

The Art and Science of Learning Languages

اطلبوا العلم من المهد الى اللحد

лучше синица в руки,
чем журавль в небе

Besser zweimal fragen
als einmal irgehen

門前の小僧習わぬ経をよむ

AMOREY GETHIN
ERIK V. GUNNEMARK

The Art and Science of
Learning Languages

Amorey Gethin and Erik V. Gunnemark

intellectTM

OXFORD, ENGLAND

This One



FWJ9-678-3WN3

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First Published in 1996 by

Intellect Books

Suite 2, 108/110 London Road, Oxford OX3 9AW

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Consulting editor: Masoud Yazdani

Cover design: Robin Beecroft

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1-871516-48-X

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Cromwell Press, Wiltshire

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Introduction

More people go to more different foreign countries than ever before, and there has never before been such a widespread practical need to know foreign languages. For those whose mother tongue is not English, that is obviously the most generally useful language to learn. And the greater the number of people who know English, the more useful English becomes. It is invaluable to travellers of all kinds, and to those who want to send letters or faxes, telephone or radio messages, across the world.

However, knowing English alone would not be nearly enough even if almost everybody in the world knew how to speak it. It is widely recognized that in the world of business it is an immense advantage to be able to write or talk to customers and partners in their own language. But the need to know foreign languages other than English extends far beyond those engaged in trade and industry. Journalists can only do their job half effectively if they do not understand the language of the country where they are working. Nobody, in fact, whether tourist, expatriate worker, diplomat, or anybody else, can come to more than a superficial appreciation of a people's attitudes and pleasures, sorrows and aspirations, if he or she cannot understand its speech and its newspapers. A country's culture is almost completely hidden to anyone who cannot follow the words the population uses to express it. To learn new languages is to open up new worlds.

Learning foreign languages, though, can be far more than just useful for practical purposes. If approached as an adventure rather than a chore, it is one of the most fascinating, rewarding and exciting activities a human being can engage in. It is no exaggeration to say that, for many people, finding out about languages is a joy, a passion. Indulging curiosity and satisfying curiosity are essential parts of this joy. The Finnish writer Veikko Koskenniemi once wrote that 'Curiosity is the knocker on the door to wisdom.' But curiosity about languages can not only bring wisdom, and understanding; it can also bring people together, not just in the obvious practical everyday sense, but as an interest shared by enthusiasts. Learning languages is perhaps the most 'outgoing' hobby in the world.

In many ways the times have never been better for studying foreign languages than they are today. Communications between countries are easier than they have ever been. It is easier than ever before to hear foreign languages and to obtain written material in them. There are also probably more people than ever before who have the opportunity and the time to study them. For the increasing number of people who are unwillingly unemployed there are few better - and more affordable - ways of getting a sense of

purpose and an interest in life. And in the ageing populations of the rich countries there are ever more pensioners with the leisure to discover an enjoyment that maybe most of them have never suspected.

The difficulties of learning foreign languages have been both harmfully underestimated and harmfully exaggerated. Learning a foreign language needs time and dedication. On the other hand, contrary to what many believe, most people can probably learn languages well if they go about it in the right way and if they really want to. Enthusiasm can enable people to learn lots of things they might think they were incapable of learning, and one of the main aims of this book is to help overcome any inferiority complex some readers might have about their linguistic abilities.

The message we want to give is one of encouragement and optimism. Self-confidence is not only something that in itself gives happiness and satisfaction; it also makes people much more efficient language learners. That in turn gives a sense of worth and achievement. It is never too late to start learning languages. Nobody is too old. It is never too early, either. Nobody is too young, so long as their endeavour springs from a spontaneous ambition and is not imposed in any way. The right age to start learning foreign languages is the age you feel an urge to do so.

At the same time, however, we have to emphasise that millions of people go about learning languages in the wrong way. They waste a great deal of time and emotional energy in misguided effort. They accept too easily the latest fashions in learning methods prescribed by the 'experts', and believe too readily in the inducements of what has become a vast world-wide language-teaching industry. An alliance of publishers, language-business entrepreneurs and academics makes large amounts of money for a small number of people. Those who pay are innocent students of all ages.

With the help of this book we hope you will be able to learn foreign languages rationally and effectively. It is the product of the many years we have spent both teaching and learning them ourselves.

Those who have never tried to learn a foreign language may perhaps be stimulated to take up a pursuit that they are probably far more fitted to engage in than most of them believe.

Then there are those who have tried language learning before, but are dissatisfied with their methods or their progress. We should like to help them to learn all the languages they want to learn, and even pass examinations in them, without spending a lot of money and without being dependent on other people or on institutions. Relying on oneself is not only the surest way to learn; it also gives the greatest satisfaction. Yet to be successful as well as independent, most language learners need some guidance. There are basic principles which are universal, and it is often a failure to apply these that leads to disappointment and frustration. This book tries to make these principles clear.

We hope, too, that language teachers will find food for thought in these pages, and that some of our advice will be of interest to them.

This is a practical book. It explains what to learn, and how to learn it, as well as how much time and work you are likely to have to put into your studies. And, as important as anything, it explains the nature of languages and how to think about them. We believe

it will be useful to both those who are native English-speakers and those who are not. It contains a lot of information and advice that we think is important for people studying English as a foreign language, including those who want to pass examinations in it; but the book is written just as much for everybody, of any nationality, who wants to study any language.

Learning languages, then, involves both effort and joy. So we wish you, as the Italians say, 'Buon lavoro!' - 'May your work be good!' However, if you want to avoid time-consuming toil, you could instead adopt the following strategy that EVG found in an old book of black magic:

Catch a young swallow. Roast her in honey. Eat her up. Then you will understand all languages.

Wer fremde Sprachen nicht kennt, weiss nichts von seiner eigenen (Goethe)
He who does not know foreign languages knows nothing of his own

On apprend a tout âge
One is never too old to learn

A.G. E.V.G.

*One of the fruits of this common enthusiasm is the society founded by EVG, Amici Linguarum (Friends of Languages), which has members all over the world. No rules! No subscription fees!

Acknowledgements

We owe a great debt to AG's one-time colleague Ivor Pemberton, who has expressed his friendship by going through the entire text of the book and subjecting every detail of it to the most thorough scrutiny. He has also made many valuable comments on the content. The defects in the writing that remain are where we have failed to take his advice.

We express our thanks below to the many other individuals who have helped us in different ways in the writing of this book.

A.G. E.V.G.

I should like to make a special mention of the kindness of Jeanne McCarten and Michael McCarthy, always ready at a moment's notice to respond to my many requests for information, advice, and practical aid.

David Bond and I, during the years we worked together and the many years since, have never stopped discussing and exchanging letters on the subject of languages and how to learn them. Without the enthusiasm and friendly enquiring spirit he always brings to these debates, the will, confidence and energy needed for my task would have been so much less.

I also want to express my gratitude for the help that I have been given by Derek and Rosemarie Baines (UK/Germany), Michael Bulkley (UK), Lucia Duff (Italy/UK), Caroline Edge (UK), Roy Fleetwood (UK), Hugh Gethin (UK), Sylva Gethin (Sweden/UK), Yukiko Isono (Japan/UK), Paul and Rachel O'Higgins (Ireland/UK), Maria Pemberton (Italy/UK), Diane Reeve (UK), Mario Rinvoluceri (UK), and Marion Shirt (UK).

I especially thank Masoud Yazdani, our publisher, for his constant encouragement.

Lastly, and above all, I say 'thank you' to my wife, Mieko Suzuki-Gethin. Without her patience, and her support, both moral and practical, I should never have been able to complete my part in this work.

A.G.

Sonja Gunnemark. Among our friends Sonja has always been known as 'the gentle genius', admired for her mastery in many fields and loved for her generosity and loyalty. Her artistic mind and unflinching common sense have made up for my own shortcomings, and throughout our married life she has always taken time to advise me and help me find the right word or phrase - in Swedish and English and other languages.

Stig G. Gunnemark. My brother Stig, founder and director of the publishing enterprise Geolingua, became legendary because of his honesty, wisdom and helpfulness. His death in 1994 was an irreplaceable loss. All those who were lucky

enough to come in contact with him in some way will agree that Shakespeare's famous words also apply to Stig:

'His life was gentle; and the elements so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, This was a man!'

In addition to my wife Sonja and my brother Stig, I am especially indebted to the following friends, all members of Amici Linguarum:

Hans Alberg (Sweden), Leonard R.N. Ashley (USA), Roland J.-L. Breton (France), Eugene Czerniawski (Russia), Johannes Hedberg (Sweden), Ola J. Holten (Norway / Sweden), Arvo Juutilainen (Finland), Donald Kenrick (UK), Mary Ritchie Key (USA), Gustav Korlén (Sweden), Mari-Anne Lindblom (Sweden), Pent Nurmekund (Estonia), Pierre L. Sales (USA), Hans Joachim Störig (Germany), and Robert J. Throckmorton (USA).

In the next century people will say 'There were giants in the earth in those days' (Genesis 6:4).

I should also like to express my gratitude to Tsuyoshi Amemiya (Japan), Lasse Back (Sweden), Gerald Baker (USA), Joseph Biddulph (UK-Wales), Robert L. Birch (USA), Daniel Björkman (Sweden), John R. Butcher (UK), Eugene S.L. Chan (Hong Kong), Vyacheslav Chirikba (Abkhazia/Holland), Jul Christophory (Luxemburg), Marcel Cortiade (France/Poland), Gunnar and Margot Danielsson (Sweden), Bo and Ulla af Ekenstam (Sweden), Annmarie and Olle Fallgren (Sweden), Thomas J. Gasque (USA), Ingvar Gullberg (Sweden), Kerstin Gunnemark (Sweden), Nils E. Hansegård (Sweden), Einar Haugen (USA), Magnus Helin (Sweden), Georg Holmblad (Sweden), Gunnar Jarring (Sweden), Anja-Riitta Ketokoski (Finland), Sverre Klouman (Norway), Ago Künnap (Estonia), Johan Lagerfelt (Sweden), Alfred F. Majewicz (Poland), Antoni Llull Martí (Spain), Georges Massieye (France), Carl Masthay (USA), Joan McConnell (USA), Anders W. Mölleryd (Sweden), Jean-Claude Muller (Luxemburg), Valeriu Munteanu (Romania), Bo Nensén (Sweden), Bernard Nežmah (Slovenia), Anna J. Partington (UK), Lília Pereira da Silva (Brazil), Sten-Åke Petersson (Sweden), Pavel V. Petrov (Russia), Josep Pons Sabata (Spain), Franco Rossi (Italy), Christopher K. Starr (Trinidad), Dmitri Spivak (Russia), Eva Sternberg (Sweden), Dennis Tengbring (Sweden), V. Lynn Tyler (USA), Ülle Udam (Estonia), Valev Uibopuu (Sweden), Tor Ulving (Sweden), H.J. (George) Weber (Switzerland), Nico Weber (Germany), Claes and Doris Wennerberg (Sweden), Stig Wickström (Sweden), Edith Woolfson (USA), David Wright (Sweden), Jan Åhman (Sweden), Olle Öhman (Sweden), Ragnar Östlund (Sweden).

E.V.G.

Part I

The art of learning languages

Amorey Gethin (AG) and Erik V. Gunnemark (EVG)

1

Basics 1. Who can and who should learn languages

§1 A 'talent for languages' is not so rare as you may think

What does one need to be good at foreign languages? A phrase one hears a lot is 'a talent for languages'. What special thing is that? We should start by considering that we have all shown a talent for at any rate one language - our own. So if some people have difficulty learning a foreign language, it must mean that something is getting in the way of the natural talent they were born with. When this happens it is perfectly reasonable to talk about one person having less linguistic ability than another.

But we should be quite clear about what that means in reality. What it does *not* mean is that a person is necessarily stuck with that lesser ability for all time. AG's experience shows that is a false idea. He says: 'At school I was certainly not particularly good at languages, that is, languages as school subjects, even if I was not particularly bad either. Then when I was sixteen and still at school it happened that I became interested in Spain and suddenly felt I must know the language too. I describe in greater detail in §53 the effect this had on my attitude to foreign languages generally. But the important thing here is that it did change my attitude and approach to languages, and I discovered I had much more linguistic 'ability' than I - and anyone else - had suspected. I would never have had my comparative success with foreign languages if I had permanently accepted the view of my 'linguistic nature' that my teachers and I myself had had.'

So people who do not think they are good at languages may suddenly find they are good at them after all. This may happen in a variety of ways. It may happen because people change their general attitude to foreign languages. Or maybe they change their practical methods. These changes may be conscious or unconscious. Or again a person's circumstances may change and she finds herself able to do things she could not do before.

ὅποιος δε διακινδυνεύει τίποτα δεν κερδίζει τίποτα
Nothing ventured, nothing gained

§2 National differences

However, there are some clear facts as regards differing 'abilities' in learning languages, and we should accept them and consider what they may signify. One clear fact is that the people of some nationalities are on average better at foreign languages than people of some other nationalities.

There is a widespread belief that if people of a certain nationality are generally not good at a particular language it is because the foreign language is so different from their own; and, conversely, that if they are good at, say, English, it is because their own language is close to English. The facts do not bear this view out. For example, Hungarian belongs to the Uralic family of languages, and Turkish to the Altaic family; the two families are sometimes classified together as belonging to one combined Ural-Altaic family. In any case, both languages are quite different from those of the Indo-European family to which most European languages belong. Yet Hungarian-speakers tend to learn other European languages well, often outstandingly well, while Turkish-speakers unfortunately often have great difficulty with European languages. There are also noticeable differences in average linguistic ability between speakers of the different Latin languages. And Persian-speakers do not as a rule learn English any more efficiently than Arabic-speakers, although Persian is an Indo-European language, like English, and Arabic is not.

Naturally it is *easier* (see §§218-225 and 256-258) to learn a language that is close to one's own than to learn one with a very different vocabulary and grammar. But people who are good at learning one foreign language will almost always be good at learning others, even if those other languages are further from their own; and if they are bad at a 'distant' language they are unlikely to be good at one that is much closer to their own. People will of course mostly be able to get by in a language that is very close to their own, while they may not be able - apparently - to cope at all with a language that is not so close. But this in no way means that their linguistic *abilities* vary according to what language they are trying to learn.

Again, many people think that those who speak a language spoken by only a small fraction of the population of the world will be good at foreign languages 'because they have to be', while if one speaks one of the world's major languages one tends not to bother enough about foreign languages. But it is not difficult to think of cases where this 'rule' does not apply, and anyway it surely makes little or no practical difference to a person whether her language is spoken by fifty million others or five million - in either case it is very much a minority language. Once more, though - and this is the crucial point - even if it is true to some extent that speakers of some minor languages tend to be better at foreign languages, it does not mean that they have greater inborn ability. There are quite different causes.

§3 Lack of talent is not inborn; cultural influences are strong

Indeed, the fact that there are national differences suggests it is very unlikely that difficulties in learning foreign languages are inborn. It seems almost certain that the most important influences on the average ability of a country's citizens to learn them are cultural and educational.

It is very difficult, probably impossible, to discover the mental processes involved in learning foreign languages, in the sense, that is, of establishing some set of 'natural laws', some universal process. This is because everybody is subject to cultural and social influences and their minds work in certain ways determined by

those influences. The influences will be different in different communities; and even within the same community different individuals will be subject to different influences.

Some of these cultural influences are very subtle and very difficult to put one's finger on.¹ In our present state of understanding it is almost impossible to do anything about the harmful influences in the sense of direct, specific cures. This, though, does not mean that we cannot do anything to resist them. If we learn foreign languages according to good principles, the unfavourable cultural influences will have little or no effect on us.²

§4 Think rationally about learning languages

Probably the most important thing to recognize here is that when people study foreign languages, what they actually do and what they ought to do are more often than not two quite different things. So it is unlikely to be very helpful to examine closely what people do instead of thinking about what the rational thing to do is. There are a number of basic but simple truths about languages, and the best way to learn them, which can be worked out if one thinks about a few equally basic and simple facts. Practically everybody knows those facts already, or they can be easily found out or learnt with a little experience.³

We need to apply rational thought to practical realities, and individuals should use their rationality in accord with their own particular nature. But there we would say: Be on your guard. Don't jump to conclusions about your 'linguistic nature'. Don't accept what traditional or expert views about language learning seem to say about that nature. Don't assume that it really is as it seems to be at the moment. Put rationality before what you think your nature is. If you do, you may get a pleasant surprise and find your nature is other than you thought, and that you can do things you never suspected you could do.

