CAN WE AFFORD TO BE RELEVANT?

EARL W STEVICK

When Donald Freeman invited me to contribute a volume to his *TeacherSource* series, he asked me to come up with a book that would contain the most important parts of *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways* (1980), but that would be updated, and in a new format, and about half the length of the original. The result was *Working with Teaching Methods: What's at Stake?* (1998) Since that time, reaction from readers and users of the new book have convinced me that I omitted one short chapter too many. This is it.

Let me begin by saying that I am not here today[1] as an expert in what you are doing. I have never taught a language to anyone under eighteen, and most of my students have been over twenty-one. Furthermore, my recent experience has been with seldom-taught languages like Armenian and Swahili, which are taught under conditions and for reasons which are vastly different from what most of you are accustomed to. What I hope is that a few of the ideas that have developed out of my kind of work will be of some interest in yours.

I am not here, then, because I am an expert, and only partly because I am a linguist. My own principal reason for wanting to talk with you today is that I am a parent. Two of my children have gone through five years apiece of foreign language study in what I believe to be one of the best school systems in the country, and I am gravely concerned lest my third—and thousands like him in all parts of the country—have an experience like theirs. My first two, though their grades were very high, almost dropped their languages after four years; they did drop them after five, and I must say that I can't blame them. The principal shortcoming in their high school instruction, I am convinced, was lack of relevance. That is what I'd like to talk with you about this afternoon.

Here in my hand, I have an ordinary two-pronged electrical plug. If life were an electrical system, this plug would be a language, and the process of assembling this plug would be the subject matter for a language course.

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[1] This is based o n a paper delivered at Fairleigh-Dickinson University in 1971

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This plug, as you see it here, is related to nothing: and it is totally "irrelevant." But suppose now that I have a socket into which I can fit the plug. Now the plug is no longer related to nothing. It is closely and appropriately related to the socket. But it is still just as irrelevant as it was before. Suppose I go on and relate the socket to a wiring system, and the wiring system to a fuse box, a power line, and ultimately to a generator. The plug is still irrelevant, even at the end of this long chain of relatedness. We still need a wire from the plug to a switch, and something for the switch to turn on, and finally we have to have somebody to eat the toast, or read by the light, or listen to the radio. Then and only then does this plug become in any useful sense "relevant." If the chain is broken anywhere, the plug immediately reverts to irrelevance.

In this sense, "relevance" is an all-or-none proposition. In the context of language teaching, if what goes on in class does not make sense in terms of at least one of the student's interests, and that interest make sense in terms of a pattern of wider and longer-term interests—in other words, to what is for him reality—then relevance breaks down after the plug. Just a picture of Buenos Aires or Berlin, or just talking about the day's events, or race relations, or the war, or ecology, or just playing dominoes with each other in French does not guarantee relevance. Any of these may be helpful, but none is sufficient, and none is necessary. And if on the other hand there is a lack of an authentic model to follow, or lack of coherent materials, then the power is not getting even as far as the socket.

Much of what has been said and written about language teaching, particularly in recent years, has concentrated either on getting the power to the socket, or on devising faster, more efficient, cleverer ways of assembling the plug. We're pretty good at that. Sometimes I think we're much better at that than we need to be. But we are much less adept at tying into the total need- and-interest structures of our students.

Can the hard-pressed classroom teacher, who meets over a hundred different students every day, hope to have time and energy enough to fire up a toaster for one, drive a radio for another, and light a reading lamp for yet another? Can we be expected to do more than get the 110 volts up to the socket? Or, in the words of my title today, can we afford to be relevant?

The obvious reply to a question like that is, Relevant to what? In that connection, I'd like to list for you several kinds of relevance which I have observed over the years, but particularly within the past year as I've been traveling around, talking with all kinds of language teachers, and pulling together some of my thoughts for a report to the Office of Education.

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A relevant lesson or activity may of course relate to present reality—to the here and now—what is physically present in this classroom, during this hour. Or it may relate to prospective reality—something that will or may happen in the future. This is valid as long as we remember that the literal meaning of "prospective" is "looking forward," and that the person whose imagination must look forward to these things in the future is the student, and not just the teacher and the textbook writer. In the same way, a relevant lesson may have its immediate relationship to something in the past—last week, last year, or a thousand years ago. This we may call retrospective reality, and again, when we say "spective" we are referring to the mind of the student, not only the teacher or the textbook writer.

This is the chronological dimension of relevance, past, present, and future. Scattered along this dimension we find the student's experiences, we find his use of language as an instrument to do other things, all of these in their external aspect, in terms of his relationships with the outside world, and with other people. All of these, then, involve what we may call extro-spection. This outward-looking kind of relatedness may in the long run be necessary for relevance, but it is not by itself sufficient for relevance. Because running at right angles to the horizontal chronological dimension is the vertical dimension which goes beneath extrospection to introspection—to what the student sees when he looks inside himself. Does he see himself as a success, or as a failure? As apt, or as inept? As a docile internalizer of "phonetics, basic vocabulary, and grammar," who is striving to meet the teacher's expectations and so receive a passing grade? Or as a contributor of necessary insights and valued expectations? Whose activity does he see as primary, the teacher's or his own? Is he, in his own eyes, a mover or a pawn?

