LANGUAGE TEACHING VERSUS LANGUAGE LEARNING SYSTEMS

RICHARD SHOWSTACK

English Academy Ryugakukai, Minato-ku, Tokyo, Japan

In spite of the tremendous record of failure of the present system of institutional foreign language programs, in 1980 the U.S. President's Commission on Foreign Languages and International Studies recommended that millions of dollars be poured into this system. This article attempts to suggest answers to the questions: Why is it being proposed that so much money be poured into a system of failure? Why has this system developed? Why should it be changed? And, how could it be changed? It is suggested that while there are now many foreign language programs all over the world, they are, almost without exception, language teaching rather than language learning programs. That is, they have been organized by, and ultimately for, language teachers, rather than language learners. Finally, it is suggested that what is needed is for language learning systems to be set up with language learners, rather than language teachers, at the center of the language education process.

Consider the following two quotes:

All over the world today the study of a modern foreign language is part of the secondary education course, and all over the world there is more failure than success in the learning of English, French, German, or whatever the language may be. This failure is not confined to school-children, but dogs the efforts of adults. . . . In no other school subject . . . do we find like results.

Although one of the more essential skills which many people try to acquire through formal education is competence in a second or foreign language, the success record for attempts to help students acquire this skill has been notoriously poor.

It is not only the content of these two quotes which is depressing. Also depressing is the fact that the first quote is taken from an article which appeared in the journal English Language Teaching in 1948 (Gatenby 1948) whereas the second quote is from an article which appeared in the journal TESOL Quarterly in 1975 (Rubin 1975).

Reading these two quotes, one must ask oneself if any real progress had been made in the field of foreign language teaching in the intervening 27 years.

Apparently, little progress has been made. Whereas in 1948 in the article mentioned above ('Reasons for Failure to Learn a Foreign Language') Gatenby concluded, 'The moral is
that the secondary school classroom . . . is the most unsuitable place for learning a language’, in reporting on the results of one study in 1970. Hale and Budar concluded that: ‘There seemed to be little evidence that those who had attended special TESOL classes . . . had progressed in their acquisition of English any more than those students who had not attended special classes.’

Likewise, James Asher reported in 1977 that ‘a school superintendent . . . reported that . . . Few students—less than 5% who started in a second language [program] continue to proficiency’, and in a study reported in the September 1980 TESOL Quarterly, Monshi-Tousi, Hasseine-Fetemi and Oller reported that, ‘formal classroom instruction in EFL . . . may have a negligible effect on the eventual attainment of proficiency in English’.

Also, in an article in the 8 September 1980, issue of Time, it was reported that:

The only national study of bilingual ed . . . completed in 1977 . . . found that children in bilingual programs did no better at learning English or anything else than non-English-speaking students thrust into regular classes . . .

Finally, in 1979 the U.S. President’s Commission on Foreign Language and International Studies concluded that ‘American students do not understand foreign languages’ (Japan Times, 9 November 1979) and that ‘America’s scandalous incompetence in foreign languages also explains our dangerously inadequate understanding of world affairs’ (TESOL Newsletter, April 1980).

Yet, in spite of the equally scandalous record of failure recorded by institutional foreign language programs (as noted above), the Commission uncannily suggested that ‘the federal government offer incentive grants . . . for each student enrolled in foreign language courses in grade schools, high schools and colleges’ in a program that ‘would cost the federal treasury less than $50 million in the first year’ (TESOL Newsletter, April 1980).

What is happening here? Why is it being proposed that so much money be poured into a system of failure? Why has this system developed? Isn’t there any alternative to the present system of second language programs? This article will attempt to examine the answers to these questions.

Basically, ‘what is happening here’ is that instead of listening to language learners and considering their needs, or considering the needs of the nation as a whole, the Commission instead listened to the testimony of members of the language teaching establishment, the very people who have the most to gain from government subsidization of the present language education system. These language ‘educators’ are like the priests of a primitive religion, maintaining their own power by encouraging and supporting the people’s beliefs about the myths of the religion. This religion has grown mainly over the last thirty years, and the primary myth of this religion might be called ‘The Myth of the Foreign Language Class’, the myth that in order to learn a foreign language, it is both necessary and sufficient to learn it from a foreign language teacher in a foreign language class.