§5 Resist bad influences on your talent, and rely on yourself

Unfortunately, where language learning is concerned, most of the world's education systems put the emphasis almost entirely on teaching, when it ought to be on learning. When teaching is emphasized, students tend not to be told about the ways of thinking that will help them automatically avoid the unfavourable influences. Indeed, the emphasis on teaching may often actually encourage bad learning habits.

Take control of your language learning yourself! Don't wait for and rely on teachers, the latest fashion in teaching techniques, or the 'new scientific' system of learning. None of them will do you any good if you don't rely on yourself, and if you rely on yourself you don't need them. Accept the whole responsibility as your own. It is to you it really belongs, and the more you accept it the more you will succeed.

If you feel at the moment that you are not good at languages, you should certainly not give up and accept the situation. You may find that by changing your

approach, changing your methods, and relying on yourself, you can become a really good linguist. One of the main purposes of this book is to help you do this.⁴

Aide-toi, le Ciel t'aidera

Heaven helps those who help themselves

§6 A very few people may have permanent difficulties

However, it would be quite wrong of us to finish this part of the discussion without admitting that there are probably some individuals (and this has nothing to do with intelligence) who may never be able to learn languages easily. There are certainly far fewer of them than most people think. But there will be people who may fully accept the advice in this book, for instance, and be as willing and eager to follow it as anybody, yet who just cannot put it into practice successfully. Nobody knows anything about how the brain works in this respect, let alone what causes the individual differences. All we can say at the moment is that for some mysterious reason some people never get onto the right 'wavelength'. That is sad and very frustrating for them. But there are many things in life far more important than being good at languages.

§7 A good memory is not necessary

There is a widespread belief that one of the things one needs in order to be good at foreign languages is a good memory. We should get rid of that idea straight away, and at the same time the idea that one cannot learn languages if one has a bad one. Even if you have a memory much worse than average there is no reason why you should not learn a foreign language, or several foreign languages, perfectly well. We can see that this is so simply by considering the fact that every 'normal' person in the world, whether they have good memories or bad ones, clearly has a memory good enough with words for them to remember thousands of meanings in their own language, and exactly how those meanings are used.

§8 Bilingual people don't have particularly good memories

Bilingual people, people who have been brought up speaking two languages, also provide a good demonstration of how memory is not important for learning languages. Bilingual people have to remember twice as many or almost twice as many words as people who only have one native language. They do this successfully without any special effort. Yet obviously we cannot suppose that all bilingual people have better than average memories. They will have memories of varying efficiency just like any other group of people.

§9 Connect foreign words to 'things', not to words in your own language

Remembering the words of a foreign language depends on *how* you remember them, not on how good your memory is. The secret is to connect foreign words to things or ideas, not to words in your own language. In other words, you should not try to remember words (or phrases or sentences) by translating them. Think instead directly of the thing

the word represents. For instance, if you are an English-speaker learning French do not try to remember that 'lit' = the *word* 'bed' but that 'lit' = that *thing* that people sleep in. The same goes for abstract words. Think of the *idea* of fear, not the word 'fear', when you are learning the French word 'peur'.

If this seems a strange approach to suggest, consider the fact that when you were learning your own language you had no other language you could translate the words of your own language into. You *had* to 'translate' the words of your native language into things or ideas in your mind. That is the natural way to use words and to learn them. Let us look at another example from English/French. What happens when an English-speaker learns, as part of her *own* language, the word 'soufflé'? She does not say to herself: I must remember that the word 'soufflé' = the words 'light frothy dish'. She gets in her mind a picture of the *thing* that is light and frothy that one can eat. Yet in fact, of course, 'soufflé' (with its acute accent and all!) is a French word. So the English-speaker is learning, quite naturally and without any worry, a French word in the same way psychologically that she is learning all English words, and in the same way that she should learn all French words if she is studying French.

The importance of connecting words directly to things and ideas can perhaps be seen rather well if we think of telephone numbers. Imagine you were asked to memorize just a single column of names and their numbers in a telephone directory. You would surely find it very difficult, particularly if you did not know personally any of the people named in the column. It would require a person with an outstanding memory to learn that whole column of numbers within a reasonable time.

Many people find they can learn words if they are given pictures they can associate with them. This is an excellent method as far as it goes, but the trouble is that it doesn't go very far. One can really only use pictures to illustrate words for concrete objects. One cannot make pictures of abstract ideas, nor of most actions. Attempts to do so are dangerous in two ways. Students can easily misunderstand what the picture is supposed to represent; and they will almost inevitably start searching for a word in their own language, which it is the whole point of pictures to stop them doing. It should always be immediately obvious what a picture is intended to represent.

There are indeed some purely practical though important differences between the ways people learn the words of their own language and those of foreign languages. We shall discuss the details of those differences in chapter 8 (Vocabulary 2), particularly in §§119, 121 and 126.

§10 What motives are effective for language learning? The need for an inquisitive attitude

So a good memory is not one of the things one must have to be a good linguist. What, then, *does* one need?

Most important of all is probably one's attitude to the language one is learning. One needs to be curious, inquisitive, about the language itself. (In practice, if one has the right curiosity about one foreign language, one will probably have it about any language one wishes to learn.) That inquisitiveness is usually enough by itself for a person to learn a

foreign language successfully, while without such an interest it is often very difficult for people to get very far, however strong their other motives may be.

Necessity can be a powerful driving force: the need, for example, to learn a language in order to cope in a foreign country or engage in at least a minimum of conversation or correspondence with foreigners. But the sad fact seems to be that desperately desiring a nicer job, or a rise in salary, or more efficient and profitable conduct of one's business, or wanting to enjoy a holiday more, is no guarantee by itself that one is going to learn a foreign language well and quickly, however intensive a course one takes in it. Many people would have been spared much disappointment, disillusionment and frustration if there had been more awareness of this truth, and many business people and others would have saved themselves a lot of money if they had realized it.

As a rule, just an urge to have a command of a language for the sake of having a command of that language is enough to give a person the power to get that command. An ulterior motive without that urge is unlikely to produce the desired result. Naturally this interest in a foreign language for its own sake is often bound up with an interest in a country and its people; or learners want to learn a language - French, for example - because they think it sounds beautiful.

One needs to grasp at a language for its *immediate* rewards. At its most extreme this is a feeling of 'I want to do it just like the natives' and it is in a way a childish itch, the same sort of itch that makes children so efficient at learning language.

Aiming direct at the language itself in this way probably also encourages the imaginative, flexible approach that is basic for any effective grasp of a foreign language. It is striking how well so many international sportsmen and sportswomen speak foreign languages. This may surprise some people. But it is not really surprising when one considers their urgent need for immediate reward.

That immediate reward is not only being able to communicate for practical purposes, though that is undoubtedly important in many cases. What probably impels people in the world of sport most of all is the need to be 'one of the lads' like everybody else. (They also enjoy the wonderful advantage of constantly hearing the foreign language in practical action. Many of them may believe it was the formal lessons they had that were the key to their success. This is unlikely.)

To have a good chance of learning a foreign language successfully your motivation should be both long-term and short-term. You need motivation that does not fade when you come up against difficulties or 'have other things to do'. But you ought also, if possible, to be in a position to reach a clearly defined goal after a maximum of 3 or 4 months, so that you are conscious of making definite progress and spurred on to new efforts.

خواستن توانستن است

Where there's a will, there's a way

§11 Teaching languages to children is not effective; adults learn better

Many ordinary people have almost certainly been aware for a long time that young children are not as good at learning foreign languages in class at school as older ones. That is, they are not good at formal language learning as organized by adults. No sensible person would try to teach French, say, to English-speaking five-year-olds at school, although they might well encourage the children to 'pick it up' in a French-speaking community. Trying to teach a foreign language to a five-year-old in a classroom can only come from badly misguided theories.

On the other hand, a twenty-year-old starting a new foreign language, at university for instance, usually makes so much more rapid progress than a ten-year-old at school that most people would think it silly even to compare them. Among other things, adults can even acquire a far larger vocabulary in a foreign language, and far more quickly, than a child can in her own language, for reasons explained in §119. See also §126.

§12 Language learning should be enjoyed, not imposed

We have suggested that a 'childish itch' is a good thing to have for the learning of languages. We hope it was obvious that we were not using the phrase in any unfavourable sense. On the contrary, it is precisely the kind of childish joy that can be got out of mastering a foreign language that makes it so worthwhile.

But no-one should ever be forced to learn a foreign language. Learning a language should never be a duty, and it is morally wrong as well as ineffective for it to be imposed as a task. If it is, many will not experience it in the way they should be allowed to. Learning a foreign language can and ought to be enjoyable.

Unfortunately many educationists in the field of language studies - compulsory or otherwise - seem to have a different attitude. The approach often appears to be to try to get students to learn almost without noticing it, to manipulate them into success. Boredom is to be avoided at all costs. Students must be kept amused, and learning resistance must be overcome.

It is surely a clear sign that at least some educationists do not believe that foreign languages can really be interesting in themselves. We are no longer so barbarous that we are prepared to flog people into learning them. Therefore other means of encouraging the study of languages have to be found, and the modern sophisticated way is to sugar the bitter pill. (See also §43.)

Should all children really be made to learn foreign languages? How many British people of even those who have studied French well into their teens could use that language to tell a visitor how to get to the local post office? Do the educational powers-that-be really believe that the curriculum is going to produce millions of young people who can communicate effectively in one or more foreign languages? If not, what is their excuse for forcing children to study something most of them would patently rather not study, particularly when it is liable to put many people off foreign languages for life?

It is probably going to be found fairly soon, at least in Britain, - though it will very

likely not be admitted - that the attempt to train in languages both the young and the mature for the opportunities of the great open European market has been a failure. This will be partly the harmful result of compulsion and partly because, as already argued, ulterior motives do not often work well as inspiration in the learning of languages.

But the moral question is just as important as the question of the effectiveness of study. Why can the decision to study a language not be left to individuals, whatever their age? We should not be trying to prepare large numbers of people to be efficient - and yes, perhaps high-earning - cogs in a successful economic machine. Training should be to help individual humans do the things they want to do. To children we should be trying to give the genuine freedom of choice and the real independence that are rightfully theirs.

As noted by Olle Holmberg (professor of literary history at Lund 1937-59), 'the best things in life are the occupations one chooses for oneself; the worst are so-called pleasures forced upon one.'

Cosa fatta per forza, non vale una scorza
Forced love does not last

§13 Learning a language is observing

The first essential for effective language learning, then, is to be interested in the language itself. But if this is the necessary basic *attitude*, what must one *do*? We come here to the heart of the process of all language learning, both the learning of foreign languages and children's learning of their own language.

Learning a language is *observing*; that is, simply noticing what words mean what, and how the words are used together to produce broader meanings. (See further §§28-30, 32-33, and 167-177.)

§14 You must do the work yourself

Stated like this it may seem rather obvious. But in practice many language students act as if they didn't know that observing is the key. The danger is that if one forgets that observation is the essence of learning language, one will make the worst mistake one can make as a student of a foreign language: one leaves the work, or at least part of the work, to other people. In other words, one relies on teachers. We discuss the role of teachers in more detail in chapters 4 and 5 (§§38-66). Here we only want to emphasize that when you learn a foreign language you must do all the work yourself. Teachers can guide you; with a bit of luck they may even inspire you; but they cannot observe for you. This does not necessarily mean you have to work harder. On the contrary, millions of students could work far less hard but far more effectively if they concentrated on observing, instead of wasting their time on pointless tasks.

Observing comes naturally to children learning their own language. It is an urgent matter for them, as they want to share and communicate with the world around them, but, as we know, they do not see it as a task.⁵ The ideal for the rest of

us, when we try to learn a foreign language, would be to do it in the same relaxed way as children.

Les alouettes ne vous tombent pas toutes rôties dans le bec
You should not expect larks to fall ready roasted into your mouth

Notes

1. An example AG has long found intriguing is that although Norway and Sweden have such very similar languages and cultures, and the two languages have almost exactly the same set of vowel sounds, Swedish-speakers tend to pronounce the sound of English 'oo' (/u:/) far more correctly than Norwegians. However, the difference has seemed less marked in recent years.
2. There are at present very wide differences among adults in the ability to learn foreign languages, far wider than the differences among children learning their native language. All normal children are good or very good at learning their language. Adults' learning of foreign languages, on the other hand, varies from the apparently hopeless to the perfect.

Many people seriously underestimate how proficient many adults are at foreign languages. Many adults can in a matter of months or very few years become much 'better' at a language than ten-year-old children speaking it as their mother tongue. They can understand far more words than the native children, and they can use far more words. The only way in which the children may be superior is in the accuracy of their grammar and pronunciation. Accuracy is a small and unimportant part of the command of a language, as long as it is not so lacking that it seriously interferes with understanding. It is thus quite untrue to say that people suffer a decline in their ability to learn language after a certain age. If all the distractions of adult life are taken into consideration, it would probably be truer to say that the basic ability to learn new languages *increases* with age.

It is reasonable to suppose that there are two main reasons for the differences in *apparent* ability among adults. One will be that cultural influences have varying effects on different individuals. The other will be the varying *will* of the adults to learn a foreign language. Children presumably all have much the same will (or urge) to learn their language.

3. There is a problem with theories of language learning and their application, whether they are 'behaviourist', 'cognitive', or any other sort. They all tend to treat the humans that are the subject of them as beings that go through certain (natural?) mental processes when they learn foreign languages. In principle at least, it is believed, we can find out what these processes are; on the basis of our knowledge of the processes we can then manipulate the activities of students so that they learn the foreign language more easily and efficiently. Once again, though, we must emphasize the difference between what people do and what they ought to and can do. There are only two effective ways to learn a language: 'naturally', without conscious thought; and deliberately. The whole basis of the 'deliberate' method is - or ought to be - conscious rational thought. It is pointless to choose the 'deliberate' method if you are not going to think constantly about what you are doing; about both logical methods of learning and the details of the language you are learning.
4. In recent years there has been a revival of interest in what is now called 'learner autonomy'. Students of foreign languages are encouraged to find out what methods of learning suit them

best. Some good general principles have been proposed. (It is suggested that good language learners are self-aware, inquisitive, and tolerant of differences between their own and the foreign language, self-critical, realistic, willing to experiment, actively involved, organized. See Ellis & Sinclair, 1989, pp.6-7.) But if one really leaves a person to find out her own best way of learning languages, one risks doing something very like throwing a small child into the water at the deep end and expecting her to swim. Many people who have not thought carefully about learning languages beforehand, or read or listened to rational argument about how to do it, are likely to be guided by a mish-mash of ideas, assumptions and habits that make little or no practical sense. And telling would-be learners of the diverse experiences of other learners does not help those who need advice. Discovering what others have done does not tell them what they should do themselves. Further, if they decide they like the *sound* of a method and try it, they may get stuck with it, believe it gives them some success, and so not try another perhaps more rational approach that might have been easier and given quicker results.

On the other hand, if one advises students on the results of language learning research, one is not only to a large extent taking the learner's autonomy away; one is also yet again confusing what people do with what they could do.

5. It is not possible to draw a clear borderline between the desire for mastery and the desire to communicate. The merging of the two is surely seen in small children, who apparently without effort pick up the language of their playmates when they go to a foreign country. It seems likely that the efficiency with which they do it is due at least as much to the wish to share their companions' mastery of the language as it is to a wish to communicate. One reason one cannot teach a language formally to those same small children must be that in class at school they have no need either to communicate or to share as regards the foreign language.

2

Basics 2. Understanding the basic nature of languages

§15 Languages are translations of 'life', not of other languages

Children, though, have two great advantages. First, they are allowed to take many years to learn their language, a length of time that older children and adults cannot usually allow themselves for learning a foreign language. Secondly, they do not have one language already, so they cannot get muddled by it, and they appreciate, without thinking, something that is fundamental to the nature of all languages: They are not translations of other languages; they are direct 'translations' of reality, of things, feelings, ideas, actions, of human experience.