Emphasis on the introspective end of this vertical dimension is, to my way of thinking, the most interesting feature of what Dr. Gattegno calls his "Silent Way" of teaching languages. Exploitation of the horizontal dimension is reduced to what must surely be its very narrowest minimum. During the first part of the course, all talking is about a set of cuisenaire rods. As you know, these are small wooden blocks which differ from each other only in length and color. They are little more than concrete abstractions. These are followed by a series of pictures which portray other things, but which again are about as unrelated to the horizontal kind of external, interesting reality as it is possible to get and still depict real objects. But it is this very annihilation of the horizontal dimension, coupled with the almost complete silence of the teacher, that allows and indeed forces both student and teacher to focus their attention on the introspective—on what resources are available from within his mind, and what he is ready to do at any given moment. Having seen this kind of thing in action, I am no longer willing to deny that, in the short run, and with a teacher who can focus his attention on the inside of the student's mind, the vertical dimension may be

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sufficient. In the long run, of course, it is not. In fact, the essence of relevance is that it connects something on the horizontal dimension of external experience with something on the vertical dimension of the student's appreciation of himself. It is the vertical dimension, however, that language teachers talk and write about least.

So we have discovered that the essence of relevance lies in forming a bond between the exterior and the interior. Very pretty. We still come back to our original question: Can we afford to be relevant? And a second obvious retort to this question is, Can we afford not to be relevant? Put that way, it is almost like asking whether we are against motherhood or goodness. How can anybody, these days, say publicly that he believes we can afford not to be relevant? But be that as it may, I'm afraid that even the stoutest certainty that we cannot afford to be irrelevant does not guarantee that we can afford to be relevant.

So let's try again. Maybe the question, instead of Can we afford to be relevant? should be How relevant can we afford to be? This sounds like asking How much individual attention can we give students? To what extent can we dispense with a printed textbook? To what extent do we dare put ourselves into the position of often responding to the initiative of the students, as contrasted with only evaluating their responses to ours? These are fundamental questions, all right, and they do have to do with relevance, but to the hard-working and overworked classroom teacher, they may also be alarming questions. So let's select a question that is a little less formidable. Instead of inquiring about the limits, as in the question How relevant can we afford to be? let's start from where we are and look in the direction we want to go. The question then becomes How can we afford to be more relevant? That is the question that I am going to explore with you today.

Before trying to answer it, though, let me state one hunch that is on its way to becoming a conviction: that a small-scale relevance—relevance now and then, whenever we can make time for it—is going to turn out to be prohibitively expensive. Maybe it's true that we cannot afford to be irrelevant, but we can't afford relevance, either, if we have to pay for it at retail prices. We can afford it, though, if we can get it wholesale, on a regular, habitual, pervasive basis. This for me has required a drastic change in outlook—in some ways a reversal of much of my thinking of ten years ago. What I am suggesting to you today is that such a change is possible, and I would like to tell you what I think it involves.

We have often said that "language is behavior," and so it is. Some of us have gone on from that statement, though, and concluded that what we must therefore do is first of all to describe that behavior and its internal structure, and cause students to produce that behavior, and further that the way to get them to produce that behavior as a whole is to start

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by having them reproduce small samples of its external manifestations: this is where we get close mimicry, dialog memorization, and the like. Others have quarreled with the emphasis on pronunciation and surface structure, but even they have left unchallenged the assumption that description of the language, and particularly of its deep structure, is a matter of top priority.

But let's go back to our original three-word premise and draw a different set of conclusions from it. "Language is behavior." Well and good. But it is behavior that normally accompanies other behavior, and all these kinds of behavior are related to one another like strands in a cable: none will carry much weight by itself. It seems to me that in our everyday, week-in-and- week-out ordinarily irrelevant language teaching—mine at least, and the kind that has been inflicted on my kids in high school—we have placed almost all the weight on the linguistic strand. No wonder it so often sags or even snaps in two!

Language is only one strand in the cable of total behavior, and furthermore, that cable is usually attached at both ends: behavior is normally purposeful. This leads to two conclusions: (1) that the teacher should know what is being done, by teacher and students, in the greatest possible detail, and (2) that the teacher should also know why it is being done, and should see the '"why" on the widest possible scale.

Going on to look at the lesson itself, as it stands in the book, I would like to suggest a simple but useful way of analyzing its content, and a simple but useful way of analyzing its form. Content may be inventoried from a linguistic point of view: what words and what structures does the lesson contain? A second point of view is social: who might use this kind of language in talking with whom? A third point of view is topical: what is being talked about? Having made an inventory from each of these three points of view, the teacher is in a better position to hold the structures constant and supplement the vocabulary, or to hold the language relatively constant but change the social setting, or to make other conscious changes that are demanded if we're to have controlled adaptation.

