Front-Page Dialogue

Teaching for Proficiency: The Conversion Principle

Note from the editor: Front-page dialogue was established as a way in which teachers of Russian can share their views on a special topic of philosophical and practical interest to the classroom. This year's topic has been "Teaching for Proficiency." Andrew Corin of Pomona College reports on "A Czech to Serbo-Croatian Conversion Course at the Defense Language Institute" in this issue. This report will continue in the summer issue. Please send in your responses to the ideas presented here, as well as your own philosophical thoughts on new teaching strategies. (Length doesn't matter; let's just keep the "dialogue" going!)

A Czech to Serbo-Croatian Conversion Course at the Defense Language Institute

0. **Background.** Throughout 1993 and continuing into 1994 the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, California has been conducting accelerated (intensive) courses in Serbo-Croatian. This is a report on one such course conducted over the twelve weeks of June, July and August, 1993. Because of its innovative, indeed experimental, character and the far-reaching implications of some of the lessons which can be drawn from it, it should be of interest to the broad ACTR readership. Because of the severe time-pressure under which we operated, systematic data gathering on student performance controlled against background, learning style and instructional technique was impossible during the course. These lessons must therefore be phrased in the form of hypotheses requiring further testing, or even impressions requiring both formulation and testing.

The normal basic course of study at DLI is one year. The institute's on-going program in Serbo-Croatian was discontinued several years ago, so that the supply of fully-trained Serbo-Croatian linguists ceased to be replenished. In response to the current international situation, the armed forces have therefore been attempting to train students in Serbo-Croatian at an accelerated pace.   In the course on which I am reporting, testing (DLPT — Defense Language Proficiency Test) began after ten weeks of instruction, so that the effective length of the course was in fact ten weeks. Despite this severe limitation, our goal was to develop proficiency sufficient for students to utilize the language in carrying out real-world tasks under demanding and often dangerous conditions. Specific proficiency goals were set at reading 1+, listening 1+, speaking 1.

1. **Students.** Our students were forty U.S. Army enlisted personnel. All had previously completed the DLI basic course in Czech. During the course we discovered that their aptitude for language learning varied considerably, as did their learning styles and motivation for learning the language.

2. **Instructors.** From the moment when it was informed of the imminent arrival of the forty students, DLI had two weeks to organize all aspects of the course. The goal was to divide the students into four sections of ten each, with two instructors assigned to each section. Since DLI's on-going Serbo-Croatian program had been disbanded several years earlier, an entire team of instructors, preferably drawn from a variety of ethnic and dialect backgrounds,

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News and advertising for the spring issue of the ACTR Letter is due April 15.

—*Conversion Course, from page 1* had to be hired and assembled. The entire team was not yet assembled as of the first day of classes, but we ultimately built up to a situation in which we had seven instructors plus the coordinator. The latter taught in the classroom in addition to his coordinating and course development roles. Aside from the coordinator, only two of the instructors had language-teaching experience, while a third had general pedagogical training. A key to the project's success was a one-week seminar in the foundations of language-teaching methodology given to those instructors who arrived in time for this, or a modification of this for those who arrived later. None taught classes before they had received some methodological orientation.

3. **Materials.** Virtually none of the usual study requisites were available for this course. The students had no textbook. Older versions of the Army's Basic Course in *Serbo-Croatian* were available, as was a test version of a newer Foreign Service Institute text, but these were judged to be unsuitable. No reference grammar was available to students. Small pocket dictionaries became available only in the second half of the course. We did have available newspapers and magazines from Serbia and Montenegro on current subscription at the institute's library, as well as the library's small and woefully outdated, but nevertheless useful reference and monograph collection. We also had access to Scola broadcasts from Zagreb and Belgrade. Aside from these, the only materials available came from the instructors' and coordinators' personal collections.

4.0 **Methods and strategies.** The obvious disproportion between the goals of the course and our resources (including the mere ten effective weeks allotted to the course) dictated strategies and specific methods. Since our students had studied another Slavic language and there was obviously no time for a thorough introduction to the grammar, the general strategies chosen were conversion and immersion. The classroom methods chosen were task-based and content-based instruction. Content-based instruction is a standard com-

ponent of DLI courses. The heavy emphasis on task-based instruction is not.

4.1 Conversion. By conversion I mean that we assumed that students already had set in their minds a grammar and vocabulary in most respects congruent to that of the target language. Rather than teaching students the target grammar and vocabulary, we immediately exposed them to normal native usage, set them to work on communicative tasks, and began the course of content-based instruction, assuming that over time they would literally convert their Czech proficiency into Serbo-Croatian proficiency. It need be mentioned that our assumptions concerning students' proficiency in Czech (at or near level 3 in all skills) were not in all cases borne out.