The result of this is that at one level all languages are in principle exactly the same, that is to say, they are sets of meanings, collections of words for directly representing the world.¹

§16 Every language is different and divides the world up differently

But it also means that every language is in a sense completely independent of all other languages. Each language divides the world up in its own way, a different way from other languages. One can see this at the very simple level of single words. For instance, Italian has two words,

sapere and *conoscere*,

where English has only one:

know

On the other hand, English has two where Italian, like many other languages, has only one:

fare
do make

This does not mean that when you have two words it does not matter which you use. Each word has its separate meaning, as we can illustrate with

do the washing up
and

make a plate

But Italian-speakers use 'fare' for both. In the same way, Italians use 'sapere' when they are talking about knowing facts or truths - for 'I did not know she was here' they would use 'sapere' - and 'conoscere' when they want to express the sense of being

acquainted with somebody or something - for 'I know her well' they would use 'conoscere'. So we can see that 'know' has at least two different meanings.

There are untold thousands of cases like this throughout the languages of the world. English can use the same word to describe a person who is annoyed because his neighbour has a nicer house, and a person who is upset because he thinks his wife is interested in another man: 'jealous'. But Swedish, for example, calls one 'avundsjuk' and the other 'svartsjuk'. However, it is by no means always as simple as that. In Swedish, for instance, 'bra' as an adjective has the sense of 'good', but 'bra' as an adverb means 'well'. On the other hand, of all the things English simply calls 'good', some would be called 'bra' in Swedish but others - such as food - would be called 'god'.

well
bra
good
god

§17 Prepositions don't fit from one language to another

Prepositions are famous for being used in their own special and 'different' way in each language, and cause great difficulties to students all over the world. (See §§111, 129 and Appendix 8.) If you look up the Spanish word 'por' in a Spanish-English dictionary, you will almost certainly find that the first word given is 'by'; and, vice-versa, if you look up 'by' you will find 'por'. Yet for a sentence such as

She's walking about IN the garden

the Spanish would be

Está paseando POR el jardín

In the same way, if you look up the Swedish 'på' you will find 'on' and vice-versa. Yet the English for

Jag har inte sett henne PÅ mycket länge

is

I have not seen her FOR a very long time

And although dictionaries will tell you that Italian 'da' first and foremost means 'from' or 'by', and the other way round,

She must go TO the doctor

= *Deve andare DAL dottore (!)*

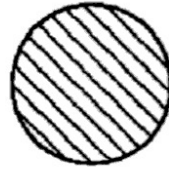
And so on. Nearly everybody thinks it is the other people's language that is peculiar. But the true moral to be drawn is that you must recognize that every language works in its own special way, and if that's peculiar, then your own language is just as peculiar as any other.

§18 Words in one language do not usually mean exactly the same as words in another language

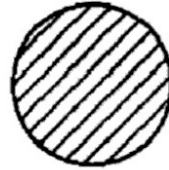
It is also important to understand that there are not many words in a language that mean exactly the same as words in another language. (This naturally does not apply between languages that are very close to each other, such as the Scandinavian languages, or

Russian, Ukrainian and Bulgarian. But here we are really talking about what are effectively the same words.)

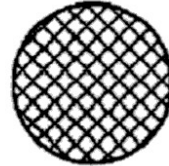
If we imagine a word in one language (let's say English)



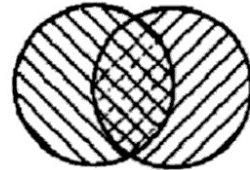
and a word in another language (let's say Russian)



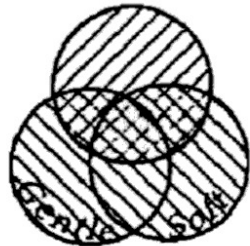
it is very rare for their meanings to fit exactly like this:



It is much more likely that they will be related to each other something like this:



Now, there may be a second English word that covers part of the Russian word that is not covered by the first English word. But again, it won't cover the 'missing' part exactly. There will also very likely be a part of the meaning of some Russian words that cannot be covered by any English word - perhaps even not by any other word in any language in the world - and vice-versa. Notice that there are large parts of the English words which are not covered by the Russian word. Perhaps there is another Russian word that can do that, but maybe only partially.



'Gentle' is in fact an example of a word that possibly has no exact equivalent in any other language. It can of course be translated, but only in a very rough and approximate way. The first thing to notice is how 'gentle' has to be translated in one context by a certain word and in a different context by another word. (In some contexts it might even have to be translated by a combination of words.) Its most likely appropriate Russian equivalent is given for each of the following sentences:

1 He is a very gentle person.	<i>myágkiy</i>
2 He gave her a gentle smile.	<i>lyubéznyy</i>
3 She gave him a gentle push.	<i>lyógkiy</i>
4 He was rowing against a gentle current.	<i>slábyy</i>
5 Can't you give him a gentle hint?	<i>tónkiy</i>
6 She laid it gently on the table.	<i>ostorózhno</i>
7 The tap on the door was so gentle we hardly heard it.	<i>tíkhyy</i>

Seven different Russian words are thus used for the same English word, and further uses of 'gentle' in other contexts might require further different Russian translations. And there is almost certainly a part of the meaning in 'gentle' that is missing in all translations, whatever word is used.

'Gentle' is perhaps a rather extreme case. But there are huge numbers of words in the world's languages that have this same unique character, even if not always so clearly.

§19 Whole expressions, too, are different in different languages

Again, different languages express the same combination of ideas in different ways:

English	I have been here for two hours
Italian	<i>Sono qui da due ore</i>
	= Am here since two hours
Japanese	<i>Koko-ni ni jikan imas</i>
	= Here two hour-period am

English	She is six years old
Italian	<i>Ha sei anni</i>
	= Has six years
Japanese	<i>Kanojo-wa roku sai desu</i>
	= She six age is

On the telephone:

English	This is Maria
Italian	<i>Sono Maria</i>
	= Am Maria
Japanese	<i>Maria desu</i>
	= Maria is

We can see here not only that some languages sometimes leave out meanings that other languages have to put in, and vice-versa, but also that different languages 'think' about the same reality in different ways. We see here that Italian, for instance, 'has...years', whereas English says 'is...years old'. (See also §§99-103.)

It is interesting that bilingual people are nearly always much better than average at learning foreign languages. This is almost certainly because people brought up with two languages realize naturally (and usually unconsciously) through their own experience that different languages work in different ways, and so their minds become more flexible and more able to grasp how another language connects direct to 'life'.

§20 Do not learn by translating into your own language

That foreign languages work differently from your own is the first and most basic thing to observe and remember about them. Do not try to learn them by constantly translating them. We have already pointed out how a much more effective way to remember words, phrases and sentences of the foreign language is to connect them directly to things, people, events, feelings and ideas in real life. We have just seen, in the previous sections, the immediate practical difficulties involved in translation and how the same word in one language may have to be translated into another language by different words in different contexts. But the difficulty is also more basic. If you always try to turn the foreign language into your own you will never truly understand it, and you will certainly never master it and be able to use it naturally and fluently. This is because translation goes right against the basic nature of language that we explained above. Translation is never truly 'true'.

§21 Translation is essential as a practical instrument for beginners; it is translation as a 'mentality' that is dangerous

What we have just said does not mean that you should never use a translation given you in a book or by a teacher, or that you should never use a dictionary. On the contrary, there is only one practical way to take the first steps in learning a language, and that is to learn meanings through translation. It is the only method that can give the beginner a reasonable amount of knowledge within a reasonable time. To recommend any other approach, such as the 'direct method', is to do a great disservice to would-be language learners. You can only make that direct connection between words and 'things' etc. that we have recommended if you have first found out what 'things' the foreign words represent. Translation is the only quick way of finding out.

But there is a right way and a wrong way of using dictionaries, and translation generally, which we suggest in detail in §§117-118, 128-131, and 134-145. What we want to warn against here is not translation as a practical instrument. Both EVG and AG are convinced that translation is an essential practical instrument for any beginner making a conscious study of a new language. (We each use somewhat different practical methods, which we discuss in §105.) What is terribly dangerous, though, is the translation 'mentality', the approach to foreign languages that cannot see them or learn them as anything but translations of the mother tongue.

It also does no harm to translate phrases and sentences literally in the way we have just done in §19. On the contrary, this is probably the simplest and best way to explain to a beginner the way a language works. But neither this nor any other sort of translation should become a habit. It should only be used right at the beginning in order to 'get you into' the language. Once you have got a fair idea of the basics of a language you should think of translation as something to be avoided.

§22 Translating is not the path to complete and certain understanding

Many language students insist that they cannot 'really' or 'completely' understand anything in a foreign language, from sentences to single words, unless and until they have translated it into their own language. Some do not go as far as this, but say they cannot be *sure* they have understood until they have translated. Naturally, if you are not sure you have understood something, and you have someone with you who knows the foreign language, you can suggest a translation and ask that person if you are right. But that is quite a different matter. What we are talking about here is your basic approach and the normal practical method you use to study the language. It really is a very bad idea always to turn the foreign language into your own. If you still desperately hanker after such translation, please consider two facts:

Young children have no other language to turn their mother tongue into as they learn it. Yet we all know that in the end they learn it far more effectively than most people who try to learn that language as a foreign language. The children can only turn their language into 'life'. So if ever you get a longing to turn another language into your own, remind yourself that children can't do that, and yet they get to know *exactly* what words mean.

Secondly, you can only translate a piece of one language into another if you have *already* understood it properly. (If you have not understood it properly you will translate it wrong.) But if you have understood it properly there is no need to translate it!

СТАВИТЬ ТЕЛЕГУ ПЕРЕД ЛОШАДЬЮ
Putting the cart before the horse

§23 Translation diverts your attention to the wrong thing

There is a very basic practical psychological reason why you should not translate. If you constantly translate you will find it far more difficult to remember how the foreign language was expressed. Your attention should always be on the foreign language, not on your own.

As we have just pointed out, you can only translate if you have understood first. If you go on from there and turn the 'real life' in your mind into your own language, you take a fatal step. You break the crucial connection between the foreign language and 'real life'. You interfere with the proper use of the foreign language in both 'directions', that is, both comprehending and producing the language. When you hear or read the same words or phrases again, you will tend to experience them in terms of your own language, and so the true meaning will get distorted. Equally, when you want to speak

or write you will tend to have forgotten the words and phrases that express what you want to say, as you will have 'left them behind' in your hurry to turn everything into your own language.

Alternatively, you may remember some expressions superficially, but because the exact meaning has been overlaid by your translation - a translation almost certainly only appropriate in certain contexts - you will forget the proper use of the expression. Indeed, it will probably never have been anchored in your mind in the first place, because of that haste to translate.

Apart from anything else, this will probably mean that you will tend to use many expressions in quite the wrong way, to convey meanings that the expression does not have, or at least not in that context.

§24 Translating acts as a barrier to understanding speech

Furthermore, if you try to translate as you listen to the foreign language, you will find that you are putting an almost insurmountable obstacle in the way of understanding the speech you hear. In real everyday situations you simply do not have the time to both translate *and* understand.

§25 Translating can make language learning far more difficult, sometimes for whole countries

It is often an insistence on translating that makes learning a foreign language much more difficult for some individuals than for others. Sometimes, even, this misguided approach can affect whole countries. It is quite possible that it accounts for a lot of the difficulties in Japan, for instance.

The practical command of foreign languages in Japan is far below the average for highly literate communities, and this is especially remarkable when one considers the attention paid to them in Japanese education. This cannot be due simply to the fact that the Japanese language is very different from English, the first foreign language for students in Japan, since, as we have seen in §2, speakers of equally different languages can speak English very well.

§26 Translating may also spoil the enjoyment

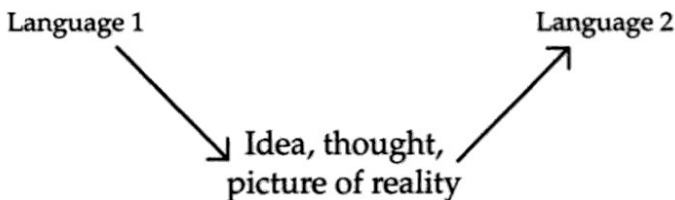
The translation approach may also deprive the learner of that delight there can be in mastering a foreign language. AG's experience has been that 'translating' students tend to have a tense anxiety about what is for them a laborious learning process. That is perhaps partly because it is not an effective method. But it is probably also because they do not experience the thrill that one can get from controlling the direct link between life and a 'new' language in the same way as the native speaker. (It is not normally a thrill for the native speaker, because the native speaker takes it for granted.)

It can perhaps in some ways be likened to learning to ride a bicycle. Learning to ride a bicycle by carefully analysing how the muscles must be used to apply the laws of gravity, energy and motion to the bicycle would not only be hopelessly unsuccessful; it would be horribly boring. But a child who learns how to ride a bicycle delights in the

natural confident mastery gained through becoming one with the machine without any intervening process.

§27 Good translators don't translate

It is also worth considering what good translators do. They could not even begin to translate properly if they simply transferred the words of one language directly into those of another. What they have to do first is turn words into the 'languageless' ideas, the 'real life' in their minds that we have been talking about, and then, as a *second* stage, turn those ideas, that 'real life', into the other language.



There can be little doubt that no person who learns a foreign language solely through translation will ever be able to speak it completely idiomatically and fluently. To truly master a language you will have to get 'inside its skin', just as you have got inside the skin of your own language. You don't get inside a language's skin by translating it.

Note

1 It is important to be clear about what is really happening inside people who are described as 'thinking in the foreign language'. Strictly speaking nobody thinks in any language (see Gethin, 1990, pp.194-219). What an English-speaker (for instance) is really claiming - though he may not be aware of it - when he claims to think in French is that when he hears or reads French he turns the language directly into ideas in his head without going via English words; and when he speaks or writes French he turns his ideas directly into French, again without going through English words. There are several simple proofs that we do not think in language, but perhaps the simplest is to consider what we mean when we say we understand a piece of language, in the first place a piece, any piece, of our own language. We do not just repeat inside our heads the language we hear. We turn it inside our heads into something else that is not language at all. Let us call that something ideas, or pictures of reality - nobody has yet pinned down exactly what the something is, and we shall know a great deal more about ourselves if anybody ever does. But whatever it is, it is clear that if ever and whenever we cannot turn language into that something else, we do not understand. Not being able to make that conversion in our minds is what we mean whenever we say 'I don't understand', whether our own or a foreign language is involved. Quite simply, we hear words but they don't *mean* anything to us (or at least we realize we have not grasped the whole meaning).

3

Basics 3. Basic practical principles of learning

§28 When and where you should observe - listening and reading

Observing, we have said, is the basis of all language learning. But when should you observe, and where should you observe? The answer to the first part of the question is: as far as you have the energy, whenever you come in contact in any way with the foreign language.

The answer to the second part of the question is: everywhere. However, in practice things are not as simple as that. In principle, of course, one can observe and learn from both listening and reading. But observing as one listens is difficult, particularly when one has just started on a new language. Even at a later stage it is difficult for many people to observe exactly what a person says at the same time as trying to follow the meaning of what the person is saying. This is one of the possible reasons why some people who have a lot of conversation practice in the foreign language do not make the progress one would expect. Observing as one listens how the language is used can be done, though, and you should do it as much as possible once you find it fairly easy to understand.

§29 Try to concentrate on exactly how people say things

AG recalls: 'A method I often used with my classes in English was to make some remark to them, and then, after one or two more sentences, if it was clear that they had heard and understood the remark, and if I thought it contained a useful piece of usage that they ought to observe, I would ask: 'What exactly did I say about so-and-so?' or 'What was my last question?' At the beginning they would seldom remember exactly what I had said, although they were perfectly able to continue the conversation. I used to ask for repetition of all sorts of usage, both grammar and vocabulary; two examples can illustrate what I mean. I might say:

A It's best to leave the bottle in the shade.

and I might get back something like

B It is best to place the bottle in the shadow.

showing that they had failed to notice, among other things, the distinction between 'shadow' and 'shade', although they had obviously understood the sentence perfectly well. Or:

A I'm not very keen on driving so far in the dark.

which might be given back as

B I do not like to drive that long distance at night.

revealing that among the several points they failed to notice was the characteristic English use of the '-ing' form, something that it is very important to learn for anybody who wants to speak and write truly idiomatic English. It will be very difficult for students to make progress if they are not going to notice such things. The fact that both the B sentences are in themselves possible correct sentences - if not very idiomatic - is irrelevant. The essential point is that the students were not observing what I said, but contented themselves with their 'own' usage, usage as they thought it ought to be irrespective of what they had actually heard. If one does not notice new things, one stands still.