The fact is, however, that if one wants to learn a foreign language, studying it in a language
class is neither necessary nor sufficient. That is, it is possible to learn a foreign language without attending a language class and, likewise, merely going to a language class is not sufficient to learn a foreign language.

Sadly, however, the Myth of the Foreign Language Class is fostered and spread by the language teaching establishment itself. This is only natural, however, for virtually all journal and newsletter articles and advertisements are written by teachers or other people who have a vested interest in the present system of foreign language education. Very few articles are ever printed, for example, written by disgruntled students or by people who have taught themselves a foreign language.

Let's face it: anyone can reach level X in a foreign language by using various ‘non-class’ means (such as books, tapes, tutors, and so on) if such means are available. (This is especially true of English as a foreign language, since there are so many English-language materials available throughout the world.) Therefore, the reason to attend a language class is not that this is the only way to reach level X in the foreign language but rather that attending a class will allow you to reach level X sooner.

The fact is, however, that in the present system of language instruction there are really only two things a teacher in a language class provides for the students that they could not get more efficiently through other means (if the means were available): (1) through the force of attendance procedures, the teacher ‘motivates’ the students to expose themselves to the language a certain number of hours a week; and (2) through the force of grading or other procedures, the teacher ‘motivates’ the students to study.

Now, in the first place, we should ask ourselves why people who want to learn a foreign language need to be motivated to study it. (Could it be that nobody has ever designed a system that makes it enjoyable to study a foreign language?) In the second place, we should ask ourselves if people who only succeed in learning a foreign language through such artificial external motivation will actually use the language effectively once they leave the language class. (And shouldn’t that be the goal of language education—to help students to become independent in their use of the foreign language?)

But, realistically speaking, isn’t it a bit naïve to expect any education system which depends on the number of students enrolled in it for its revenues to function in such a way as to try to help the learners to be able to proceed toward their learning goals independent of the education system as soon as possible? Isn’t it naïve to expect the language education system (or language teachers) to develop ways to make language students (their prime source of revenue) independent of the system as soon as possible?

Let’s look at the present language education system from the point of view of the seller of language education, the language school (and teacher). What incentive is there to work hard and expend money in order to bring the student to level X as soon as possible? Whether they like to admit it or not (and whether the school is private or public), the amount of revenue taken into the schools (and the amount of money paid into salaries) is directly related not only to how many students are enrolled in language classes at the schools but also to how long the students stay enrolled. Therefore, to look at the situation
from the most cynical point of view, the slower the students progress in improving their language ability (while at the same time being convinced, of course, that they are learning the language faster as a direct result of attending the language class), the more revenue it means for the school (whether that revenue comes in directly in the form of student fees or indirectly in the form of government subsidies).

Also, foreign language students are generally very poorly informed consumers.

Most language students only ‘buy’ language instruction once in their lives, that is, they study only one foreign language, and it is a product which is not well defined to them. And, since they have no other similar experiences (and no Consumer Reports) to draw upon in evaluating their language-learning experience, if they do not after all succeed in learning the language, they are led to believe that, rather than being the fault of the seller of the product (the language school), it is, on the contrary, their own fault because they are poor language learners. (Of course, nobody bothers to remind them, either, that 99 per cent of the people in the world manage to learn a language, their native language, without ever attending a language class.) And students who fail to learn a language in a language class usually fade away without complaint either because they blame themselves for their failure, or they see no advantage from complaining, or because they can’t speak the foreign language well enough to complain in it.

There is probably not another buyer-seller relationship in the world where the buyer is so passive and easily satisfied with what he is receiving for his or her money.

Why do people accept this situation? Why is it considered wrong to accept a $1000 of a person’s money for a tour that does not take him where it promises to take him but not considered immoral to accept a $1000 to teach a person a language even if he never succeeds in learning it? Why is it that the highest degree of skill and success are assumed to be essential in other professional fields when so little is required (relatively) in the field of language education? How would society react if 95 per cent of the cars sold by a company did not perform well? Why is it that if you walk into a math or physics or sewing or physical education class you find the students working with thousands of dollars of special equipment but if you walk into a language class you find them sitting in desks facing a teacher? Why is it that the system of language education has changed so little for thousands of years?

