

LANGUAGE IMPROVEMENT SCHEMES
IN TEACHER TRAINING PROGRAMMES
AS SEEN BY TEACHERS AND TEACHER TRAINERS

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1. The problem

In November 1992 a conference was organized by the British Council and the Adam Mickiewicz University of Poznań, to discuss the English teaching scene in Poland. The title of the conference was "Towards the Year 2000: Supply and Demand in English Teaching in Poland". A number of teachers and teacher trainers attended the conference, and I considered that to be a good opportunity for sounding the teaching profession's opinion on the subject of my special interest: namely, the linguistic component in pre-service teacher training programmes. I decided to focus on that aspect of future teachers' linguistic competence which I consider particularly important; that is, competence in *spoken* English – both receptive (listening comprehension) and productive (speaking).

I asked a group of teachers and teacher trainers to evaluate the relative importance of different aspects of linguistic and sociocultural competence of trainees, and followed that with questions on the relative value of different ways of improving both these kinds of competence in the course of teacher-training programmes. The respondents were asked to evaluate each item on a scale from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important). The responses were anonymous; the respondents were only asked to state whether they were teachers or teacher trainers (or both). They could, however, give their name and affiliation if they so wished; only a few did so.

2. The questionnaire

The questionnaire reads as follows:

QUESTIONNAIRE

Dimensions of improvement of AURAL/ORAL COMPETENCE of trainees in pre-service teacher-training programmes.

1. LINGUISTIC competence

- a. comprehension of the spoken word (standard varieties)
- b. comprehension of the spoken word (non-standard dialects)
- c. fluency in speaking
- d. correctness of pronunciation
- e. correctness of grammatical structure
- f. extensive vocabulary

2. SOCIOCULTURAL competence

- g. ability to interpret speech acts correctly (e.g., to know when an interrogative sentence *is not* a question, and when a positive statement *is* a question)
- h. command of several styles (degrees of formality): from formal, through neutral (unmarked) and casual, to intimate
- i. good command of strategic competence: ability to use language appropriate to the partner(s) in conversation, the subject, and the occasion; and to deal with emergencies endangering the process of communication
- j. ability to comprehend metaphors, allusions, jokes, innuendoes etc.

3. Ways of improving the trainees' LINGUISTIC competence

- k. classroom teaching
- l. self-study in the home
- m. self-study in the self-access learning centre
- n. 'natural' acquisition in informal contacts with native speakers
- o. [?]

4. Ways of improving the trainees' SOCIOCULTURAL competence

- p. classroom teaching
- q. self-study in the home
- r. self-study in the self-access learning centre
- s. 'natural' acquisition in informal contacts with native speakers
- t. [?]

The questionnaire was presented on a screen, by means of an overhead projector. The participants were issued with sheets of paper on which to register their responses.

3. The results

39 questionnaires were returned. Most respondents answered all the questions; a few left some of them unanswered. The unanswered questions were mostly in the second half of the questionnaire: the one in which the respondents were asked to evaluate the different ways of improving the trainees' competence.

The responses were in the form of numerical grades selected from the one-to-five scale. However, in seven cases the respondents only stated verbally the importance of the item in question relative to other items, without assigning it a grade.

Five respondents used an inverted scale in their responses; i.e., they treated 1 as the highest grade, and 5 as the lowest. This is overtly stated in their response papers. In calculating the results, their responses were converted into the scale set at the beginning of the session (and used by all the other respondents).

The numerical results are presented in the table on page 124.

Aside from stating their opinions in terms of numerical grades on a scale, the respondents were also asked to add comments of their own (in items o and t). Thirteen of them did so. Nine came out with suggestions for ways of improving the trainees' *linguistic* competence. Using the media (radio, TV, video) was advocated by five respondents; reading, by three; personal contacts (friendship, group-learning, teacher-teacher contacts), also by three. One person suggested that clearly defined standards would be of help.