'If you are really serious about learning the foreign language you are studying, and you have a teacher, and the teacher doesn't sometimes test you in this way, I suggest you ask to be given such questions. It forces you to concentrate, so it's hard work. But it's a healthier activity than a great many of the tasks that teachers set language students, because you are sharpening up your faculties and practising that crucial observing. It is also immensely satisfying to be tested like this and get the answer right.'

§30 Observing through reading

However, it is far easier, at any rate at the beginning, to observe through reading, and you can learn more from it. When you read you can take as much time as you like over the observing. You can study the text in as much detail as you like. The written word is always there, it stays put. Unlike the spoken word, it doesn't fly away so that you have to catch it, so to speak, on the wing. You can make notes on the printed pages themselves, and you can come back again and again, as many times as you want, to refresh your memory about how the various parts of the language work. (If you keep the texts you have marked, you can even make an index of the points you have noted. See §153.) It is also much easier to find exactly the sort of material you want. It is true that in its essence a language is something that is spoken. But for practical purposes a language is in a sense in its most solid and accessible form on the pages you read. Apart from pronunciation, which is a separate skill anyway, it is reading that will give you most information about a language at the start, and that information can and should include the language people use when they talk. Ways of observing through reading are described in §§167-177. See also §§43 and 179.

Facal a beul is eun air sgeith

A word from the mouth and a bird on the wing

§31 Learning how the letters of other languages are pronounced (see also §258)

But the first thing you must do, before you start reading or anything else, is find out exactly what sounds the letters of the foreign language represent. Even if the letters are the same as your own, you will usually find that they represent sounds that are slightly

different from the sounds represented by the same letters in your own language. You will find that some sounds are completely different from your own.

Whether the alphabet is the same as yours or not, you should practise reading every day, even if it is only for a few minutes. Read aloud if that doesn't disturb people around you. Otherwise just make the sounds in your head. It does not matter if at the beginning you understand almost nothing of what you are reading. The important thing is to become so familiar with the relationship between letters and sounds that very soon you can read the language aloud correctly without thinking about it.

In one way, practising reading a script that is the same as your own has more problems than practising a new script. That is because you may find yourself slipping back into pronouncing the letters in the way of your own language. Constantly make sure you are not doing this.

§32 What you should observe

What should you observe? Again the answer is: just about everything. You should always be saying to yourself: 'This other language is *different!* It's *different!* It's *different!*' In some cases, of course, you will find that the way it works is not in fact different, but until you do find it's not different, always assume it is. In that way you will observe as quickly and efficiently as possible.

A good way of deciding in detail exactly what you should notice is to ask yourself: 'If I had been writing or saying this, would I have used *exactly* the same language?' If at any point you have to confess 'no', then there is something you must pay special attention to and think carefully about. If you use this criterion, you may be surprised, to begin with, at some of the things you bring to your own notice. In particular you may be struck by how important 'little' words are. (See §§167-177)

§33 It is important to notice the contexts in which words are used

Many people do not pay enough attention to detail. You need to be especially sensitive to the detail of *context*. You need to be aware of exactly what words are used with what other words, and, perhaps even more important, to be aware of what words are used for the real life situation being expressed, with its particular practicalities, atmosphere, attitudes or tone. This awareness, or sensitivity, is not nearly as difficult to practise as many people believe. We have virtually all shown this sensitivity in learning our own language. But in learning a foreign language we must first clear from our minds the prejudices about both vocabulary and grammar that we have collected from our own language, and remember that words in one language very seldom have exact equivalents in another.

To look at some examples of the language in context we have just been talking about, let us imagine that we are students of English as a foreign language. If you are in fact a native English-speaker you may be a little surprised at first at the sort of points we suggest are important; but they are precisely the sort of thing to look out for if you are studying a foreign language.

We should notice, for instance, that it is,
 check the baggage (*not* 'control' the baggage)
 put one's clothes on (*not* 'take' one's clothes on)
 get into the car (*not* 'go' into the car)
 a rise in temperature (*not* rise 'of' temperature)

In the morning when we are in bed we
 get up (*not* 'go up' or 'stand up')

We must distinguish between words like
 road, street, route, way

and between phrases such as
 (She's) outside, out, not at home, away, gone away

At a rather more advanced level of language, English would say
 His provocative ideas were INEVITABLY attacked

but on the other hand
 He explained he had been UNAVOIDABLY delayed

And we must be careful to distinguish between words such as
 woman, lady, female, dame *or*
 old, elderly, ancient, aged, mature

and learn to use each, with its own particular flavour or shade of meaning, to express what we intend. English-speakers know that these are not just alternatives to each other. We must remember that exactly the same principle applies to other languages.

In §§167-175 we study a whole passage of English in detail to show how much can be learnt from even a short piece of language.

§34 Different levels of knowledge; active and passive knowledge

The extent of linguistic knowledge and the degree of linguistic skill can be indicated in many different ways. EVG eventually decided to classify the different levels mainly on the basis of vocabulary, the number of words that one ought to know to reach a certain 'point', for speaking on one hand, and for reading on the other. This is because it is the knowledge of words that is crucial in the learning of a language - not knowledge of grammar, as many people seem to think.

The various levels of proficiency according to the vocabulary mastered are shown in a table in §251, together with suggestions for the number of phrases (everyday expressions) that one ought to aim to learn. That classification of levels is in the first place based on EVG's own experiences in the learning of many languages and in teaching some ten of them. It should not, however, be regarded as anything more than a

guide. There are no general rules for the definition of different levels, and judging which level one is at will always remain a more or less subjective matter.

Note that for speaking and writing one needs an *active* vocabulary, that is to say, the words one can remember for using oneself. For reading or listening one only needs a *passive* vocabulary, that is to say, the words one can understand when one reads or hears them, but some of which one would not think of for oneself if one was talking or writing. In their own language, too, people usually understand many more words than they actually use themselves. See chapter 22.

§35 The importance of organization, independence and self-confidence

'Better a lazybones who can organize than a workaholic who endlessly rushes blindly on.'

(Stig Gunnemark)

Even with the greatest enthusiasm in the world, students of languages will waste a terrible amount of time and effort if they do not know how to study them rationally and effectively. The proper organization of work, time and material is a key element in the learning of languages. With it you will learn far more quickly how to speak, read and write well. A few people seem to be born organizers; but most students of languages can learn how to organize, even if the ability is poorly developed in the beginning.

Organization, independence and self-confidence are all bound up with one another. If people can combine them with the right sort of motivation they can achieve great things in the way of language learning. Organizing ability will increase one's 'independence', that is to say, the capacity to work entirely on one's own. This will in turn increase self-confidence, and the more self-confidence one has, the greater tends to be one's eagerness to learn more about the foreign language - and vice-versa. Self-confidence is needed very particularly when one starts to speak in a foreign language. Travel abroad can increase self-confidence, provided that one is well prepared and can spend sufficient time in the foreign country. (See §60.)

Hilf dir selbst, dann wird dir der Himmel helfen
Heaven helps those who help themselves

§36 The need for concentration, time, repetition and practice

Language learners should try to build their activities on the three 'pillars' of concentration, repetition and practice. Particularly at the beginning, concentration - in more than one sense - is essential. In books on learning languages it is often maintained that hard work is the most important thing. One gets the impression that one only has to 'work' to learn a language. However, it is not the work in itself that produces results, but well organized work. Try to work economically. Don't disperse your efforts in all directions, and feel that you are achieving something just because you are doing something, but think carefully. What work is necessary? What belongs to each stage of my language learning?

At what we can call the 'crawl' stage you should concentrate on 'crawl' words, 'crawl' expressions and 'crawl' grammar. At this stage only try to learn the minimum necessary. §§89-104, with §§250-251, explain the numbers and sorts of words and expressions (or 'phrases') that beginners at a language need to know, and the words and phrases needed at later stages. §150 discusses how much grammar you need to know. Do not at any stage spend time on what you already know, or on anything you do not need to learn. Concentrate particularly on the words, phrases and grammar that you find difficult.

Time is another aspect of language learning that needs concentration. You not only need a long enough time in which to make some real progress. You also need to devote enough regular hours to your studies during that period.

There is a minimum period you should have available. Below this the learning process suffers. Time is needed to 'digest' knowledge. Skill in speaking requires a certain time to develop, and, above all, for listening the ears must 'mature' (see §184). On the other hand, you must study sufficiently often. If you study furiously for eight hours, but then allow six or eight weeks to go by without attending to the language at all, you will almost certainly find each time that you have to start more or less from the beginning again. It is better to do, say, a 60-hour course in a month, rather than extend it over 4 or 5 months. (See §§245-249 and 60-61.)

'The drop of rain maketh a hole in the stone, not by violence, but by oft falling.'
(Hugh Latimer)

Try constantly to repeat what you are learning - mostly silently to yourself - at any and all times of day, in and out of doors. Words and phrases are what you will need to repeat most, but pronunciation and grammar are important too.

If you are studying at school it is essential to have your own books - grammar, dictionary, etc. Without them you will probably find it impossible to do the necessary repeating, make any notes you may want to make, and work in a systematic and effective way generally.

Finally, you should practise. Use every conceivable opportunity to listen and speak, to read and write. (See §§178-192.)

点滴石を穿つ

Tenteki ishi o ugatsu

Never ceasing drops wear away a stone

§37 More time, and intensive study, are needed for difficult languages

A great deal of time and intensive work is needed from the very start in order to learn to speak a language which is difficult at the beginning. (See §§240-244.) The pressures are threefold: the language is basically difficult to learn to speak; one has to learn a great deal even as a beginner; and one has to learn quickly, sufficiently quickly to avoid getting stuck at the obstacles one meets right at the beginning of the journey. Outside

pressures are liable to have a far greater effect on one's studies, particularly on one's ability to organize them properly.

The more difficult a language is, the more important it is to obtain an overall view without delay. Otherwise there is a serious risk that one soon becomes completely lost in the jungle of words, phrases and grammar. Some languages should be studied intensively even if one is going to content oneself with simply reading them. Otherwise it will take far too long to learn how to read normal texts at a reasonable speed - one will be constantly looking up words in the dictionary instead. This applies to languages like Irish, Russian and Arabic.

4

Learning and lessons 1. How useful are teachers?

§38 Languages are learned, not taught

The most important thing of all to understand when one is learning a language is that 'learning' is the key word. One is never *taught* a language. One can only *learn* it.

A person who does not apply this principle - consciously or unconsciously - will find language learning very hard and very slow; and until the principle is publicly recognised and applied there will probably be little or no improvement in the command of foreign languages generally.

§39 Language learning has not improved

There is no evidence that people have got better at learning languages in the last thirty or forty years, in spite of all the new theories, tools and techniques that have been developed. There is no objective way of testing whether language learning has improved. Tests of the traditional sort - compositions, translating, precis writing and so on - were always and obviously still are subjective, so they can't be used to judge whether people have got better or not over the years. But so-called objective tests cannot be used for that purpose either. They have not been used consistently in the same 'concentration' over the period they have been in use. They do not, in the main, test the things that are important in foreign-language learning - even comprehension is a partly 'creative' activity in real life, as one has to think of possible meanings for oneself rather than have them suggested for one from outside - and there is no objective way of judging what *is* important. Moreover, people can be trained in the techniques of multiple choice and other 'objective' tests, so they are not really objective at all. Impressions are still the only thing one can go on.

As far as English as a foreign language is concerned, AG's personal impression is that standards have declined somewhat. This view is apparently shared by some people concerned with the problem in other countries, such as Germany and Sweden. The lack of progress has been pointed out, for instance, by Professor Emeritus Johannes Hedberg (Gothenburg), one of Sweden's most experienced workers in the field of English-teaching.

§40 Teachers can't do the learning for you

The thing that more than anything else stops people learning a foreign language effectively is the belief that the teacher is in some skilful way going to fill one with

knowledge of the language. This is to believe in magic. Students tend to believe that the essential thinking work is going to be done by the teacher. Dedicated students believe they must work hard, and they do work hard, which means they conscientiously carry out all the tasks the teacher sets them and they study their course books regularly (or regularly use their computer programs). It will all do little or no good if they are lacking in self-reliance and active curiosity.

It is sad that this situation, where students rely far too much on their teachers, is very common. But things do not have to be like that. You can do ten times better with only a quarter of the effort if you rely on yourself and work in a rational way.

It seems to be a very widespread opinion that teachers are not doing their job properly if they do not set regular homework. In practice such a failure may indeed be a sign of a lazy, unconscientious teacher. But in principle it is quite wrong to demand that the teacher should set regular tasks, for yet again it puts the onus on the teacher, instead of on the student, which is where it belongs. You should never have to ask for tasks to be given. If you are studying and learning in the right way you will always have more than enough to do on your own initiative.

Die gebratenen Tauben fliegen niemanden ins Maul.
Roasted doves fly into nobody's mouth

§41 What can teachers do? Explain grammar?

It is useful to look realistically at what a teacher can do, first of all as a teacher of a class. She, or he, can explain rules of grammar. But she is unlikely to do this better than any reasonably well thought out grammar book. The author is likely to have worked out the explanations just as carefully as most teachers, if not more so. It is much better for the student to study the grammar by herself at home, where she can go at her own individual pace and think about problems at leisure. It is a terrible waste of time for the teacher to do this work in class, and any notes students make will probably mostly be inadequate at best. The only grammar that it is really worth a teacher talking to a whole class about is either points that the teacher thinks are neglected or badly explained in the books the students are using, or questions on grammar raised by individual students. (See §§44-46.)

§42 Explain words?

An even greater waste of time, an even more misguided activity, is for the teacher to give the students detailed explanations of the meanings of words. We shall explain in §§139-145 how this is wrong in both principle and practice. But we should point out already here how, once a teacher starts explaining vocabulary, he may find he is spending hours on just very few words. Even if he does not do actual harm by encouraging a faulty approach to vocabulary, he will achieve nothing of value; there are far better ways in which he can spend his own and his students' time.

There is just one sort of word of which this is not true. There are some words that are often confused with other, often similar words. If the distinctions in meaning are clear

cut it is useful for students to have them pointed out to them. An example of such a pair in English are the adjectives 'economic/economical', and in Italian the nouns 'sinistra/sinistro'. Once again, though, there are books for many languages which draw attention to words of this kind, and their lists are likely to be more systematic and complete than lists that teachers make up for themselves. (See also §§238-239.)

§43 'Student participation'

It seems that teachers have come to realize more and more that simply talking about grammar and words is not a good way of spending a lesson. So instead they have tried to 'involve' their students in the lesson more.

The result has been that a lot of teachers now go in a great deal for activities they call group work, pair work, or role play. Students are given various tasks that they have to carry out on their own, or they enact little scenes, such as buying railway tickets or asking for directions, or even have short debates among themselves.

One wonders whether the main reason why so many teachers are keen on such methods is that they are rather desperately trying to solve practical problems in the classroom. There are several such practical problems. There is the problem of discipline (where classes of children are concerned); the problem of finding something everybody in the class can be active in, because the teacher cannot give individual attention to each student; the problem of boredom, keeping learners amused.

It is difficult to believe that things like group and pair work and role play are really recommended because teachers truly think and have actually found that they are better and more effective ways of teaching languages. Reason, too, suggests that they are not sound methods.

First, language learning is a task that has to be carried out by individuals on their own. It is a process of 'noticing' that has to be done singly. The more the process is shared and so spread out among others, the less effective it will be.

It is too often forgotten that simply by *using* the language one can *learn* nothing. One cannot speak until one has some language to speak with, and one can only learn that language by *observing* - listening and reading, and noting what one hears and reads. There is no other way. So it is obviously very important that students should hear correct language. Yet in classes where they do most of the talking themselves they will hear each other's often incorrect speech far more than they hear the teacher's. (Let us hope that the teacher's speech, even if he is not a native speaker, is always right.) Students clearly cannot learn from language that is wrong. But they are also not learning anything new by saying things that are correct, since the fact that it is correct shows that they have already learned it (by observation).