Even more important, to me, is analysis of the form of the lesson. I have just about concluded that a complete, well-balanced, nourishing lesson must have four components and needs only those four. Let's skip the first for a moment. The second component is the one that is the most conspicuous in many language courses today. It is what I call the sample of language in use: a basic dialog, or a reading selection or something like that. The third component consists of one or more ways of exploring the structure of the language, usually departing from something in the sample of language use. These are drills, exercises, grammar notes, and so forth. And the fourth component consists of one or more ways of exploring

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the lexicon—again usually starting out from the sample of language use. The first component—the one that I think should be first in the mind of the textbook writer and the teacher, and at the same time the res ultima, the destination which the student reaches at least once in every lesson—this component is the one that receives the least attention from most writers whose books I have seen, and from most teachers whose students I have interviewed. This alpha and omega of a good lesson, this source and goal of all the other components, can be stated quite simply in one word: "payoff." What will the student be able to do, as a result of the lesson, that will enhance his appreciation of himself, and/or enable him to make a favorable impression on people whose opinion he values, and/or get information that he really wants, and/or do other things that he genuinely wants or likes to do? And it is particularly the interpersonal and intrapersonal kinds of payoff that so seldom get mentioned among us language teachers. "How can we be more relevant?" If a high school teacher in a fourth year course spends day after day reading aloud to his students, and another, whose command of the language is somewhat better, sees fit to lecture over a period of weeks about details of the architecture of a series of cathedrals, both are obviously dealing with classes of students who could be engaged in all manner of interesting projects, either individually or in groups. Those are easy examples, but drawn from actual classrooms. The point is that neither of them could have happened if the teacher had looked first at the payoffs that could be expected to result, or not to result, from his performance.

Here's another example of what I mean. Lesson 1 of a well-known beginning text in French (La Clef, by Yvette de Petra, Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1970) a text that illustrates more than most do the kind of attitude that I think we ought to be encouraging. The author, in the introduction, speaks to the student about ways to "restore your confidence in yourself and in what you are doing" (vi) and encourages them to use their imagination and their intuition (viii). She enjoins the teacher to "encourage any initiative, provided that French is the medium used" (19). On the very first day of class, when only half of the first dialog has been presented, the teacher is advised not to worry about finishing it, but to " use the rest of this period for reviewing or conversation" [21]. On the fourth day, the teacher's manual observes that " 'free' conversation is a very useful exercise which can be resorted to whenever time permits." (25) On the eighth day, the teacher is instructed to "adapt the questions in the book to fit your specific class.... Try to make this as much of a 'real' conversation as possible, not just a series of questions and answers on a text they had to prepare." (30) Later on in Unit 1, which covers 17 class meetings plus lab, the students do two compositions, one on describing the classroom and the other on describing a picture; they do this first orally and then in writing. The purpose of the composition topics is to "force the students to use the French which they are learning, in relation to their own

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experience...." (15f) Now, what could possibly be closer than that to what I am recommending?

Let's take another look at this book The teacher's manual is a wonder of thoroughness, even to the point of suggesting specific gestures and quips for the teacher to use, but the exhortation to make conversation as real as possible is about the only one in the book that is not supported by detailed examples. Even where free conversation is described as "useful," it is not the focus toward which all other parts of the lesson converge. No, it is something to be "resorted to," and when? "Whenever time permits." This lesson has all the right components. Its faults are mainly in focus and emphasis.

But we can go beyond free conversation. Let's look only at the simplest visual aids, such as travel posters or large magazine pictures. Items in each picture can be marked with numbers, as they are in the book itself. The vocabulary can be made available on a single tape or cassette. Individual students may then contract with the teacher to prepare an oral or written description of one or more pictures. Going one step further, students might provide their own pictures of rooms or buildings, marking with a number each new item for which they don't know the name. The teacher, or some other speaker of French can then read the vocabularies onto a tape, which is then made available to the students. This gives an opportunity to use French- speaking paraprofessionals in a controlled way. Going one step further still, the French speaker might describe each picture in three or four sentences. Students could understand what was already in their textbook, guess at some of the rest, and incorporate it into their own compositions. Meantime they would have the satisfaction of partially understanding something done impromptu in response to their own pictures, and at the same time they have a good excuse for not worrying about whatever they can't understand.

I'm afraid we don't have time for further examples. The thought that I would like to leave with you today is this: that the total meaning of a language course for any one student is the net effect it has on him. He may conclude that language learning consists in assembling and adjusting an especially complicated plug. Or he may have learned to handle the language somewhat, but believe that he owes it all to a gifted teacher, or a well-written textbook, or even a teaching machine, and fail to appreciate his own part in the process. He may think that the main object of speaking a foreign language is to avoid making mistakes. I would rather have a student come out of a course with a vocabulary of 500 words and a weak grasp of the subjunctive, but with the skills and confidence that will enable him to go on and get more of that language (or some other) when he needs it, than to have him come out with 5000 words and flawless control of the subjunctive, but with the conviction that he cannot --

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or doesn't even want to -- learn more on his own later on. Yet lack of self- confidence in language matters is what we see in too many college graduates who come into the Peace Corps or the Foreign Service. And lack of interest is what my oldest daughter's high school teachers built into her—at exactly the same time they were qualifying her for her membership in the French Honor Society!

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