4.2 Role of immersion. Immersion was considered an integral component of the conversion process. Students were assumed to have proficiency in all skills in Czech, and to be able immediately to begin the process of substituting SC items for Czech, and of making adjustments where the lexical and grammatical systems of the two languages were not congruent. Continual active use of the language from the outset of the course — testing hypotheses about effective communication in SC and receiving maximal feedback on actual attempts at communication — was considered imperative as the quickest and most effective means for discovering and mastering Czech-Serbo-Croatian correspondences. Of course, the time pressure under which we operated provided a further incentive for an immersion approach.

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4.3 The overall communicative strategy was envisioned as a recycling of the skills of description, *narration, and to the extent possible argumentation,* at ever higher levels. Due to the overall inexperience of the instructor team and experimental nature of the conversion method itself, this general plan could not consistently be followed through, especially in the earlier

portions of the course. Where it was, though, it proved strikingly successful.

4.4 As already noted, the primary classroom method was task-*based and content-based instruction.* These two approaches are related and in many cases overlap. They share the assumption that language learning is most effective when higher intellectual processes are brought into play and the target language is used to analyze and interact with the real world. Both require for proper implementation an awareness of fundamentals and issues of language-teaching methodology beyond what would be considered a professional minimum. It was in this respect that we faced our greatest challenge. Though the task-based/content-based approach could not be applied in a consistent and skillful manner in the beginning, by the end of the course most instructors were developing an ability to productively apply the method.

5. **Course organization.**

5.1 Content areas. DLI courses typically involve instruction in geography, history, economics, politics and culture of the target culture, as well as military affairs, including both organization and operations of the U. S. Army and that of the target country, and the ability to discuss these in the target language. Since it is crucial for effective functioning in the target culture, and can be discussed at a relatively low proficiency level, we spent a disproportionate amount of time on geography (three of the ten effective weeks). All instruction was supported — indeed based on — authentic materials ranging from tourist guidebooks and maps to articles from the daily and periodic press dealing with or only mentioning the topic under discussion, articles from reference works and technical journals (e.g. on military science), railway timetables, and, of course, Scola. In short, we utilized whatever was available. In

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only a few instances did we utilize contrived "pedagogical" materials.

5.2 Daily schedule. At the beginning we devoted two hours each day to our "main topic" — geography, history, etc., and one or two hours each to press and conversation (bearing in mind that "conversation" classes were often based on articles from the press), with one hour for Scola, for a total of six organized hours of instruction. A seventh hour (usually that immediately following lunch) was designated a "processing" hour for individual study with an instructor available to answer questions or lead whatever discussions might spontaneously arise.

5.3 Teaming and rotation of instructors. Instructors were teamed in pairs, to the extent possible so as to reflect a variety of dialect, ethnic background and teaching styles. Whenever possible, "four-handed" teaching was encouraged, and when the roles of the two instructors were designed to complement each other the results in general justified the additional expense in time and energy. At three week intervals teams of instructors rotated to another section of students so as to increase the variety of language, cultural background and teaching styles to which students would be exposed.

6. **Projects.** The incongruity between our classroom setting and the real-life tasks which students might soon have to perform quickly became apparent. This problem seemed especially acute because we had reason to believe that some of these students would be deployed without having an opportunity for advanced specialized study. In order to meet this need for an ability to perform in specific real-life situations, but nevertheless more for the benefit in terms of general language acquisition and as the epitome of the task-based approach, we introduced a system of projects based on real-world premises. We began in the second week with a classroom exercise in which students prepared, using whatever maps, slides, tourist guides, and instructors' personal knowledge we could muster, a plan for their unit to deploy to

Mostar and occupy it as part of a UN peacekeeping force. This was essentially a level-zero+ to level-two task for all skills, but had enough facets to generate genuine interest — locating major strategic objects such as approaches to the city, bridges and other crucial infrastructure, major political and social institutions in the town, basic demographics, etc., etc. By the middle of the course we had made group and individual projects a regular activity, with at least one hour devoted to them each day. Some of the more successful were preparations for and execution of a road block and car-search exercise with students manning the road block and instructors (and a few unsuspecting passers-by) playing the role of drivers with various contrived and genuine circumstances; first aid and medical evacuation exercises in which students played the role of wounded or injured personnel, the personnel attempting to aid them, and hospital dispatchers; interrogation. In short, as the course progressed we approached ever closer the concept of performing regular army training exercises in the target language, to the extent that this could be done given our daily schedule and logistics, and in an environment without security clearances. Other "cultural" projects such as cooking were also carried out.