Suggestions for ways of improving the trainees' *sociocultural* competence were put forward by seven respondents. Again the media lead the way: they were mentioned by four respondents. Visits, i.e., staying in Britain or the USA for some time, were suggested by two persons; and reading books, by one.

4. Discussion

4.1. Linguistic competence. The respondents were almost unanimous in considering training in comprehension of the spoken word (in the standard varieties of the language) to be the most important requirement in pre-service teacher-training programmes (mean score 4.46, with a low SD of 0.91). This is interesting, in view of the fact that training in listening to the spoken word has not, until recently, figured very prominently in the curricula of courses of English as a foreign language, in textbooks for learners, or – for that matter – in teacher-training manuals.

Comprehension of non-standard varieties got the lowest mean score of all: 2.46 (SD: 1.02). This would seem to reflect the opinion that teachers, in their work with learners, will not need familiarity with non-standard dialects of the language.

The next highest mean score in this part of the questionnaire was won by fluency in speaking: 4.16 (SD: 1.05) – an unsurprising result.

It is interesting that correctness of grammatical structure was not reckoned to be as important as fluency. The mean score was not quite 4, with a low SD of 0.96. The tendency in language teaching methodology to emphasize fluency rather than correctness – which we have witnessed over the last two decades or so, and which is a side effect of the dominance of the communicative approach – has ob-

viously changed the profession's outlook on grammatical correctness of learners' utterances. Yet when the learners are future teacher, grammatical correctness is, surely, no less important than fluency.

Another result of emphasis on fluency is a fairly low mean score given to correctness of pronunciation: 3.71. Here, however, the scores are more widely dispersed (SD: 1.01). – which reflects lack of unanimity on this point.

The most surprising result is the relatively low importance attributed to vocabulary extension. The mean score is just 3.44 – but with a fairly high degree of dispersion (SD: 1.13), reflecting differences of views on this subject.

As far as the different ways of *improving linguistic competence* are concerned, classroom teaching was considered the best. The mean score was 4.25, with scores closely bunched together (SD: 0.95).

The next best way of improving one's linguistic competence is – according to the respondents – 'natural' acquisition in informal contacts with native speakers. The mean score here was almost 4, with a fairly low SD: 1.06. Thus, as far as linguistic competence is concerned, classroom teaching was considered more effective than 'natural' acquisition. This is interesting; we shall see later that in the case of *sociolinguistic* skills 'natural' acquisition scored much higher than classroom teaching.

The idea of learners' responsibility for their own learning has not yet become incorporated in the profession's accepted set of beliefs. For self-study in the home the mean score was a fairly low 3.65, but the dispersion was quite marked (SD: 1.14) – reflecting lack of uniformity of opinion. Self-study in a self-access learning centre was even more out of favour with the respondents. The mean score was a low 3.03, with the individual scores bunched quite closely together (SD: 1.03).

Yet there were two respondents who expressed their full support for this form of learning verbally (without assigning it a grade). Moreover, when asked for comments of their own, five persons suggested using the media, and three advocated reading. Watching TV or reading books is surely best done outside the classroom; in other words, it is a form of self-study – and this is best done in a well equipped self-study centre. The case for promoting the learner's individual effort was thus strengthened by those comments – even though indirectly.

4.2. Sociocultural competence. Of all the aspects of sociocultural competence, it was the pragmatic ability to interpret speech acts correctly that was considered the most important. It got a high mean score (4.45), with a low SD (.92). The next place fell to a good command of strategic competence. The mean was a high 4.11 and the scores were quite closely bunched (SD: 0.89).

The aspect of sociocultural competence that took third place was command of several styles (degrees of formality). The mean score was rather low: 3.51, with a fairly low degree of dispersion (SD: 0.98).

The respondents did not seem to attach great importance to the ability to comprehend metaphors, allusions, jokes, innuendoes, etc. – that is, to the culture-bound aspects of language use. The mean score was a very low 3.00, but the dispersion

of scores was quite considerable (SD: 1.07), reflecting lack of unanimity on this subject.

