SOME CONSIDERATIONS ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE FACULTY OF ARTS, INCLUDING USES OF THE LANGUAGE LABORATORY AND THE QUESTION OF A PERIOD OF RESIDENCE ABROAD.

The fact that the Faculty of Arts and Education in Benghazi has now become, for better or worse, the Faculty of Arts, does not mean to say that interest in methods of teaching has entirely disappeared here. On the contrary, there is probably an increase in interest for several reasons, including : (a) this year's change of syllabus in all departments; (b) the need for the constant reappraisal of the aims and objects of courses; (c) the general feeling of unrest in so many of the world's universities; (d) the influx of new lecturers, some fresh from training, others bringing in the benefit of their experience from other universities; (e) the near-certainty that many of our graduates will continue to join the teaching profession; (f) our interest in the standards of our freshmen; (g) the possibility of some use being made of Libyan Radio and Television for educational purposes, (especially language teaching); — and still the list is by no means exhausted. But of course, what is of most immediate concern to the staff of the Faculty of Arts at the present time is not so much what the effect of our graduates is going to be as teachers in the schools, but

rather what effect our own teaching is having on our students both as scholars and as individual personalities.

Some very fundamental questions are being asked in the world at large about the aims and objects of language teaching, and it will be well for us in the University of Libya, foreign teachers as well as Libyans, students as well as staff, to ask ourselves some of these basic questions. Firstly, for example, « Why are languages taught in the universities ? Which languages need to be taught in Libya ? To what level ? » Secondly, « Are these languages being taught efficiently Thirdly, « What do recent (i.e. post World War II) innovations have to offer which can be of help ? » And lastly, « Do we need to change our objectives and methods ? »

Though I may have formed my own opinions on some or all of these points, I have no intention of laying down the law on them : they are open to debate, and answers which may be found to them now may have to be changed again in the course of a few years. It might well, however, be a useful thing for the University of Libya to institute an annual or biennial conference between the Foreign Languages Department of the Faculty of Arts and that of the Faculty of Education — preferably annually I think, but to be held alternately in Benghazi and Tripoli, perhaps in the September of each year. Some open debates might be arranged to which might be invited interested representatives from other Faculties, from the Ministry of Education, from Teachers' Training Colleges, and from among our own graduates and the general public. Whether such a conference is held or no, some thought might well be given to the question of how closely, if at all, the programmes of the two departments should be related. Should they be basically the same ? If so, Arts students should presumably be given an additional advanced course in literature

or linguistics in order to balance the specifically teacher-oriented courses given in the Faculty of Education. And what of those Arts graduates who, in spite of everything, decide to take up teaching after all ? Should they not be required to do a special one-year post-graduate course in the principles and practice of education?

Another somewhat knotty problem which needs to be kept under fairly constant review is the so-called 'service work' of teaching English to the students of other departments in the Faculty of Arts and of other outside faculties. That we are not alone in having this problem to face is borne out by a writer commenting on the teaching of foreign languages to students of science and economics in British universities. He makes the following rather restrained comment :— « As the linguistic achievements and aptitudes of these students do not always match their abilities as scientists or economists, this work is usually confined to straightforward language teaching at a comparatively elementary level, and is not a task which all university teachers of languages view with pleasure. » However, it should be remembered that the foreign languages referred to are languages **other than English,** and that the area in which most progress has been made by British university language departments in recent years is precisely that of the teaching of English as a foreign language (now usually abbreviated to T.E.F.L.). The Majority of university lecturers now coming abroad to teach English have taken a course in T.E.F.L., and can therefore be relied upon to tackle their O.D. (Other Departmental) English with at least a modicum of interest and enthusiasm.