Nor can students learn from the things their companions say that are correct, because they cannot know whether those things are in fact correct or not. Over the years AG has known several students of English as a foreign language who did an exceptionally large amount of talking in English, especially with their fellow students of different nationalities. They were usually warm personalities and delightful companions. But in several cases their English was less accurate at the end of their language course than it

correcting work itself, with the result that it was not really worth the students' while to do the exercises in the first place? (See also §§191 and 196.)

Exercises that are done orally in class are a different matter. The teacher can 'correct' the students as they go along, and the discussions the teacher and the students have about the problems can be very valuable. But the principle that teachers should not force individuals to give answers publicly still holds. This probably reduces the value of the exercises. Yet more important is the fact that exercises done in class do not attend to the particular needs of individual students.

§47 Classes take time and effort away from learning

As things are now, nearly all lessons to a class simply take time away from learning. As a rule the greater the 'intensity' of a course of lessons the more this is true.

A truly 'intensive' course would in fact consist of at least 45 hours a week, of which a maximum of 5 hours - preferably less - would be with a teacher in class. Students would devote all the rest to studying on their own, naturally including being out and about if they are in a country where the language concerned is spoken. (See §§57-58.)

The snag is that the institutions that offer language courses cannot afford to organize them in this way. Most would probably collapse if they did. They have to offer a large number of hours in order to justify the already excessive fees. The result is that practically everybody who goes on a course ends up paying large sums of money for being prevented from doing what they really need to be doing.²

Many of the tasks that teachers give to classes these days only make matters even worse. If for instance the teacher is supposed to be training students to understand the spoken word, and plays them a cassette and gives them questions to answer on it, either in class or as homework, all he is doing is giving them a test (which may very well discourage many of them). They are not learning anything. The time and effort students spend on this task should instead be spent on actually learning how to understand better by learning more vocabulary, and, above all, by constantly listening to the spoken language. In short, you won't master 'listening comprehension' by answering questions; you have to practise listening.

Projects that the teacher gives to be carried out by the class, or by parts of it, are not likely to be much better. Class projects for discovering aspects of vocabulary, say, usually involve the spending of a lot of time that is quite disproportionate to the amount of vocabulary that each individual student actually learns in the process.

One cannot help feeling that a great deal, perhaps the greater part, of the activity suggested or recommended to teachers and their classes is thought up mainly to make sure that the students have something to do. Or perhaps, to put it even more unkindly, to ensure that teachers have things to ask the students to do. It may seem very modern and enlightened to promote lively, often entertaining activity on the part of the students. But the only activity that matters is the activity of learning as much as possible of the foreign language as fast and effectively as possible.

AG recalls: 'The headmaster of the boarding school I went to almost certainly did my companions and me a much greater service than any entertainment would have done

when he forced us at the age of 14 or 15 to learn vast numbers of Latin irregular verbs by heart in preparation for the Oxford and Cambridge School Certificate examination. We were summoned to his spacious elegant study out of lesson and 'prep' hours to recite them to him, and woe betide any of us who got one wrong. We feared we might be caned mercilessly if we failed; this nationally famed Reverend headmaster had already frenziedly thrashed one boy in front of the rest of us in the class when the youth protested *sotto voce* - but not *sotto voce* enough - at the hugeness of the task imposed. 'Cor!' he had recklessly breathed. Barbarous. And the approach to Latin - as if its 'deadness' meant that any real meaning it had was purely accidental - was utterly benighted in those days. But at least our headmaster was getting us to do some genuine direct learning.'

§48 The need for a completely new sort of language lesson

The failure to attend to individual needs and the difficulty of attending to real learning are disadvantages that apply to all foreign-language teaching in classes. So does teaching foreign languages in classes really work? We have already suggested that there are no clear signs that foreign-language learning has improved since the second world war. It is time, we believe, to re-think our whole approach to language learning.

The teaching of English as a foreign language, which has had a big influence on the teaching of languages generally, has become a very large-scale business. This is part of the trouble. It has meant that entrepreneurs have made large amounts of money, and that attention has been concentrated on promoting their schools' image at the expense of both students and teachers. It is said that the huge growth of the industry has required the 'professionalisation' of its teachers. But is it as a great multi-national business that language learning should be organized? And what does the new 'professional' training mean that teachers can do? Perhaps it means that some, even many, of them can teach better. But if that better language teaching does not produce clearly better language *learning*, the whole enterprise is misdirected, for teaching is not the end; the end is learning.

This may seem obvious. However, not many people seem to remember it. Most of the emphasis is on the skills of teaching, not learning. Much less attention is paid to whether individuals are making more, or less, real progress in a language than they would if they tried learning in a different way.

§49 We need language guides, not teachers

A teacher who can show students how to study systematically on their own should be valued highly. Enthusiastic teachers can give students greater motivation, and truly competent ones can give learners self-confidence. Unfavourable factors, such as that one lacks practice in studying or that one feels one has little 'talent for languages', can up to a point be counterbalanced by a teacher's efforts.

'Blow on a spark, and there will be a great fire; spit on it, and it will go out; both results come from the one mouth.' (*Ecclesiasticus*, or *The wisdom of Jesus ben Sira*, 1st century B.C.)

Every person who assists learners of a particular language can be regarded as a language teacher. The Hungarians in particular are well known for their helpful attitude. 'In Hungary there are ten million language teachers for foreigners who want to learn Hungarian.'

But we need to recognize the essential truth stressed earlier: languages can only be learnt; they cannot be taught. Language learners need to realize that they must do practically everything for themselves; that if they know how to learn they have little or no need of teachers; but that if they do not know how to learn, teachers will do them no good. Indeed, teaching for the most part hinders language learning, for, as we have already pointed out, students believe that their teachers are doing the work for them. The more they rely on their instructors, the less students achieve.

What we are proposing can not only give happier and more effective lives to students and 'teachers' alike, but also keep a need for just as many, if not more, of what we shall now call language 'guides'.

Most people probably agree that the best help one can give learners is individual attention. But again, even this is useless if the student does not know how to learn. What the student really needs is somebody who can do two things: show him or her how to learn a foreign language; and answer questions about that language. Those questions must be thought of by the student. If students do not find questions to ask, it means either that they are not interested enough to do that crucial thinking for themselves, or that they need to be shown how. (See below, §51.)

As things are now, though, it can often be difficult for students to find a really good private teacher. Then, if one can be found, the number of lessons conventionally believed necessary will almost certainly be far too expensive for most people.

But when students have that independence essential for learning languages, they will need only a fraction of the number of lessons that they at present attend at language schools or other teaching institutions. So, although they will probably still pay high fees for the individual attention they get, they will only have to pay a tiny proportion of what they normally spend on private lessons (or even classes at schools) today. On the other hand, language guides will be able to help a far larger number of different individuals than they can at the moment. In this way they will be able to make a decent living out of providing a far more genuinely useful service than they can hope to do at present.

Qui demande, apprend
He who asks, learns

§50 Co-operative language guides

It would be a service best organized in the form of co-operatives, which would need much smaller amounts of space, equipment and administration, and where the money would go to the people who did the work. People who wanted to become guides could be given free apprenticeships at such co-operatives. They could attend

- and participate in - both the advice sessions with the individual students, and the frequent discussions that there would be between the members of the co-operative. That would be stimulating for all concerned. This sort of system would make it far clearer than it is possible to do at present whether the guides were doing their job well. As things are at the moment students have very little control over the quality of the teaching they get.

Rather than teacher training courses, what language guides need, in addition to an apprenticeship, is the experience of learning one or several foreign languages themselves. If a student's native language is different from the guide's, the guide should ideally know it. The understanding this gives the guide of his student's particular problems and the time it often saves in explanations are a marvellous help for both student and guide. But all language guides must learn at least one foreign language, and learn it really well. They have no right to preach what they have not themselves practised.

§51 How to ask questions

The principle for finding the questions you should ask is basically very simple: Ask how you should express ideas you do not know how to express. If you have the interest in learning that is essential, you will never have any shortage of queries about how to say things, or how to write things, or about grammar or the use of individual words. But always remember that the foreign language very likely expresses things differently from your own.

For this reason you should always ask: 'How does the language express such and such an idea?' It is a good principle never to ask 'Can I say...?', because that nearly always means that you have simply translated your own language directly into the foreign language, hoping, consciously or unconsciously, that the foreign language is as much as possible like your own. But if you want to learn the language well, you should not have such an attitude. It is precisely one's own language one needs to escape from. So forget it. Welcome the novelty of your new language. Always try to get 'inside' it, get the feel of it, find out what is typical of it.

This does not mean that you should never use your own language when you ask questions about the foreign language. If the person you are asking knows both languages, by far the most efficient way of getting the information you want is to ask for a translation of what you say in your own language. (Always make sure you and your informant are thinking of the same context.) At the same time, this method will often remind you forcefully how the two languages *are* different. (See also §§167-177 and 145.)

You can also, of course, ask questions about the meaning of things you don't understand, but this is not so important, and in any case you should only ask after you have tried to work it out for yourself.

Mieux vaut demander son chemin que de s'égarer
Better to ask the way than to go astray

Notes

1. Not only competition between students, whether as individuals or as teams, but also any sort of system of immediate 'rewards' for correct answers or successful accomplishment of tasks, whatever precise form it takes, is manipulative and morally repugnant. And the morally repugnant aspect of systematized immediate praise, or emphasis on success, or of any method of exercising some sort of oblique control over somebody else's learning activity is inseparable from the practical defects of such techniques.

First, they make students concentrate on the wrong things, on the immediate, the ephemeral. One defect of these 'reinforcement' techniques is the same that we criticize in connection with exercises (§§155-156). The student thinks, 'I must get the answer right *now*, so that I get my reward *now*.' So he tends not to think in broader terms and about problems. His effort is no guarantee of performance in the future.

But there is something even more seriously wrong about any sort of rewards system. It is basically a way of getting people to do things that they do not naturally want to do - or at least that they do not want to do for the things' own sake. We must emphasize again the need for language learners to have a greediness for the language itself. For this reason alone any system of 'reinforcement' or reward does the learner a disservice, because it leads her aspirations in the wrong direction, deceives her as to what her true requirements are. Morality and the practical coincide. They both point to allowing a person to do what she is inclined to do.

These objections also apply in any computer assisted program. See §65.

2. The two commercial enterprises of, on one hand, institutions that offer long or intensive language courses given by a staff of 'qualified' teachers, and, on the other, the sellers of three-week wonder cassette courses, appear to contradict one another. The claims of each implicitly deny the validity of the claims of the other. We must be being fooled by at least one of them. (See §§245-249.)

'So I have always tried not to spend too much time on my first book of instruction on a language. Instead, after going through the book once fairly quickly, I usually went through it again, and even after that I often went back to it, that is, whenever I needed to. Meanwhile I wanted to get on with things! I wanted to *use* my new language as soon as possible in a real way, learn it effectively from real examples of it. So I never read simplified texts. Instead I went almost immediately to the genuine article.

'What this 'genuine article' was depended on my practical circumstances at the time. For Spanish and French I went to history texts (and in the case of French, to Casanova's memoirs!). As an English-speaker I found much of the vocabulary of these Latin languages easy (see §§218-225 and 90-91), particularly in subjects like history. (History had the added advantage that it was a subject that interested me; that is psychologically important.)

'German vocabulary is a bit more difficult for English-speakers, particularly the verbs. I read one work of literature with parallel texts in German and English. Then, as it was the period just before and after the end of the second world war, I used to go to talk to German prisoners who at that time could often be found standing in little groups at the side of the road in the evening, waiting to be taken back to camp after their day working in the fields.

'I remember one slightly comic occasion when I was talking to three Germans in their prisoners' uniforms in the little market town near where we lived and a fellow Englishman came up to us and asked me where a certain building was. I was so taken up with the excitement of talking German with real Germans that without thinking I answered with 'Im Marktplatz' ('In the market place'). It was only when he quickly made off with a look of utter bewilderment on his face that I realized what I'd said. I think my German companions thought I was a bit barmy too.

'I learned Swedish in my early twenties; Italian not until my late fifties and early sixties. But with both languages I had the enormous advantage of living in the country concerned. In both countries, but particularly in Sweden, I greedily used all the opportunities offered me. I unceasingly examined the road and shop signs. In shops and restaurants I listened intently to fellow customers. On buses or trams or trains I strained to catch every word of the passengers near me, and studied the sound of every word. When I got home I practised the announcements of the tram driver. I listened to all sorts of programs on the radio. I listened to shop-assistants and waitresses, and tried to prevent them noticing I was a foreigner. And, perhaps most important of all, I read newspapers. (See §131.)

'I have not become as proficient in Italian as I did in Swedish. This is partly because I have not read as much, and partly because I was not so much involved in Italian everyday life and so have not heard as much. And forty years on I may not have had so much energy.

'When one knows one of the three main Scandinavian languages it is very easy to learn to read the other two. A few years after learning Swedish I had occasion to read material of very varied kinds in both Danish and Norwegian, and I have done translation work with all three.

'As I have already said, my intention here is not to show how talented I am. Quite the contrary. For a start, there are many, many people who are far more accomplished linguists than I am. Beside EVG's achievements with languages my own are ridiculous. But I managed to learn quite a lot of foreign language quite quickly, and get a genuine feel for it at the same time. I have described my own experience with languages at some length because I want to show what can be achieved with enthusiasm and curiosity. I want to emphasize, too, that learning and using a language have always been enough fun in themselves, so I have had no need of any sort of 'entertainment' on the way. I have never had any need for amusing textbooks or amusing lessons or amusing exercises.

'I have already mentioned how when I was at school I was not considered by anybody, including myself, to have any particular talent for languages. But then I suddenly became fascinated by the Spanish civil war, and then all things Spanish, and 'taught' myself Spanish. I forgot to think in terms of abilities, of whether I had them or not. It didn't occur to me to ask myself whether perhaps I couldn't. I had an ambition and just went ahead and did it. At that stage I still had a lot to learn about learning languages, and I made many mistakes. But the important thing was the eagerness that carried me through. I wanted to do it, and I wanted to do it well.

'Both my own personal experience with languages, and my experience of observing many other people who wanted to learn English as a foreign language have convinced me that the most important thing is the attitude one brings to the work. If they are genuinely interested, most people can do it. Believe you can do it; and when you have done it, enjoy the new self-confidence that you will have found.'

Enthusiasm ist das schönste Wort der Erde
Enthusiasm is the world's most beautiful word

§54 Deciding whether to take lessons

So if you want to learn a language, should you have a teacher or attend a course? To make the right decision you must understand exactly what they can give you.

If a teacher or an institution tells you - or implies - that they will train you up to a certain standard in a certain time, do not believe them, because they do not know, and they do not know because nearly everything depends on you. No remotely responsible institution or teacher will make promises of this sort. They know that students of languages vary tremendously in what they are able to achieve. Most teachers, perhaps, think that this variation is due to differing basic abilities, but as we have tried to convince you, this is probably not true in most cases: some students do better than others usually because they have a better attitude to language learning or a better understanding of how to learn, or both together.

Nor should you believe that if you go to a private teacher or take a course, you will necessarily pass whatever examination you want to take, or at least be much more likely to do so. Unfortunately it does not follow. It is worth noting, as an example, the figures for the two main Cambridge (England) Certificate exams in English as a foreign language. Of overseas candidates (who make up four fifths or more of all candidates) on

average less than 65% of First Certificate candidates and less than 45% of Proficiency candidates are successful. The vast majority have attended courses, and most of the remainder have probably had private teachers. You could of course argue that the percentages would be even lower if the students concerned had not had lessons, in class or privately. All AG's experience suggests, however, that lessons make a difference to whether they succeed or fail to only a tiny proportion of students, and even then mainly only if they are coached efficiently in exam preparation and exam technique. (See Part III, §§259-296.)

In the economic system under which we live it is unfortunately natural that most institutions and private teachers give prospective customers the impression that they are going to help them greatly to pass their exams, maybe even that such help is essential. Yet teachers who are honest with themselves know that *at the beginning* of (let us say) a ten-week course one can tell from the grading tests within a very small margin who are going to fail at the end; and that nothing the institution concerned does is going to alter those individuals' fate. Equally, realistic teachers know that practically all those they know are going to pass at the end of the course could pass already at the beginning, assuming they have a fairly good understanding of what they will be asked in the exam. Naturally a lot of students who take much longer courses, and who would have failed their exams at the beginning of the course, will pass at the end. But that is not necessarily anything to do with the course. They might have improved by the necessary amount without it.