The system continues to exist for several reasons. First of all, most people (including teachers, students, parents, administrators, and taxpayers) assume that the best way to learn a foreign language is to put a teacher in front of a class, have the teacher ‘teach’ the students, have the students listen to the teacher, study books, and take tests.

A second reason the system exists is that it is good for the students: it allows them to say they are learning a foreign language while letting the teacher do most of the work.

A third reason it exists is that the present system is good for administrators, taxpayers, and parents: it allows them to keep track of exactly where their teachers, children, and tax money are at any moment. (In fact, however, most administrators don’t really know
[and in too many cases do not really care] if a teacher is really teaching a foreign language or if the students are really learning to use it. It is much easier to keep track of whether the students are learning, for example, math or history than a foreign language which the administrator may not even know. The administrator must take the teacher’s word for whether the students are making good progress or not. In any case, the administrator is probably more interested in having a program that is easy to administer than in having one that is successful.)

Not only that, but who is usually put in charge of setting up, designing, and administering a language program? A successful foreign language learner? No. In most cases a ‘successful’ teacher is chosen, a teacher whose ‘success’ is judged not by how well his or her students have learned a foreign language but by how many texts or journal articles he or she has published, a teacher who may know a lot about how to teach a language but does not necessarily know anything about ways to learn a foreign language.

Next, the system is good for publishers who, through the language programs, have a constant market for new textbooks.

The last reason the present system exists is that the present system is good for foreign language teachers: teachers are almost totally in control of present language learning systems.

So, the present system seems to be good for everyone involved. The only problem is that it is not doing what it is supposed to do. Of course I do not mean to suggest that language teachers and administrators are dishonest. Don’t the teachers in the classrooms care about their students?

Of course they do; most teachers care very much. However, now language teachers are automatically part of a larger system which they cannot easily control or change.

That is, a teacher is hired to teach a class of students, and that is all that can be expected of him or her. So, teachers naturally develop ways that seem to them the best ways to teach the language, considering the classroom situation they find themselves in, without necessarily ever being forced to consider whether those ways are the best ways to help each student learn the language.

And even in so-called ‘individualized’ programs, the teacher or the group is left at the center of the system. For example, in Learner-Centered Language Teaching, Papalia writes:

The function of the foreign language teacher becomes that of instructional designer as well as instructor. His task is to determine, on the basis of the students’ needs and characteristics, values of society, and knowledge of subject matter, what must be learned and what procedures and materials will work best to reach desired learning levels (Papalia 1976, p. 52).

This sounds wonderful. There are at least three problems with this in reality, however.

The first problem is that most language teachers do not have this much freedom (or
time) to redesign the language program they are employed in. Often teachers are only hired in a language program if there are enough students to fill up a class. Even if they have been employed in the program for some time, they are usually so overburdened with the day-to-day problems of keeping up with their teaching schedule that they have no time to devote to designing a new program.

The second problem is that even if the teachers do have the freedom or time to perform these functions, they do not necessarily have the ability to perform them. That is, training as a language teacher does not necessarily give a person the ability to perform the job of a designer of a learning system.

The third problem is that even if they do have the freedom, time, training, and ability, teachers are not likely to design a learning program in which the part they themselves play is reduced or even eliminated entirely, nor are they likely to be able to judge their own abilities and skills objectively enough to make an adequate assessment of where they belong in such a program.

Not only that, but there are also other broader questions to be considered. For example, what can a teacher do about students who want to learn a language but never attend a language program because they don’t have the time, money, or confidence? Or students who do sign up but are absent so much that they are left behind the rest of the class? Or students who drop out before they reach their language learning goals? Or students who finish the program but never use the language outside of the classroom? Or students who give up because they can’t seem to succeed in learning the language?

Obviously, though these are important problems in language learning (certainly more important than which method the teacher happens to be using or which textbook, etc.), there is very little a language teacher can do about them. And the reason for this is that these are not problems of language teaching, per se, but rather are problems of the present language education system, as a whole.

That is, in evaluating present-day language education, it is not enough to merely evaluate language classes or language teachers or language teaching materials or practices; rather, we need to step out of the language school entirely to get a broader perspective on the situation. We should start by looking at all of the potential language learners in society and asking ourselves how we can design a language education system that will best serve them. (Language teachers, unfortunately, are too close to the ‘language learning trees’ to be able to see the ‘language learning forest’ as a whole.)

