic expression (Germanism, Gallicism etc.) and should be underlined, because it does not mean what its separate parts would seem to mean – "it doesn't mean what it says" and needs special attention. Difficult passages should be marked with a vertical line in the margin, thus: |, continuing along as many lines as the difficulty extends. For later convenience this line should always be put in the same margin, the left or the right, the inner or the outer margin, so that it is always immediately seen. If the difficult passage should prove to be impossible, another line should be put beside the first, thus: ||, as a reminder to ask about the passage in class. On no account should the student lose too much time pondering over these impossible passages! If he does, his attention will almost surely wander, and anyway, the solution may very likely be in the next sentence or two. It is difficult to budget the time for this stage of the preparation, for hardly any two students have equally good previous training, and they will vary in intelligence and working speed. But if two hours are allotted for the entire preparation, this stage should take about an hour and a half. The previous perusal (stage I) speeds up the second stage considerably, at the same time

making it easier, and in the case of the "B" and "A" student, more enjoyable.

III

The third stage of the preparation is another fairly quick perusal, with special attention to the underlined idiomatic passages and the marked difficulties. Now the student has already been over the assignment three times and should be able to erase a number of the extra lines that mark the "impossible" passages. In all he has read the lesson three times, taking no more time than another equally gifted student who reads it only once, and he has at least three times as clear an idea of what it is about. He can even consider the subtler meanings and implications if the text happens to contain them.

Let us return to the problem of vocabulary building and retention. One other reason that the interlinear glossing and similar methods that we have described earlier are so inefficient, is that the student remembers most of the words he looks up, certainly if he follows the procedure just outlined, hence it is wasted effort to write them *all* down. On the other hand, certain words are absolute nuisances: they occur again and again and must be looked up repeatedly. Actually, as several years of experience in using this method with my own students shows, the number of "nuisance-words" is very small: it is their frequent recurrence that makes them seem so many. Now it is in the nature of the human mind that troubles produce a sort of chain reaction that is far greater in its effects than the sum of the components that produce it. In terms of our problem here, this means that the student has the feeling that literally hundreds of words are bothering him, when the actual number is very small (it varies between a couple of dozen to fifty or more). By putting a dot in the margin beside the word every time it is looked up, the student is in effect keeping a perpetual inventory of his difficulties. At intervals of a week or two weeks the student should go through the glossary, writing on an index card or slip the words that have collected three dots, on another those that have four dots, etc. Now he can study these words with the help of a real dictionary – not a mere glossary which only offers one word for another, but a dictionary which gives examples of the words' use in short sentences. Unfortunately there are few such dictionaries which are small enough and modern enough for the second or third semester student, but a dictionary which explains a word instead of merely glossing it is a good substitute. Of course, as every one who has had some lexicographical experience knows, the best dictionary is the text itself. When the student finds that he has four or five dots beside a word, he should begin to keep a list of references for it with page and line numbers. Then, when at the end of a one or two week period, when he works over the list of difficult words, he can study the especially difficult ones by comparing the sentences in which they occur. In this way he can gradually eliminate all

of the trouble makers which would otherwise bother him much longer. As the student progresses, the frequency of the checking can decrease.

I am well aware that this last phase of the method I have described seems impossibly complex and tedious on first consideration, so let us do a little time study. To place a dot beside a word in the glossary takes about as much time and effort as it takes to write half a letter of the interlinear or other written gloss, and let us say that the average gloss is a five letter word – that is surely a generous enough allowance. Then it takes only one tenth of the time and effort to dot a word as it takes to write it out.

There is however a seemingly more valid objection which I shall try to answer: can a student remember new words as well if he does not write out the gloss? The answer is yes: he can and will. Writing the gloss distracts his mind from the text, where the word is alive with meaning and association, and focuses his attention upon the dissociated gloss which has nothing to lean upon, as it were. Further, the student depends upon the gloss, else he would not go to the trouble to write it. No one doubts that memory is a faculty which grows and gains strength through exercise, and that the capacity of memory of an average student is far beyond the learning we expect of our students who are learning to read a foreign language. Admittedly, progress in vocabulary building by the method recommended is slow at first, and the student must be constantly encouraged. Then when the student has been forced – gently, but still forced – to rely upon his memory, the effects will soon be evident. His working speed, which at first will be a little slower than with the traditional self-help methods, will after the first two or three weeks increase. Because of its extreme economy of mechanical work, this method will continue to speed the student's work as long as he is learning large numbers of new words. Like any study method it is a discipline, which once acquired, requires less and less effort. Also, as time passes the student can increasingly apply himself to the text and its larger meanings, without neglecting the necessary groundwork of vocabulary acquisition.

Let us now consider the application of this method to review study for examinations. The material to be covered by the examination is say one hundred pages. The student has been over the material three times by himself and once in class. All the difficult passages are marked: he has his list of nuisance-words, the idioms and idomatic expressions are underlined, the difficult and once impossible passages are marked in the margin. When thus plainly marked, only about fifteen to twenty percent of the text is in urgent need of review – the rest has been done without trouble four times already and can hardly be a threat now. Thus the student knows exactly what must be done and can set about doing it with the end in sight. Furthermore, his text is uncluttered by interlinear and marginal glosses, and he knows immediately if he needs to look

up a word again. In the case of the traditional methods the student has no other choice but to plow through the whole hundred pages – if he does it, it is drudgery, and if he tires and gives up, or cannot find the time to do it, his examination will show it.

In conclusion I should like to say a few words about my own experience with this method. I have been recommending it as described above to my students in second semester and higher courses in German for the past five years. I have never insisted that it be followed because it was experimental and a teacher has enough to insist upon anyway. At first only the better students, those of "A" and "B" grade followed it, but in the last two years I have been able to persuade about half of my students to adopt it. The response from those who stay with it has been uniformly favorable. Students are always eager to "know where they stand", and like the method because of its inventory nature. The forced memory training, as might be expected, is not popular, but the students admit its necessity. An attempt to collect a typical list of "nuisance-words" was a distinct failure: in about one hundred lists collected there was hardly any congruence beyond the usual one syllable particles, etc. The "nuisance-word" problem varies from student to student and can involve such improbables as "Pferd" and "Augenblick", but every student has his "nuisance-words" and is grateful for a method which not only identifies them but shows them to be much fewer in number than his own subjective estimate.

Du mußt das Leben nicht verstehen,
Dann wird es werden wie ein Fest.
Und laß dir jeden Tag geschehen,
So wie ein Kind im Weitergehen
Von jedem Wehen
Sich viele Blüten schenken läßt.

Sie aufzusammeln und zu sparen,
Das kommt dem Kind nicht in den Sinn.
Es löst sie leise aus den Haaren,
Drin sie so gern gefangen waren,
Und hält den lieben jungen Jahren
Nach neuen seine Hände hin.

– Rainer Maria Rilke