§55 Find out about the lessons before signing up

So before you commit yourself to either a private teacher or to a course at any language-teaching institution, and spend a lot of your time and money, there are several important questions to ask. The first and most basic is one we have suggested before: is the teacher or course going to give you anything you cannot get on your own?

Let us look at the most important things that you might not be able to do for yourself and that you must find out about before you start paying for any lessons. Do the teachers (or teacher) spend a large part of the lessons - it should be at least a third overall - discussing and showing how to learn for oneself? (AG has for nearly three decades always told his students that his most important task was to make himself unnecessary.) Do they spend as much time as is needed to answer fully every one of the individual questions that individual students want to put to them? Have they enough time to go through all the students' mistakes with them individually, to appraise their progress individually? If they are mainly going to talk about things that you can read in books, or play 'games' in class, or make you carry out various tasks that are supposed to be 'stimulating', you should probably not bother about either courses or private lessons. You have to ask yourself at the end of every lesson: Have I learned more in this lesson than I could have learned in the same time by myself, or learned anything that it would have been impossible for me to learn by myself?

§56 Lessons to help you pass exams

If you want to pass an exam, there are further essential things you must find out about first. You must question the teacher or institution very carefully. This can be very embarrassing to do for some people. If it is embarrassing for you, you should try to be brave and not be overawed or let your mouth be shut and your convictions shaken by anything anybody says. They may tell you that they are the experts and know what they are doing. If they do that, you must still press them, and ask them exactly what they *are* doing about exams, and what their philosophy about them is.

Some institutions and teachers take the attitude that they have a higher duty: they should concentrate on the pure teaching of the language, cultivate an appreciation of its literature and culture, promote excellence and true learning, above the sordid distractions of those troublesome examinations. One has to remind those with this attitude that the whole course of a person's life may be determined by teachers who have that person in their classes. Many students, unlike their teachers, have no choice but to descend to those distractions, sordid or not.

So if you have an exam to pass that is important and they say 'yes', they will prepare you for it, before you let them accept you as a student - and your fee - you should get a promise from them that the whole of every lesson, as well as all of any homework you are given, should be devoted to practising for that exam. (If you have the time, the money, and the inclination, you can devote yourself to the 'finer' things after you have passed the exam.) That in effect means that the teachers get you to practise previous exam papers and constantly discuss them with you. If the teacher does not do this, you have every right to complain, and get your money back if they do not meet your demands.

Be very careful about how you interpret any statistics an institution publishes about its exam pass rates. An institution might truthfully claim a pass rate of 90%, or even 100%. This will almost certainly mean that it is very carefully selecting its candidates. It is only allowing to take the exam those it has tested in advance and who it is almost certain are going to pass. It is very difficult to find out from outside to what extent an institution selects its candidates, and so exam pass figures by themselves mean almost nothing.

§57 Intensive courses. Are they worthwhile?

Any course which consists of less than 15 hours a week with the teachers should scarcely be called 'intensive'. You should do at least twice as many hours of study on your own as there are course hours, or even four times as many. Thus, if a 'course' consists of 25 hours a week, you should be prepared to do altogether a minimum of 75 hours' work a week on the language. Consider this carefully before you decide to spend your money and time on an intensive course.

Intensive courses are now more popular than ever. The participants, however, are often not at all satisfied with the results. This probably applies particularly to those who travel abroad, partly because they are more inclined to believe in miracles. They think

that after a couple of weeks they will be talking like natives, although before their journey they could not speak a word of the language. Sometimes what they knew of the language in advance has shown itself to be so inadequate that they cannot keep up with the course - and thus the many hundreds of dollars' worth of money they have spent on their language trip has largely been wasted.

One of the reasons for the excessive faith in intensive courses are the sensational reports which from time to time appear in newspapers and magazines. They often start with the reporter trying an intensive course in Spanish (a language that is easy at the beginning, unlike French). After one lesson he 'knows' fifty words and a few simple phrases, and from this draws the conclusion that he would be able to talk fluent Spanish after a week of intensive teaching...

However, it is one thing to learn something that one forgets after a few days, and quite another thing to learn language that one remembers permanently. One has learnt properly only what one has fixed permanently in one's memory. An intensive course is of dubious value if the knowledge and skills are so superficial that students forget them as quickly as they have learnt them. Many fairy tales have been told about the rapid learning of languages by those attending intensive courses. The truth is that from knowing nothing at all one can scarcely learn to speak a fairly easy language adequately in less than two to three months, and a difficult one will take eight to ten months. When beginners are claimed to have learnt to speak English in a month it is safe to assume that in reality they had considerable knowledge of the language beforehand. Where languages that are difficult at the beginning are concerned, it is quite out of the question to be able to go from 'zero' to speaking the language adequately in only a couple of months.¹ (See also §§245-249.)

§58 Choosing and preparing for an intensive course; follow-up

Before you apply to join a course it is a good idea to first find out whether the organizers of the course you have in mind have course leaders and teachers with considerable experience of work outside the education system. Practical knowledge of the 'real world' (in the export business, for instance) should have given them a good understanding of the aspects of a language it is most important to teach in order to produce the promised results.

Beginners in particular need teachers who can speak their own language. Beware of the so-called 'direct method'. ('Only in the foreign language, never in your own language.') It is only at advanced levels that there is anything to be gained from exclusively using the direct method.

It is usually advisable to do some sort of preparation before you set off on an intensive course and it is nearly always necessary to do some follow-up studies. Otherwise there is a danger that you will not get much out of the course.

Unfortunately some course organizers give advice such as 'Do some revision with your school grammar', 'Go through the textbooks you have', and so on. Preparatory programs in the true sense of the term are rare. Unless it is a matter of a complete beginner's course, the organizers ought to at least provide word and phrase lists and

The advertisements wax lyrical about the enormous advantages for young people of going on language courses abroad. But one cannot help wondering why it should be necessary to travel abroad in order to have *lessons* for a very large part of the time - just as at school or on courses at home. Perhaps it does to some extent stop the journey being nothing but a holiday trip with chums from their own country. But they are more than likely to meet compatriots on the same course and so risk that fatal 'interference' we have discussed above. We hope at least that these language course trips are sometimes somewhat more useful than suggested by a specialist in the field in a newspaper interview two years ago: 'It is usually fun and with any luck they will learn to speak the language a little more freely.'

According to an official report in 1989, only about 200 of the approximately 700 language schools in Britain could be regarded as satisfactory, and it was considered safe to say that most of the foreigners who attended courses in that country were disappointed to a greater or lesser degree. But the language-teaching industry will no doubt continue to flourish in Britain, and in France, Germany, Spain and other countries as well, no matter how inadequate the instruction given.

But don't be impressed by official status and academic qualifications either. Never assume, because a language school has been approved by some official or professional body, and its teachers have done training courses at important-sounding institutions, that it is going to give you what you need. The only things that will give you that are the teachers' enthusiasm and, above all, their conscientiousness. Having a 'qualified' staff can lull a school's management into self-satisfaction and complacency. It is enough to impress and attract students, and keep the money rolling in. 'Qualifications' can have the same harmful effect on the individual teacher. With his diplomas or degrees safely achieved, he may no longer have that urge to constantly learn more about the language, and dedicate himself to his students, whatever his age and experience, that is essential for a good teacher.

AG comments: 'Over a period of more than thirty years I worked with a large number of different teachers. Some had professional qualifications, some did not. In not a single case were their qualifications relevant to their worth as teachers.'

Non è tutt'oro quel che riluce
All is not gold that glitters

§62 Two other good reasons for taking lessons

Some people, though, may feel they do not have the strength of mind to do the work unless somebody else constantly insists. If so, it could be worth their while to attend lessons even if these do not give them exactly what they need. But they should not feel aggrieved if their lessons do not lead to the long-term results they hoped for.

And there is one excellent reason, other than the desire to learn a foreign language efficiently, for going on a course at some institution, particularly in an institution abroad. If you have the money to spare - and language courses are very expensive these days - as well as the time, then attending a course can be one of the best ways in the world of meeting people and making new friends in pleasant circumstances. AG comments: 'So

long as you know exactly what you are doing, what you are spending your money on, I recommend it sincerely and warmly. Over the decades I have made the acquaintance of thousands of young people who came to study English as a foreign language at the institutions in England where I worked. I am pretty sure I'm right in thinking that many of them look back on that period as the happiest time in their lives. And knowing them made me realize that most people are nice if they feel free, are left alone, and don't continually have things expected of them.'

But if you want to get as much as possible out of attending a course at an institution abroad, we would very strongly urge you not to go in a group of your compatriots. Go as an independent individual. In this way there will be more incentive for you to work on the foreign language; and you are far more likely to make interesting friends from different parts of the world.

§63 Working and learning as an *au pair*

If you will not miss the excitement and companionship that can come from attending an institution, there is little doubt that one of the very best ways of improving one's mastery of a foreign language is to live and work with a foreign family for a while as an *au pair*. You can hear the language constantly, often in its most basic forms (particularly if there are children in the family), and in completely natural and 'real life' contexts.

There is also the enormous advantage that working as an *au pair* is much cheaper than going on a course in the country concerned. In fact, you should be paid at least 'pocket money'. It is true that traditionally *au pairs* are young women; but it is hard to see why older women, and men too, should not be *au pairs*, so long as they are not too set in their ways.

Good host families are invaluable. But would-be *au pairs* must be careful. You can end up with unpleasant hosts who are simply concerned to exploit you. Several countries have regulations on the conditions and treatment of *au pairs*. Find out about these before you go, and try to make sure that your host family observes them all at the very least - you should really be treated even better than the regulations require.

The hours you spend working for the family should be strictly limited. You should be paid a minimum amount. You should not be asked to do any heavy work - though of course you can volunteer to do it if you feel so inclined. You should be able to have all your meals together with the family, and indeed they must treat you as a complete equal, and share their everyday life with you, or at any rate be prepared to do so if that is what you want. They must be prepared to answer, so far as they are able, all the questions about their language that you ask them.

If you are lucky you will form a lasting friendship as well as learning a great deal about the language.

§64 Language laboratories

Language laboratories probably became popular in language teaching circles mainly because they were a product of our technologically wonderful age and because many

people think it is fun to learn things with machines. In reality the value of a language laboratory depends almost entirely on the value of the programs used in it. The same applies to a book.

Apart from providing examples of pronunciation, language laboratories cannot do anything that books cannot do. Books can do the same things more flexibly, more efficiently, more quickly, and more conveniently.

As for pronunciation, it is explained how we think you should go about learning that in chapter 6 (§§67-88). Even here language laboratories do not in practice have any advantage. You can do everything useful a language laboratory can do to help you learn pronunciation, and much more, with a simple radio-cassette recorder.

So we urge you very seriously not to spend time and money on going to language laboratories of the traditional type. The use of computers to help you learn foreign languages is quite another matter.

§65 Computer assisted language learning

What is now usually called 'computer assisted language learning' attracts by its very name, because it appears to recognize the basic truth urged at the beginning of chapter 4: one is never *taught* a language - one can only *learn* it. Perhaps the description was chosen merely because it made possible a neat acronym (CALL). If that is the case, let us hope it proves a chance that leads to happy results.

A language learner who needs outside help really needs that individual attention we have already discussed - a source that can supply the specific information that will solve the problems the learner has discovered for herself. Computers would seem to be ideal for this purpose, if the right program can be devised. A competent human explainer could perform this task equally well. A really good human explainer will probably always be able to do it better than the most sophisticated computer program imaginable. But even where there is no problem of expense, it is likely that there will sometimes be situations and times when there are not enough competent human explainers to go round.

It is probably true that nothing can be as stimulating, inspiring even, as a live teacher, nothing as effective as a live teacher for creating that enthusiasm for learning a language that we say is necessary to do it well. There are many language teachers who are inspiring in this way, and they can often be inspiring at the same time as having utterly misguided ideas about teaching - or rather, learning - languages. This matters little, or not at all, if they perform the basic task of stimulating students to start doing the work for themselves. If they are warm people with obvious passion or intellectual vitality, they will transmit the essential excitement and the seed will be sown, whatever their formal ideas on the subject may be.

But reliance on inspiring teachers is probably not practical in the real world. If we continue to rely solely on teachers to give students a knowledge of languages, there will probably continue to be many teachers who are not inspiring, even with the best will in the world. And even the charismatic teachers will not inspire every student; some of the most charismatic, by a combination of their very energy with their particular personalities, provoke resentment in some individuals.

The entire enterprise of teaching languages through human teachers is rather a hit and miss affair. It is surely clear to the unprejudiced that at the moment at least it does not always work very well. We have already suggested that language teachers, as they are at present, should disappear. There will be no real advance in language learning amongst people in general until a completely new climate is created. It will be a climate where it is taken for granted that the language student is genuinely interested in the language in the first place. She needs only an aid that does two things for her: first, answers efficiently the questions that she herself puts to it, and second, shows her and reminds her of problems - or rather, keeps her up to the mark in discovering and recalling problems for herself.

We hope that computer systems will soon be able to give this sort of double aid. We discuss the possibilities in detail in §176 and §208.

So computers can probably make a wonderful contribution to foreign-language learning. But it is essential that we decide beforehand on the basis of realism and rationality - and morality - what the uses are that we ought to put computers to. We should never allow what computing technology *can* do, now or in the future, to determine what we actually do with it.

There is perhaps a tendency for researchers in the field of computer assisted language learning not only to develop techniques for applying presently accepted principles of language teaching, which alone is regrettable, since there is no evidence to suggest that those principles are particularly effective. But they seem to go even further, and explore methods of teaching and of testing on the basis of what is made *possible* by computer systems, instead of first deciding what is rational and psychologically realistic without any reference to computing. Naturally it is neither necessary nor practical to make up our minds about the entire scope of language learning before sitting down before the computer (although it should not be assumed even that teaching, as opposed to learning, is necessarily part of the problems to be examined). But it would be a terrible mistake to judge the value of any methods of teaching or learning by how successfully they can be applied by computer systems. Information technology must be kept in its proper place as the servant, not the director, of human beings' search for more practical and effective ways of doing things.²

The problem of using computers in the right way for helping language learners is made even more difficult by the fact that it is very hard to judge whether a language learning program is a good one or not. In principle it should be easy. Only the student herself can judge properly. She has only to ask herself: Can I now read or listen to the things I want to read or listen to and understand them easily? Can I say or write the things I want to say or write?

In practice, though, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to judge the effectiveness of any program objectively and accurately. The result depends so much on the approach of the individual student, both to language learning in general and to the particular program. This is a further reason for stressing the importance of the student's own curiosity and enterprise. It may be an awkward truth, but it is one we must accept: a computer language learning program may be excellent but may often fail either because students do not know

how to use it properly (because in turn they do not understand enough about how languages work and how one should learn them) or, just as likely, because they do not truly have the urge to use it properly; and a program may be a bad one but appear to succeed in many cases because its users bring an overwhelming enthusiasm to it.

We believe it is very important for all students of languages to keep a balanced attitude to computers. They should never allow themselves to be seduced by the wonders of our ever developing information technology. However clever its systems seem to become, it will never be able to teach languages to students. Only students themselves can do that.

Nevertheless, we should like to end our comments here on computers and learning foreign languages on an optimistic note. We believe they could play a crucial part in providing that freedom of choice and independence that we have urged before, and indeed encourage the self-reliance that is the essential condition for good language learning.

§66 All the things you can do on your own

Here is a summary of the activities you should be able to perform by yourself without the need for any instruction from teachers.

1. First of all, you should not need any help with reading your beginner's book if it is a reasonably good one, though there may well be points in it that are not clear and that you would want to ask someone about.

2. You can study and learn vocabulary and grammar in the ways suggested in chapters 7-10 (§§89-166).

3. You can read. There are two kinds of reading you can do. 'Quantity' reading is explained in §§117-131, and 'intensive' reading in §§167-177.

4. You can read and constantly refer back to your grammar book. See §§151-153 and 167-177 again. You can also make your own grammar charts. See §165.