The problem is that although much time and energy and money have been devoted to developing language teaching systems, the present system has not been forced to justify its existence and therefore relatively little has been done to investigate how to learn a foreign language most efficiently or to develop language learning systems. And instead of being organized according to theories of language acquisition which are based on volumes and volumes of empirical studies, the present language education system is organized according to various continually changing theories of how to teach a language, theories which are based not on research but rather on the failure of past theories or on the charisma of their promoters.
To develop or improve a scientific process, however, normally thousands of hours and millions of dollars are necessary over years of time for basic and applied research into every aspect of the problem. And this scientific research, if it is to be scientifically done, must painstakingly and methodically, under strict laboratory conditions, explore every basic factor in the process by making use of double-blind tests, control groups, and sterile conditions, and by controlling the relevant variables one-by-one to see their effect on the process.

Why is it that language education has been allowed to escape the most basic requirements of scientific research?

For one thing, language education has never been as important in the past as it is now. For another, as was pointed out above, the present system suits everyone involved just fine, everyone, that is, except those students who really do want to learn to use a foreign language, the very people the system was supposedly set up to serve.

Of course, it will require tremendous effort to change the system, but that effort is not going to come from within the system itself. For one thing, the teachers, as noted above, have neither the time nor the incentive to change it. Also, since the system is profitable and there is no more efficient system to compete with it, the administrators and investors have no incentive to change it.

Therefore, for the present language teaching system to be changed into a language learning system, some higher authority or outside force must take the lead in setting up language learning programs. This may be the only way to break up the language school–language teacher–publishing company grip on the language education field. And where can this ‘push’ come except from the ‘people’ themselves in the form of their local governments or public education systems?

Another reason it is necessary that the system be organized from a higher source is that for an individualized system to be efficient cost-wise, it must have a constant flow of a large number of people entering it, a large source of income to set it up, and a long-range development plan. In the present system, on the contrary, while there are many small teaching programs scattered about, few are large enough to organize themselves into language learning programs.

That is, most present-day language programs start off with only a few students, too few students to set up an efficient language learning program, so the first people who are hired are language teachers, and the students are then herded into teacher-centered classes. Then, as the number of students slowly rises, even more teachers are hired and the language-teaching system becomes even more deeply entrenched. Finally, even when there are so many students in the program that a language learning system could function efficiently, so much money and so many personnel have been invested in the language teaching system that it is impossible to invest the necessary time and money into developing the materials and facilities necessary to change over to a language learning system, which might take years to plan, set up, build the facilities, gather or produce the materials, develop the procedures, and so on.
Thus, a language learning system must be built from the 'ground up' and some outside force is necessary to combine the small language teaching programs into larger more efficient learning programs.

So, the next questions to be asked are: (a) If it is true that learning a language in a language class is an inefficient process, then what should the role of the language teacher be? And (b) are teachers necessary at all or are they more a hindrance than a help? Lastly (c) what are you proposing as an alternative method?

To answer (b) first: yes, teachers will always be necessary but not in their present role function. The present role function of the teacher in all forms of education is a compromise which evolved throughout the thousands of years before modern technology developed, and in the modern technological age it is an anachronism. It is wasteful of both the students' and the teachers' time and energy. Virtually everything that happens in a language class could be done just as well, or better, in another way using modern technology if the materials were available.

The problem is, then, who will design all the materials to supply such a system which takes a student from no knowledge of the target language to fluency? The answer to this question is also a partial answer to question (a) above: Teachers in the future will become curriculum coordinators, 'facilitators', materials developers and media experts, but will not stay standing in front of a classroom full of staring faces.

Actually, I do not mean that teachers should become media experts. What I mean is that in the future people will become media experts who in earlier times might have become 'teachers', a concept which will have become outdated or at least changed.

A second partial answer to question (a), however, is that there will always be areas in which the involvement of people experienced in the target language (and in ways to learn it) will be necessary in the language learning process. For example, someone familiar with the target language will probably always be necessary to help the students with their speaking and writing skills. However, since the students will be studying grammar and reading and listening by themselves, the teacher will be able to meet with them individually to help them with these productive skills.