Among the ways of *improving sociocultural competence* which were suggested, 'natural' acquisition in informal contacts with native speakers was considered the most effective. The mean score (4.67) was the highest in the whole questionnaire, and the scores were closely bunched together (SD: 0.85). Additional support came from two respondents who opted for 'natural' acquisition verbally (without assigning it a numerical grade). Classroom teaching came a poor second, with the mean score of 3.58 and a low degree of dispersion (SD: 0.85).

The two forms of self-study were considered equally effective – or rather equally ineffective – scoring on the average below 3, but with a high degree of disagreement among the respondents, reflected in a considerable dispersion of the scores. For self-study in the home the mean was a miserable 2.92, with a high SD of 1.18, and for self-study in a learning centre the mean was 2.98 and the SD 1.24 – the highest value for standard deviation in the whole questionnaire. Again, however, there were several respondents who added comments of their own, and advocated making use of the media and reading books. I commented on this at the end of 4.1.

5. Conclusions

The respondents accorded first place to good training in listening comprehension. If this really reflects the mood of the profession, we should set about creating a bank of recordings of spoken (standard) English, both dialogues and monologues, in different styles and registers, and at different levels of difficulty. The problem lies, however, in how such recordings should be used by the learner. Listening comprehension seems best practised by each learner individually, without wasting valuable classroom time, which should be used for two-way communication. Yet many respondents undervalued self-study; in particular, study in a self-access centre. It appears therefore that we should try and make the profession more aware of the importance of self-study in language learning. This would accord with emphasis on learner responsibility and learner autonomy, expressed recently by a number of language teaching methodologists.

Fluency was accorded a higher place than grammatical correctness. Those of us who attach importance to the cognitive element in language teaching and learning will probably feel that the pendulum has swung too far towards fluency, and that some propaganda for grammatical consciousness raising is now needed – particularly in teacher training.

Another feature of language teaching methodology in recent years has been recognition of the importance of vocabulary extension, as a prerequisite to successful communication. Vocabulary acquisition and extension seems to be another field – aside from learner autonomy – which needs popularising among the teaching profession.

Pragmatic aspects of language use were generally considered important by the respondents. Recognition of their importance should now result in the production

of teaching materials designed for practising these language skills. This is a difficult task; but since the existing materials in this area are few, it has to be faced.

What was underestimated by the respondents was the importance of the learner's ability to comprehend metaphors, allusions, jokes, innuendoes, etc. – that is, the culture-bound aspects of language use. Here again, availability of appropriate teaching materials might make teachers more sensitive to this aspect of competence in a language.

Item	Mean	SD	Dispersion	Item	Mean	SD	Dispersion
a	4.46	0.91	5..4 (3)(2)	j	3.00	1.07	5.....1
b	2.46	1.02	(5)(4) 3.....1	k	4.25	0.95	
c	4.16	1.05	5.....3 (2)(1)	l	3.65	1.14	5.....2(1)
d	3.71	1.01	5.....2 (1)	m	3.03	1.03	(5) 4...2(1)
e	3.96	0.96	5.....3 (2)(1,5)	n	3.97	1.06	5....3(2)(1)
f	3.44	1.13	5.....3 (2)(1)	p	3.58	0.85	5....3(2)(1)
g	4.45	0.92	5.....3 (1)	q	2.92	1.18	(5) 4.....1
h	3.51	0.98	5.....3 (2)(1)	r	2.98	1.24	(5) 4.....1
i	4.11	0.89	5.....3 (1)	s	4.67	0.85	5..4 (3) (1)

Response to the questionnaire

Dots symbolize dispersion of scores from the first to the second value given. Values in brackets signal scores with a low number of occurrences in the responses (one, two, or three occurrences). Thus, for example, 5..4 (3)(2) means: most scores were either fives or fours, there were a few occasional threes and twos, and no ones.