5. You can do exercises. See §§155-159 and Appendix 10.

6. You can listen to the radio, television, tapes, or 'live' people in order to learn pronunciation (§§67-88), practise understanding (§§183-186), observe vocabulary and grammar (§§13, 28-30, 32-33, 117-131, 178-186).

7. You can read aloud to practise your pronunciation (§§81 and 86).

8. You can write letters or 'compositions' (§§189-192, and the chapter on Mistakes, §§193-208).

9. You can collect questions you want to ask about the language, so that when you get the opportunity you can consult advisers who you think could help you. See §§45, and 49-51. §§167-174 will also help you to understand what sort of questions you should collect and ask.

Notes

1. AG is rather sceptical about intensive courses altogether: 'I think that as usual the crucial factor is the effort made by the learner. In my view a really effective intensive course would be one in which no more than a fifth of the hours of study would be with a teacher - or teachers - and

*image
not
available*

mispronounce 'tè' (open=tea) as 'te' (close=you). But AG remembers how once, 'when I was beginning to learn Italian, I said 'zero' to an Italian friend with an unvoiced 'z' and a close 'e', while it should be pronounced with voiced 'z' and open 'e'. This friend was usually very quick on the uptake, but on this occasion it was some time before he grasped what I was talking about.'

There are other sorts of differences in sound that are important. Some languages, such as Italian and Swedish, make a distinction between short and long consonants that can change meanings (e.g. Italian 'copia' - copy - and 'coppia' - married couple - or Swedish 'tiga' - keep silent - and 'tigga' - beg). Some languages, like Burmese, Chinese and Vietnamese, have differences of 'tone' that many speakers of other languages might consider small; to Burmese-, Chinese- and Vietnamese-speakers they are not small at all, and make crucial changes to meaning. The Chinese word 'ma', for instance, has several meanings which vary according to tone; two of the more common are 'horse' and 'to curse'.

So, in any language, you do not have to have a perfect accent to be understood perfectly well; but you do have to master a minimum of 'near enough' sounds, that is to say, near enough sounds for most, if not all, of the various distinct sounds of the language. If you have achieved that minimum, and have no particular interest in pronunciation, and no particular practical need to improve it, we would strongly urge you to be content and leave your pronunciation alone. Many people think a foreign accent is charming, anyway!

§69 The realities of learning pronunciation

AG says that he personally finds the pronunciation of any language so fascinating that from the very start he aims for perfection. Is a perfect accent in a foreign language possible, and if it is, how many people is it possible for? Well, to begin with we should realize that all normal human beings are *physically* able to make all the sounds that any other human being can make. This is clear from the fact that children of many different races master the pronunciation of English in the United States, and of Portuguese in Brazil, for instance; and practically all children brought up in a 'foreign' country pronounce the language exactly as the local inhabitants do.

On the other hand it is also a fact, sadly, that it is far rarer to find someone who pronounces a foreign language perfectly than a person who can use grammar and vocabulary just like a native speaker. AG says: 'I have to go further than that and report something that at first may seem very discouraging. Among the thousands of students of English as a foreign language that I have observed, I cannot recall a single one whose pronunciation truly improved in any noticeable way.'

'I must make plain exactly what I mean by this statement. Not all the students' pronunciation was bad - far from it - and many improved in the sense of learning and applying more facts about the pronunciation of English - the fact that 'worry', for instance, does not rhyme with 'sorry' but with 'hurry'; or that 'advertise' is stressed on the first, not the last, syllable. Furthermore, the fact that I personally

have never noticed a person improve his pronunciation naturally does not mean that it does not and cannot happen.

'But it is extremely rare for a person to change the essential sound he makes, to develop an accent that seems less foreign than it did before. I am sure all this could be changed. But as things are now, there seems to be a fixed limit beyond which most people never improve their accent, a limit that varies from person to person and that is reached already after the first few weeks of study of any new language.

'I said above that I do not know anybody who has *truly* improved. I used this word deliberately, because unfortunately many innocent teachers think they have managed to improve their students' pronunciation in class, but fail - or are unwilling - to notice that the students fall back into their old ways the moment the classroom door is behind them. What is probably even worse is that the students themselves are likely to believe that their pronunciation classes have made them permanently better at pronouncing the language. It is the old story. The student thinks the teacher has improved his accent, and so relies on the teacher instead of himself, when what he should be doing is constantly thinking about, listening to, and practising sounds for himself outside the classroom.'

§70 Do not study the phonetics, but pay constant attention to the particular sounds of each language

However, the solution is not to study the phonetics of the language, whether through lessons or by yourself. Studying the phonetics is an academic and theoretical approach that simply does not work in practice. Even among people who have made a special study of phonetics, only a few pronounce foreign languages really well, and some are hopeless. Among those who have *not* studied phonetics, a few pronounce foreign languages very well, and some are hopeless. None of the people AG has known personally whose accents were good enough for them to be taken for native speakers had studied phonetics, while he once knew a professor of comparative phonetics at a well-known European university whose pronunciation of English was a caricature of his native accent.

On the other hand it is essential to become aware of the special features and distinctions in the pronunciation of the language you are studying. There are general points, such as that in English a particularly important part is played by stress, or by the unstressed vowel sound as in the last syllable of 'butter' or in the first and last syllables of 'America' (see Appendix 1); or that in Swedish there are different 'accent', or stress, patterns which can affect meaning. Equally, each language has a large number of more detailed - and fascinating - characteristics, like the differences in Italian we have already mentioned between open and close 'e' and 'o', and between 'long' and 'short' consonants; or the fact that 's' in Spanish has a sound quite different from English or French 's'; or that Swedish has three different sounds which to inexperienced English ears all seem to be equivalents of English 'sh'; and so on. You should find out about and constantly be on the look-out for all these special features.

Unfortunately, despite the new aids the twentieth century has given to learning foreign-language pronunciation - the radio and tape recorders above all - its teaching in

schools is still unsatisfactory in many parts of the world. For instance, in Swedish schools (far from the worst in the world) teachers tend to forget to correct the pronunciation of English at the beginning of each school year, and a pupil may continue from class to class making the same mistakes without anybody attending to them. The problem is illustrated by the way Swedish-speakers often pronounce the verb ending '-ed' as /ɪd/ or /it/ where the pronunciation should be /t/. Thus 'helped' sounds like 'hellpit', and so on. Many have not even learned to pronounce 'ch' correctly, but pronounce 'ch' and 'sh' the same: they make no distinction between 'cheap' and 'sheep'.

Furthermore, too little attention is paid to the 'articulation base'. The articulation base is the way native speakers use vocal chords, tongue, lips, etc. when they form the sounds of language and combine them into words. The pronunciation of German and French, for instance, is more energetic and precise than that of many languages. It can even happen that if one speaks a foreign language with the articulation base of one's own language, the native speaker will have the greatest difficulty in understanding what one is saying. In each language, the words lie in a very particular place in the mouth.

But it is a serious mistake to think that you are going to make any appreciable improvement in your pronunciation of a foreign language through a close study of tongue positions or intonation patterns. It doesn't help, and for most people it is unbelievably boring. For a few sounds it is indeed possible to give simple practical instructions that are effective. For instance, people who have difficulty producing the English 'th' sound can do it if one tells them to stick their tongues out between their teeth and blow. On the other hand AG remembers an instruction he once read on how to produce one of those Swedish equivalents of the English 'sh' sound. It told the student to make a groove in his tongue. It is, of course, a ridiculous instruction, which few, if any, people could follow. It is not by attempting such conscious control of our tongues, or by following lines and curves in a book, or by watching our lip positions in a mirror, that we are going to master the pronunciation of foreign languages.

This is not to say that nobody who studies the way the sounds of a language are made is going to improve their pronunciation of it. Some people may well do so. But when they do improve, it is likely for the most part to be because such study makes them pay close attention to sounds, not because they master the sounds by analysing and trying to apply the method of producing them. As with all language learning, the solution to problems of pronunciation is constant curiosity, constant attention to detail.

§71 The international phonetic alphabet

However, very often not enough energy is devoted to teaching students the phonetic alphabet. English, in particular, is very difficult to study effectively without a knowledge of the phonetic script used in textbooks and dictionaries.

The phonetic alphabet is always a great help when the spelling of a language is not an adequate guide to its pronunciation. So it is a good idea to have at hand the international phonetic alphabet (not a 'home-made' or an Anglo-Saxon one) when you study languages such as Irish, Scottish Gaelic, Romanian or Polish. The phonetic script can always help to make one feel more secure and to acquire a more correct accent. (See Appendix 2.)

§72 The problems of pronunciation are mainly psychological; the key is listening

This becomes obvious when we remember how we learned to pronounce our own language. We listened and imitated. Children make the 'right' sounds without any instruction. It is true they usually need a little time at the very beginning to get some of the sounds right, but this is almost certain to be because their 'psychological' ears need to become attuned to the detail of sounds, rather than because they do not at first 'know how to make' the sounds. Human beings have the capacity, mysterious perhaps, to hear many subtly different sounds and then make exactly the same sounds themselves, without thinking consciously at all about the process of making them. The really crucial stage is the listening. After that humans seem to know instinctively how to use their mouths to reproduce - perfectly - what they have listened to. Unfortunately most teachers persist in recommending unsuccessful methods of learning pronunciation. They worry about the wrong problem. It is not *producing* the right sounds that is the main difficulty. The difficulty is in the listening part, and the problem is a psychological one.

The problem that faces all students of a foreign language is that they have a language already. This gets in the way of mastering all parts of another language - grammar, vocabulary, and, perhaps more obstinately than either of those two, pronunciation. A child learning her own language cannot turn what she hears into something else, because she hasn't got anything else. So there is nothing to distract her when she hears new parts of 'her' language. She may sometimes make mistakes at the beginning, but it cannot be because she is twisting what she hears into something familiar.

It is interesting to see what adults may do when they have nothing familiar to turn to or distract them. AG reports how 'Many years ago, in the days when the institution I worked at still arranged pronunciation classes for its students, I had a group of Spanish- and French-speakers whose English pronunciation was appalling. I reminded them that English spelling was often bizarre, something they enthusiastically agreed about. I then presented to them a word I was fairly certain they had not heard or read before. 'Dingy,' I said, 'is particularly odd. It is spelt like this.' And on the blackboard I wrote ZHUGHDEMB, at the same time repeating the word 'dingy' several times, fitting its two syllables to the two syllables of the 'word' on the board.

I then invited the students to say 'dingy' themselves. They did extremely well. One French girl, whose pronunciation was normally particularly French, got everything exactly right, from the individual sounds to the intonation. I finally confessed the truth and wrote DINGY on the board. The French girl threw up her hands in delight at recognizing, not the word, which she had never seen, but the letters. "Ah!" she cried. "D a i n g e e e !"

The moral of this story is that if they really listen, and act only on what they hear, most people can pronounce sounds correctly. In practice they tend instead to reject what they actually hear and hasten to turn it into the first familiar sounds that it reminds them of. Those familiar sounds are of course those of their own language. This is the true significance of the fact which everybody knows: that is, that the members of each community in the world have their own typical accent when they speak foreign languages. This fact does not mean that it is physically difficult for people to pronounce

foreign languages. It means that they are lazy, distracted, or inhibited, or suffer from a combination of those conditions.

§73 The temptation to pronounce what you see, not what you hear

The French girl in AG's little experiment also showed how students of foreign languages who can read (which today means nearly all of them) have a double temptation. When they speak a foreign language they tend to *see* the words in their minds. (This is natural enough, because it is mainly in its written form that they will have first come into contact with the language, and from the written form that they will have learned most of their vocabulary.) So it is not only sounds that they want to distort into other, familiar sounds. The written form of the words tempts them to pronounce, not what they *in fact* hear, but what they think they *ought* to have heard (according to their own language) on the basis of the letters they see, or have seen in the past.

But the corrupting effect of the written forms often extends a stage further. When students hear a new word they are liable to instantly imagine it in its written form. Immediately they do this they risk cutting it off in their minds from the sound they actually heard, and again give it the sound they think it 'ought' to have.²

By insisting on such a preposterous spelling for 'dingy' AG was able to detach the students' minds from the letters, because there was no remotely recognizable link between the letters and what they heard. They were thus left with nothing to go on except the sounds themselves. They had never heard - or seen - that particular combination before and so had no prejudices about how it ought to sound - and so they got it right. One can often get the same effect if one 'invents' sounds that one's audience (whether of mixed or a single nationality) thinks are just noises which do not belong to any language. Nearly everybody can imitate them, however 'peculiar'.

Most people are not very aware of exactly how they use language, and so there may be doubts about whether people really 'see' words in their minds when they speak them. But that word 'worry', already mentioned, illustrates how in fact that must be what millions of people do, at any rate when they speak foreign languages. The significant thing about 'worry' is that no other language has a word with a similar meaning which looks or sounds similar; therefore any mistake in pronunciation cannot be due to confusion with a word in their own language. Thus if people pronounce it to rhyme with 'sorry' instead of 'hurry', it can only be because they do see it in their minds. They cannot get the mispronunciation from anywhere else, since they do not *hear* it pronounced like 'sorry' - unless, perhaps, they've been listening to Irishmen!

Now, most students of English do in fact mispronounce 'worry' as if it rhymed with 'sorry', which shows how easily prejudices can prevent people listening properly. If students of English were really thinking in sound and not in letters they would pronounce 'worry' correctly, but often spell it 'wurry' or 'wury' or even 'wary'. In fact, they practically never do; AG cannot recollect a single instance in the nearly fifty years since he started correcting students' written English.

Japanese-speakers and others to distinguish between 'l' and 'r'. Most speakers of these languages simply cannot *hear* the difference, and if they cannot hear the difference it will be impossible or near-impossible to pronounce the difference.

AG recalls: 'Many years ago I used to feel secretly rather superior about this matter. My own pronunciation of foreign languages was very good. So, I told myself, I would always be able to distinguish between sounds in any language. I should not have boasted to myself. One day I asked a Thai student of mine to tell me about the Thai alphabet. 'What is the first letter?' I asked. 'g o,' he said. That seemed fine. 'What is the second?' I asked. 'k o,' he said. That seemed fine too. 'What's the third letter?' 'k o,' he said. 'No, no,' I said, 'not the second, the third.' 'I'm telling you the third,' he said. The difference apparently lies in the consonant sound. He repeated the pair of the second and third letters for me about fifty times. I still couldn't for the life of me hear any difference at all. It taught me not to be quite so pleased with myself.'

There are other failures to observe sounds properly for which there is perhaps rather less excuse than in the cases above. There are for instance cases where the listeners could in fact notice sounds if they were simply more alert and paid more attention. For instance, English does not have long consonants in the middle of words, but it does between words, as in pairs such as 'black cat', 'bad day' and 'home-made'. Yet many Italian- and Japanese-speakers fail to notice this, despite the fact that their own languages have long consonants. They tend to give the full separate value to each of the two parts of English long consonants, often producing what to English-speakers' ears is a rather comic effect. The reason for this is almost certainly that very few Japanese or Italian words end in consonants and so Japanese- and Italian-speakers do not expect long consonants between words. Speakers of (for example) Swedish, which does have long consonants both between and within words, do not make this mistake.

§79 Being careless or lazy

There are other difficulties, not so fundamental, but more immediate and practical. One is that, although one may have listened well to a sound and can pronounce it perfectly well, at certain points in a foreign word or combination of words one simply forgets to pronounce the sound as it should be pronounced at that particular point. This is especially liable to happen either when a word is similar to a word in one's own language, or where the sounds (or, simply, the letters, those treacherous things!) that come before or after prompt one towards a certain sound in one's own language.

Let us look at an example from a native English-speaker's point of view. The Italian word for 'circus' is 'circo', so that's the first thing that tempts the English-speaker to pronounce the first vowel sound in 'circo' as in 'circus'. Then the situation is made even worse by the fact that there is an 'r' after the 'i', so if you are not careful you will let that confirm that it should indeed be pronounced like 'circus'. So if you are not concentrating, you may pronounce what should be /tʃɪrko/ as /tʃə:ɪrko/, or perhaps, even worse, with a word like 'cheer' in mind, as /tʃjə:ɪrko/ - or, still worse, without the /r/ as /tʃjə:ko/. Your Italian listeners are very puzzled. What on earth is this 'ciaco' ('cherco' to you) you want to go to? And yet all despite the fact that very probably you are perfectly capable of

pronouncing 'circo' correctly. You must be very careful, particularly when you are just starting to learn a new language, not to fall into traps like this. It is a *very* common mistake, which becomes a seemingly unbreakable habit in many people, yet a completely unnecessary one.