The final part of the answer to question (a) is that teachers can fulfill a valuable role as monitors of student progress. This does not mean 'testing' them in the traditional way for the students will constantly be 'tested' by their teaching machines. It does mean that teachers will have the time to assess each student's individual progress (and problems) in learning the foreign language. The teachers will gain this extra time for they will be freed of the boring, repetitive, rote-learning aspects of language teaching, which will be taken over by machines that never get bored. The teachers will then be able to use their unique human qualities in the teaching process rather than being used as machines, as they are now.

As Logan says in *Individualized Foreign Language Learning: An Organic Process* (p. 15),

... the accent shifts from teaching to learning. The teacher leaves center stage and assumes a different role. It is becoming increasingly clear that 'teaching is not where it's at.'
So, what might such a language learning program look like? It might more closely resemble an out-patient medical clinic or a physical education program than a present-day language school.

First of all, a prospective language learner would come to the language learning center whenever, and as often (or rarely) as necessary (rather than when he is ordered to appear by the school).

And when he first showed up at the center, instead of the five-minutes-to-five-hours of placement tests given at present-day language schools, he might receive days of tests. But instead of being to place the student in a class, the purpose of these tests would be to assess exactly where the student is in his or her language learning, and what the student’s individual needs and ability and learning style are. Then, by comparing this information with similar information on thousands of other language learners, the language learning center could devise a learning program specifically for the student as an individual.

Next, the learner would receive perhaps several days, or even weeks, of training in how to use the facilities and in how to proceed with learning the language with a minimum of outside guidance.

The learning center itself would be organized not into areas to teach the language but rather into areas to learn the language. Learners would move about the facilities freely according to their needs rather than be imprisoned in a classroom.

The learner’s individual learning program might include work with a book or several books or no book at all. It might include work with a language teaching machine or it might not. It might or might not include group work, work in pairs, work with a tutor, self-study outside of the learning center, or any of many other possibilities. For some students, it might even include time spent in a traditional language class while for others contact with a ‘teacher’ might be minimal or not necessary at all. But whatever the details of an individual’s learning program, his or her progress would be monitored by the learning center staff, and he or she would receive additional training, advice, or counseling as necessary.

The details of the organization and facilities of such a language learning center would depend on the local situation and the needs of the learners, but the facilities themselves might include things not yet dreamed of as being helpful in learning a foreign language simply because they did not fit in the past anywhere in a language teaching program.

As Papalia says, ‘Attention should be focused not primarily on pedagogical theories but on the learners, with the purpose of adapting teaching to their specific needs’ (Papalia 1976, p. 62).

The sad fact is however, that what gets taught in the foreign language programs of the present is only what can be taught in a foreign language teaching program, and that is not necessarily what a foreign language student needs to learn. And although language classes may be the most efficient way to teach a language, or even to study it, they are not the most efficient way to learn a language.
Finally, to return to the original issue raised at the beginning of this article, what alternative is there to the government subsidizing the present unsuccessful language education system?

Instead of paying language programs according to the number of students enrolled in them, why not pay the programs according to how quickly their students progress in their language learning?

Or, even better, why not pay language learners directly for their efforts in learning the language?

That is, a regular nationwide ‘TOEFL-like’ testing program could be set up in each foreign language deemed important to the national interest. Then, based on the assessed national needs for speakers of each language, a direct award system (which could be periodically readjusted) could be worked out whereby language learners would receive monetary rewards from the government every time they improved their score on the test. Whether they used this money to buy more books, to pay tuition at a language school, to pay a membership fee at a language learning center, to take a jet plane in order to study the language in a foreign country, or to get drunk would be entirely up to the individual. Each individual would be able to progress in his or her own language learning as he or she saw fit. And language programs would be forced to become more efficient to survive.

Such a system would at last break the stranglehold held on the field of language education at present by language teachers and would instead force the creation of language learning systems.

Foreign language learning is too important to be left to the foreign language teachers. If we really have the best interests of language learners at heart, then we will tear down the language schools (which were built to provide facilities to teach the language) and replace them with language learning centers which are built to help people learn foreign languages.

The final questions we must ask ourselves then is whether the foreign language learner should continue to be sacrificed in order to maintain the present system of language education or should the present position of the language teacher be sacrificed in order to develop a new system dedicated to language learning rather than language teaching.

REFERENCES