I feel it necessary, nevertheless, to stress the fact that the teaching of a foreign language to non-language specialists is ham-

* F.G. Healey. Foreign Language Teaching in the Universities. Published by Manchester University Press, pp. 3-4.

pered by the apparent irrelevance of language study to the students' main subject. It is not enough for the foreign language to be included in the syllabus of the 'mother' department or faculty (i.e. Arabic, History, Economics etc.) : the student must be **made to feel** that his own department is really and truly convinced of the necessity and value of language study. It should not just be left to the individual teacher of a foreign language to increase the motivation of his students by using language materials and methods which he hopes will capture their attention. A language teacher unless **by chance** he has been trained in the other discipline as well, cannot surely be expected to possess great competence in convincing his O.D. students of the importance and value of language study to their course as a whole.

An interesting experiment in the teaching of O.D. English was made last year largely as a result of accidental circumstances and entirely unplanned by the English Department. The usual situation was reversed, in that native English speakers, specialists in their own (non-linguistic) disciplines, were employed to teach English in the departments to which they had been assigned. The experiment turned out to be little short of a disaster, the reasons for which are not far to seek. The three most important in my opinion are (a) the fact that neither of these foreign specialists had had any training in T.E.F.L. or even in converting his own utterances into their simplest possible form; (b) they felt that their use as language teachers was a blow to their prestige as specialists in their own subjects; (c) students in at least one case were very un-cooperative, and even boycotted lectures which they claimed (with some justification) not to be able to understand.

The insufficiency of his foreign language knowledge may not actually be brought home to a student until after he has graduated and goes abroad for higher studies. Reports recently received

from the U.S.A. on the capabilities in English of graduates from the University of Libya are in the main unflattering; but unless I am greatly mistaken, the more satisfactory students in this respect are usually those who have had a great deal of scientific teaching with English as the medium of instruction. It is thus quite possible that a post-graduate student from the Faculty of Agriculture, for instance, may get a better report on his use of English than his counterpart from the Faculty of Economics or from one of the Other Departments of the Faculty of Arts. (Since there is little opportunity for University staff in Benghazi to fraternise with their more scientifically-minded colleagues in Tripoli, and hence a lack of 'cross-pollination' in the realm of ideas, I cannot state with any degree of assurance whether English is used wholly, partly or minimally as the medium of instruction in any particular department there. But I have the impression (from a brief informal visit some two or three years ago) that as well as having lectures in English, students of the Faculty of Agriculture have a well-stocked library where the great majority of textbooks, of whatever origin, are printed in English, and where they have open access to the shelves. Motivation for learning English is therefore likely to be nothing other than sheer necessity; and this is a condition which will obviously apply also to students of our newest faculty, the Faculty of Medicine.)

In the light of the foregoing paragraphs, a tentative solution may be found to the problem of Other Departmental English in the Faculty of Arts. Since it is unlikely that the majority of students will feel a strong urge to learn a foreign language unless it is directly connected with their subject of specialisation, any department which is dissatisfied with the standard of English achieved by its students might consider engaging as one of its lecturers a (young) native English speaker, who, having already

graduated in the appropriate discipline, would be willing to take a qualifying T.E.F.L. course. On satisfactory completion of this course, he could not only provide the necessary English teaching in his department, but also lecture on his own subject in English. (Some administrative difficulties would inevitably arise from this scheme, but should not prove insuperable.) It is true that one does occasionally find already on the English Department staff a lecturer with some qualification in either History, Geography, Philosophy or Economics, but this is the exception rather than the rule.

Before turning from men to machines in our never-ending quest for aids to speed up the language-learning process and render it more effective, let us look for a moment at what we may call **recent** changes in language teaching methods. These date mainly from the Second World War, though the basic ideas behind them are of much earlier origin. To borrow a phrase from the world of fashion, there is a 'New Look' about present-day language teaching which has its origin mainly in the progress made by the linguistic sciences themselves. Much of the credit for this 'linguistic approach' must go to America, where a great deal of concentrated effort has been exerted on the development of foreign language teaching and on the teaching of English as a foreign language. (There is a well-known book by C.C. Fries entitled **Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language** published as far back as 1945 by the University of Michigan Press.) Considering the enormous vocabulary of new terms to be learnt by anyone beginning the study of modern theoretical linguistics, and the consequent arcane nature (to the layman) of writings and conversations connected with the subject, it is reassuring for the vast majority of foreign language learners to know that the fundamental 'secret' of language learning discovered or re-discovered by the authors of the 'linguistic approach' was nothing more nor less than their insistence on the imitation

and memorization of basic conversational sentences as spoken by native speakers. Genius and common sense are indeed natural allies !