§80 A physical difficulty

There is another difficulty, though, for which there is much more excuse. It is, for once, a physical difficulty. As we get older it seems that our mouths get used to producing certain sounds in a certain order, and become less flexible than they were when we were children. The difficulty is then, not that of producing the right *individual* foreign sounds, or the right intonation, but of combining the right sounds quickly one after the other in a natural way. This may indeed need practice. The difficulty of moving the tongue quickly from one unfamiliar position to another, in an unfamiliar order, leads to the temptation to return to the familiar positions of one's own language. This is, indeed, not just a question of tongue position, but of the whole 'set' of the face and muscles.

Let us take another example from the English-speaker's pronunciation of Italian. In the infinitive of the reflexive verb 'convertirsi' ('convert oneself' = be converted) the quick sequence of Italian 'i', 'r' and 's' at the end does not come naturally to most English-speakers, and so there may be a tendency, even among those who generally pronounce Italian well, to convert the 'i' or the 'r', or both, into something English-sounding. And so we are back to the same sort of problem as we had with 'circo'.

However, this is not really a great problem most of the time, unless you are aiming at a perfect accent, and even then one can often solve the problem simply by always speaking slowly. Not even all Italians speak at the rate of knots.

§81 Finding out, listening and imitating - and being eager

AG reports: 'When I have learned foreign languages I have always concentrated on the pronunciation before anything else. I listened to the language on the wireless to get the genuine 'feel' of it, and imitated phrases and short sentences I managed to catch, and took immense pleasure in echoing them exactly as the speaker had said them. I also constantly read short passages aloud, again trying to produce the real native sound. I have already described how I carefully studied sounds in various situations in Sweden and Italy.

'We mentioned above the three sounds in Swedish which all sound like 'sh' to an inexperienced English-speaker. They provide a good example of some of the principles and methods I think are useful for learning foreign pronunciation. (Studying them was also an important stage in developing my personal understanding of pronunciation.)

'One can find the three distinct sounds in a phrase like '1sju hekto 2köttfä3rs' (seven hektograms of minced meat). The first thing, of course, is to become aware that there *is* a difference between the three sounds. So you must make sure the book you are using tells you such things.

'I was a bit discouraged when I first learned about the three sounds. I was able to

hear that (1) was different from the other two and different from the English 'sh' sound. But I couldn't hear that (2) and (3) were different from each other or from the English sound. I read the instruction to make a groove in my tongue that I mentioned before, and it was at that point that I began to realize that trying to follow directions about tongue and lip movements was not an effective way of learning pronunciation.'

علاقه به یادگیری کند زبان است

He who wants to learn will learn

§82 Be determined that you can and will get it right

'I hope my experience at this stage will encourage others who are keen to improve their accent in a foreign language. But I must stress once again how probably the most important factor is one's determination to get it absolutely right. Next, as I have said, I had the enormous advantage of living at the time in the country concerned.

'I was really annoyed that I couldn't hear the difference between (2) and (3) and the English sound, so I spent several weeks making a special effort listening intently to them at every opportunity; sometimes I asked people to say the different sounds to me. The first encouraging thing was that although my mind had clearly become closed to the distinctions, this turned out, at least in this case, not to be an incurable condition! (I was only 22 at the time. Whether I could summon up the same flexibility of mind now, at 69, I do not know.) Although I cannot now remember, I suspect that my awareness of the distinct sounds came very suddenly, my ears opening from one moment to the next, as it were. This is what has happened in several cases since.

'After that it was easy. For a few weeks I practised the three sounds busily. But I did not think consciously about what I was doing with my mouth, let alone stand in front of a mirror. I simply imitated. By this stage I suspect that my practising was largely unnecessary, and more than anything a way of enjoying and confirming my success. I had already done the essential work of 'hunting' the sounds.'

§83 Intonation

Without correct intonation (the 'melody' of the voice as one speaks) one can never 'speak like a native'. In fact, for an accent good enough to allow you to pass as a native speaker, perfect intonation (including the basic stress pattern) comes before perfect mastery of all the sounds. A completely native intonation will usually cover up slight flaws here and there in the pronunciation of individual sounds. Most of us know people of our own language community who have their own personal, unconventional way of pronouncing certain sounds. There are many people who lisp, or pronounce 'r' in an unusual way, for instance, but their fellow citizens still instantly recognize them as native speakers.

Faulty intonation can sound ridiculous, and can occasionally irritate people. But defects in intonation seldom give rise to misunderstandings. So for purely practical

purposes it is more important to make sure you have achieved a comprehensible pronunciation of sounds and words.

It is even more absurd to study intonation patterns in a book or under the instruction of a teacher than it is to make a 'scientific' study of tongue positions in order to master individual sounds. Indeed, any sort of study is the wrong way to go about capturing the intonation of a foreign language. You will grasp the essence of a language's intonation in literally a matter of seconds, or of a few minutes at the outside, or you will never master it at all. There will almost certainly be some details that you will add later, but they will be added on to the basic 'tunes' of the language you have already grasped.

Although you should not study intonation, you need intense concentration to master it. However, once again you should not strain anxiously. You should concentrate because you find it fascinating to imitate exactly what you hear, because it is exciting to get it just right. If you can feel it is fun, an enjoyable challenge, like playing a game, you will concentrate naturally.

§84 What you need for a good accent

This is perhaps a good point at which to get rid of the idea that one has to be musical to be good at pronouncing foreign languages. There is little or no connection. Lots of unmusical people speak foreign languages with a superb accent, while there are famous opera singers whose pronunciation of foreign languages is abominable - sometimes so bad that they are incomprehensible. (This does of course not mean that no musical people pronounce foreign languages well; many do.)

But to be good at pronunciation you have to take it seriously. There are probably at least two reasons why, more often than not, people are better at other aspects of a foreign language than they are at its pronunciation. One is that they are discouraged. Because there are so few people who speak foreign languages with a perfect accent, most people believe it is virtually impossible to achieve one; you have to have a special freakish talent to do so. The other reason is simply that most people in practice - whatever they may say - do not regard pronunciation as very important. In one way they are absolutely right to have this attitude. If your pronunciation is good enough for you to be generally understood there is no immediate practical reason for bothering any more about it. That is all the more true if you have already reached a standard in all the other aspects of the language that satisfies you.

AG says he could himself never restrict his ambition in that way. That, though, is purely a matter of personal temperament and inclination. But a casual attitude to pronunciation can lead to bad results for people who are just beginning a foreign language, particularly if it is their first. Students usually start off, quite rightly, with the pronunciation. If they do not take it seriously enough, don't try to get it as right as possible, there is a risk that they will approach all the other aspects of the language in the same way. So it is important, right from the beginning, starting with pronunciation, to get into the habit of doing things for yourself. So you must work at it!

However, as we have already emphasized, this does not mean boring study. First, clearly, it means finding out exactly what the sounds of the foreign language are, and

whether there are sounds that are peculiar to it. After that it means listening, listening again and again, listening as much as you have time for. Listen out especially for those particular sounds you have learned about, but be careful not to assume automatically that you are getting all the more 'ordinary' ones right. One can get into bad, unbreakable habits with certain sounds if one is not on one's guard. Get the 'feel' of the intonation, and imitate short snatches of it. It doesn't matter if at the beginning you don't understand the words.

§85 What to listen to - radio, television, tapes

At the start it can be very helpful to listen to a tape, if it draws your attention to the right things, and if the language on it is spoken naturally and realistically - try to get the advice of a native speaker on the latter question. The advantage of a tape at this stage is that you can repeat particular sounds as often as you like. But it is not worth spending a lot of money on a tape, unless you have no alternative.

If you can receive broadcasts in the foreign language, by far the best thing to listen to is the radio. Television is next best, but you are likely to be distracted by the picture and not concentrate enough on the sound. After a short while commercial pre-recorded tapes cease to be useful. They cannot give you a true idea of the language. It is pointless to listen to the same passages of language over and over again. Very soon they become dead. On the radio you can hear a natural variety - constantly changing subjects and constantly changing voices. And while listening repeatedly to the same tapes is clearly artificial, at the same time tapes fail to repeat just those things that ought to be repeated. It is only by listening regularly to the constantly new things on the radio that you will learn to recognize the things that really do come back again and again in the language, both as regards sounds and expressions.

(As a very young man AG once spent a night in a youth hostel in Basle. From the other side of the dormitory he heard another young man talking perfect English with a perfect accent. He turned out to be a Dutch medical student. When asked how he had learned such superb English, he said he had just listened secretly to the BBC during the war.)

§86 Listen directly to your own voice, not to tapes of it

Listening to tapes you make of your own voice are not as useful as many people think. If you rely on them to make an appreciable difference to your pronunciation, you will probably be disappointed. It is possible that when you listen to your tape you will pick up a few tangible and specific mistakes that you did not notice when you listened directly to your own voice. But AG's experience is that in general if a person cannot hear himself as he speaks and judge whether he is doing it right or wrong, he will not be able to judge when he listens to a tape of himself either. If he is not listening properly to himself, he is probably not listening properly to native speakers.

Furthermore, listening directly to your own voice is much more practical and convenient. You can repeat what you hear on the radio or television (remember, just a

7

Vocabulary 1. Principles and first steps

§89 What words do you need to know?

Words, or perhaps we should say meanings, are the essence of any language. But what words should you learn, and which should you learn first? The answer is that it depends, as usual, on what you want to use the foreign language for and how good you want to be at it. But everybody, whatever their special interest may be, needs to know roughly the same basic vocabulary. Everybody needs to know the pronouns, the main prepositions, conjunctions and adverbs, question words, basic verbs, basic nouns, and basic adjectives. Even if your only interest in the language is as, say, a biologist, or a cook, or a lawyer, it is essential for you to know those basic words first.

§90 Active and passive vocabulary, and transparent vocabulary

In some ways it is easier to learn to read a foreign language than to speak it. But one needs a far smaller vocabulary in order to speak well enough for practical everyday purposes than one needs for understanding everyday speech. That is because when one speaks one chooses the words one uses, and one obviously tries to make do with what one has, while one has little control over what the native speaker says. The native speaker is liable to use a great many more words than a beginner can understand. To understand something like a newspaper, where one has no control over the words used at all, one needs an even bigger vocabulary.

Your passive vocabulary, then, will have to be bigger than your active vocabulary, but there are two factors that make this quite easy to manage. First of all, when you listen or read, the words are presented to you. You don't have to dig them out of your memory. Secondly, in many languages you will find words whose meaning is 'transparent' to you. (See §§218-229, 231-239.)

As the first foreign language you learn it is probably a good idea to choose one that is fairly transparent, unless you urgently need to know one that is not. But do not choose one that is *too* transparent. If you do, you may get a shock later when you come up against a language that is much less transparent! However, it is probably safe to say that there is no foreign language that is too transparent for English-speakers.

§91 Transparency can be different to different people

A very 'transparent' language is not necessarily one that has a very large proportion of transparent words. Its true 'transparency' will depend on how many transparent words you actually meet in your reading or listening. This means, in turn, that not everybody who speaks the same language will find a particular foreign language equally

transparent, especially after they have got beyond the basic vocabulary stage. For instance, an English-speaker whose contact with French consists exclusively of reading about history or economics, say, will find French far more transparent than an English-speaker whose only reading in French is novels.

Furthermore, an English-speaker learning German who only hears the language in connection with domestic matters might find it more transparent than French, while one who reads history in French and German might find French the more transparent language.

§92 Being selective is half the secret

Choosing the right words to learn is an essential part of the solution to the practical problems of learning a language, particularly for beginners. If they can find out which words are the most important, they can concentrate on those and learn them really properly first, without wasting time and effort on unnecessary words.

The fact that the general, or non-technical, vocabulary of a language consists of, say, 300,000 words is of purely theoretical interest to someone who is just starting to study a new language. We can usually only learn a small part of each foreign language that we take on. For that reason it is very important not to hurl yourself headlong into a new language without being clear from the very beginning about what you should learn. One of the fundamental principles for any beginner ought to be what we can call *word economy*.

It is much better to know 500 or 1,000 words well than 3,000 words only half learnt. Don't let yourself be taken in by assertions that you must know such and such a number of words in order to 'function' - it is you yourself who will decide whether or not you 'function' with a vocabulary of any particular size.

As the table in §250 shows, no more than 400 different words cover about 90% of all the words in your everyday spoken vocabulary. In order to read you need to know more words than those, but only as passive vocabulary, and with a knowledge of 1,500 words you can read a considerable amount reasonably well and get quite a lot out of it. Learn the most important words properly instead of grabbing constantly at new ones. Strain at too much and you may lose the lot!

χάλλιο ένα και στο χέρι παρὰ δέκα και καρτέρει

A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush

§93 The basic vocabulary

In connection with analyses of how many words it is necessary to know, the term 'basic vocabulary' often crops up. Deciding on a particular basic vocabulary is the first step in selecting the words one is going to learn.

As a maximum (or *Maxi*) basic vocabulary, 8,000 words can be regarded as quite sufficient. As appears from the table in §251, that number of words constitutes a 'complete communication system'.

But when it comes to *learning* a language, we can think in terms of far lower figures.

EVG has found it useful to work with vocabularies of 400-500 words and some 150 phrases, or 800-1,000 words and about 300 phrases, or 1,500-2,000 words and still more phrases, for both learning and teaching at different stages and for different purposes.

Around 2,000 words is now such a standard figure in books with a basic vocabulary that are published in Europe that we can call it *the European basic vocabulary*. (See §250 and §251:3.) An example of a 'basic word book' is *Grundwortschatz Deutsch*, with more than 2,000 words in six languages: German, English, French, Italian, Spanish and Russian (published by Ernst Klett, Stuttgart, in 1971).

However, the basic vocabularies are very similar all over the world. Most of the words, or, more correctly, most things and concepts, that are important in one country are also important in another. Non-Indo-European languages too, such as Finnish and Hungarian, are today typically European as regards the make-up of the vocabulary, although the words and sentences in themselves appear very alien to speakers of the Indo-European languages. So there is no reason why one should not use one's mother tongue as the starting point when learning foreign languages.

§94 One has to crawl before one can walk: the 'active minimum'

2,000 words, though, are too many as a basic vocabulary for beginners. About 400 words is a suitable first basic vocabulary. In due course this is replaced by the 'Mini Basic Vocabulary', 800-1,000 words.

EVG writes: 'A basic principle for studying a language effectively is, first, to learn thoroughly an *active minimum*. This applies irrespective of which particular skill one wants to concentrate on, that is to say, not only speaking (understanding the spoken word and making oneself understood in it) but also reading and writing.

'By 'active' here I mean that beginners should learn the equivalents in the foreign language of words and phrases in their own language, and learn them as well as possible, preferably by heart. 'Minimum' means 'first things first', that is, as quickly as possible getting down to learning what is most important in the way of words, phrases and grammar, even when the learning is hard going.

'Children crawl before they walk, and it is the same with learning a language: first we crawl, and then we begin to walk. For the purpose of learning an active minimum I have put together 'mini-material' in Swedish, English and other languages, 'minilex' for words, 'miniphrase' for everyday expressions, and 'minigram' for grammar. The first part of this material is 'crawl-material': about 400-500 words in MINILEX A, approximately 150 phrases in MINIPHRASE A, and the most essential grammar in MINIGRAM. A complete Minisystem, English-Swedish Minilex A, Miniphrase A + B, and Minigram, can be found in Appendices 3, 4 and 5 of this book. (Minisystem A's are in preparation for other languages, as well as MINILEX B, with a further 400-600 words, and MINIPHRASE B, with about 150 more phrases. MIDILEX contains about 2,000 words, including MINILEX A and B.) This material is based on my experience in the learning of many languages and in the teaching of some ten languages, both in Sweden and other countries.¹

'The 'mini' material gives beginners an invaluable overall view: they know what they

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The authors

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ISBN 1-871516-67-6



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