To this 'prime factor' in language learning we have to add of course descriptions of the distinctive elements that constitute the structure of a language. There followed also the development of the highly valuable idea of pattern practice, which sets out to establish as habits the patterns rather than the individual sentences, thereby largely avoiding the problems of tranfer from the native language. But one **can** have too much of a good thing, and it is interesting to note in this context that A.S. Hornby, the well-known British expert on English as a foreign language, (himself the author of **A Guide to Patterns and Usage in English,** co-author of **The Advanced Learner's Dictionary,** etc. etc.) has recently remarked in an article entitled « Reflections After a Visit to Japan » (v. **English Language Teaching** for October 1970) that pattern practice « has been found dull in the classroom ». Many other experienced teachers have been saying so for years, and would agree also with Hornby's later statement in the same article, viz. : « The introductory stage should, I now think, be linked closely with the situation — first with classroom activity, then... through visual aids... and later with situational activity in textbook stories. »

Now that at long last a language laboratory is being installed on the premises occupied jointly by the Faculties of Arts and Commerce, it is essential that a great deal of thought be given to the best use which can be made of language laboratories in general and of this language laboratory in particular. But first of all a word of warning to the uninitiated : a language laboratory does not confer instant command of a foreign language upon anyone who seats himself in a booth and dons the headphones. Be-

ware of expecting too much in too short a time. We must be practical, and one of the first things to be done is a little simple arithmetic. If the language laboratory is kept open 8 hours per day 6 days per week, a total of 48 listening hours becomes available. Sixteen first year classes could thus be given three fifty-minute periods per week. But there are many other classes and two other foreign languages besides English which have claims on language laboratory time. The usual 50 minute period might of course be halved into two periods of 25 minutes each. Even so, it is unlikely that we can have more than 50 minutes of language laboratory instruction per student per week.

This being the case, it is clear that we cannot regard lab work as being the central component of language learning and teaching. Rather must we regard the lab as another aid, the materials used in it being designed to supplement class work selectively, not as complete lessons in themselves.

The role of the new Arts — Commerce language laboratory is thus likely to be confined for the present mainly to that of providing reinforcement for skills already taught in the classroom. The lab increases the power even of the teacher who is a native speaker by permitting the students to hear a variety of speakers of the language. It also gives each student far more speaking time than is possible in class, where the rule has to be, « One at a time, please ! »

Students and staff who are looking forward to the move into the new University buildings will be glad to know that provision is being made for much more extensive use of language laboratories, and that in addition a whole floor of the new library building will in all probability be devoted to the use of the most up-to-date audio-visual equipment, not of course for the sole pur-

pose of language teaching, but for use by each department according to its own special needs.

One final matter of major importance to the English Department remains for me to discuss here : the question of sending language students for the whole or part of an academic year to the country whose language they are studying. This « stay abroad », as it is generally called in English universities, is an idea of which I am wholly in favour, and which I do not need to defend, since I am sure that, apart from possible financial objections, the vast majority of my colleagues in all departments and probably 100% of the students concerned, would give it their full support. I should be in favour of one full academic year abroad; but the question then arises : which is the optimum year in a four year course for this operation to take place ? The students' first year at university is of course out of the question, since this is a preparatory year, but what of the second year ? There is a great temptation to say, « Yes, by all means send students in their first year of specialisation. How much easier our work would then be in the third and fourth years ! » But if we accept this, is it really the best tihng for students ? Most of them, in my opinion, do not in their second year know enough English to get the maximum benefit from their year abroad. There is no established practice in this respect, at all events in English universities, to allow us to accept the « stay abroad » as an inevitable and indisputable fact, as regards either its length or temporal position in a university language course.

The **Modern Languages Association** published in Britain in 1965 a handbook called « Modern Languages in the Universities », and from it we can ascertain that there was at that time (and there has been little or no change in the position since) very little conformity between different universities and even between

different departments of the same university as regards the practice of sending modern language students for a «stay abroad». It does however show that more and more departments are requiring students to spend a whole year abroad, or are at least stressing the advisability of doing so. We therefore — I believe I can speak on this point for the whole body of foreign language teachers in the Faculty of Arts — welcome the initiative taken by the Faculty of Education in sending their second year students specialising in French or English to France and England respectively. We hope that University funds will be made available for the Faculty of Arts to take similar action. We hope also that the University Administration will consult not only deans and heads of departments but the whole corpus of foreign language teachers before making the vital decisions as to when, where, and for how long. The fact that our new syllabuses in the Faculty of Arts **may** be covered in two years of intensive work by brilliant students might even lead to the suggestion that a language student be allowed to opt for reserving his « stay abroad » until after graduation. This would enable him to spend a year taking part in Hons. B.A. courses at an English University, and give him a better chance of making the best choice of subject for himself if he intends to go in for higher studies. Otherwise, the present division of our (English) Department syllabus mainly into «A» and «B» courses would lead naturally to the suggestion that a student should at least complete all «A» courses before being sent abroad.

It can be argued of course that a language student should be sent abroad at the earliest possible moment, so that his knowledge both of the foreign language and of the culture which is its background, would enable him to make faster and better consolidated progress in his remaining years at university after his return. In my own view, however, much greater profit will be

drawn from the « stay abroad » if it be postponed until the second year of specialisation, or even later.

Most English students who go abroad to improve their knowledge of a foreign language are able to act as « assistants » in secondary schools, but this of course is due to the unique position of English as the first or second foreign language in most countries of the world. This enables them to earn their own living whilst abroad, which is an important consideration in view of the fact that they are not normally provided with travelling scholarships or any increase in their student allowance during this period. Such a system **can** work well for the English student abroad provided that conditions are suitable. He should, for instance, live with a family where little or no English is spoken, his work as « assistant » should leave him with plenty of time and energy for his own studies; he should be in an environment where there is access to cultural institutions such as museums, theatres and libraries; and if possible he should be near some kind of institution of higher learning which provides at least vacation courses for foreigners.

In the case of students whose native language is Arabic, it will obviously be advisable for them to attend a college or institute where they will receive tuition in English as a foreign language. They should if possible be boarded out with English families individually instead of living in hostels, and they should be discouraged by their supervisors from spending too much time together, as this would inevitably entail less exposure to the language they have come abroad to study.

One good reason for not sending English Department students to England in their second year (i.e. first year of specialisation), is that we are probably better prepared here in the University of Libya to carry out what amounts to initial instruction than

most Foreign Language institutes in Britain. We do possess, after all, a sufficiently large body of specially trained and selected experts in the teaching of English who are likely to be more devoted to their special task and to their own students than their counterparts in England.

What we cannot provide is « total immersion » in a foreign language community, together with the accompanying cultural background, which is the chief reason for the « stay abroad ». This « total » immersion, or as near total as it can be made, will bring our students into close contact with the foreign culture in the full sociological sense. The result should be not only a greater mastery of the language in terms of sheer quantity, plus a wider acquaintance with the appropriate literary, historical and artistic background, but also something which is difficult to define, but amounts I suppose to something like a general enrichment of the personality, a greater degree of self-assurance, and an all-round increase in the ability to see in the language meaning due to the culture and the way of life which the language itself not only expresses but to which it contributes, and by which it is to some extent itself given form and shape.

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