7. **Outcome.** Oral proficiency ratings from the eleventh-week testing were: 3 (2 students), 2+ (1 student), 2 (11 students), 1+ (17 students), 1 (9 students). Reading scores were: 2+ (1 student), 2 (5 students), 1+ (18 students), 1 (16 students). Listening scores were: 2+ (1 student), 2 (1 student), 1+ (10 students), 1 (21 students); 0+ (7 students). Reading and listening scores cannot be considered to reflect students actual proficiency levels, as the DLPT version 2 test for Serbo-Croatian, in its first large-scale application, proved to be woefully inadequate.

8. **General lessons.** First, the outcome in terms of proficiency ratings should be viewed against the limitations which we faced in preparing and conducting the course, and our lack of information concerning students' Czech proficiency coming into the course. One cannot escape the

conclusion that with adequate time for course and materials preparation as well as instructor development, and especially taking into consideration the lessons of this first attempt at a large-scale conversion course, even a significantly higher and more consistent outcome could be achieved in the same ten week period using the same general methodological principles, but perfected through practice. It is this prospect, as well as the fact that in such an intensive environment we were able to observe effects (of various instructional strategies) which would have escaped notice in a more leisurely course, which gives the lessons of this course their interest and urgency.

It must be noted that based on our experience, the optimal outcome would result from a radical break with certain time-honored principles of (Slavic) language instruction. Among these are the use of a textbook and the use of a classroom as the primary locus of instruction.

9.0 **Specific lessons derived from the course.**

9.1 *Efficacy of the conversion principle.* The general conclusion would be that it works. However:

9.1.1 *"Garbage in, garbage out!"* It seems reasonable to hypothesize that in a 1) relatively short and 2) conversion-type course of the type which we conducted, possible outcome has to be limited by proficiency in the previous Slavic language. In short, students do not enter the course as equals. Therefore the base-line goal for any student should be successful conversion, i.e. attaining the same level of proficiency which exists or existed for the previous Slavic language. We were wrong to assume that all of our students had a fully functional Czech grammar, and set ourselves an inappropriate task by stating our goals absolutely (i.e. reading and listening 1+, speaking 1).

Самый легкий способ завоевать аудиторию — покороче!

9.1.2 The conversion approach forces us to deal with students' learning styles in a novel manner. The "traditional" textbook course is based on study of grammatical structure through exercises and vocabulary-building through memorization, with an admixture of communicative activity. Analytical learners flourish in such an environment (at least in terms of their perceptions of successful learning), while global learners are subject to frustration and the perception of an inordinately difficult task. Leaving aside intermediate approaches, the conversion/immersion approach dictates an opposite orientation. This is the optimal environment for a global learner. Analytical learners feel frustrated by the demand to communicate using forms and structure which they do not completely control. A great deal of frustration would have been avoided in our course had reference *grammars* and good dictionaries been available from the start at least for those who could benefit from their use. A certain admixture of analytical study for some students did prove beneficial. Toward the end of the course, in response to demand, we instituted classes in translation of sophisticated journalistic prose articles into English. Not only did this result in an immediate lessening of tensions, but it also yielded for some students a rapid improvement in their ability to accurately assess the information contained in such articles. Another striking related observation is that use of computerized grammatical exercises of the "plug-and-chug" non-contextualized or marginally contextualized variety resulted in rapid and noticeable (though unfortunately not measurable in our circumstances) increases in accuracy on the part of some students. The obvious hypothesis would be that it is the analytical learners who benefited from these exercises. It also became clear that an admixture of explicit grammatical discussion is useful, though we reached no conclusions as to the most effective means of doing this without sacrificing the conversion/immersion principle. The overall lesson for dealing with varying learning styles would be that while insisting on task- and content-based organization of the course, it is necessary to employ a sufficient admixture of analytic-type activities to meet the needs of this type of student, and to avoid simply reversing the type of prejudice which has existed in "traditional" analytic-type courses.

9.1.3 A further serious implication of the success or potential of the conversion approach concerns graduate-level courses in a second *Slavic language*. Since the conversion approach promises more rapid development of proficiency in students with the necessary background, it should be strongly favored in the graduate-school environment. The benefit to the students is obvious, while institutions may save money by attaining a satisfactory outcome from fewer terms of instruction. The negative effect of instituting conversion as the principle for teaching second Slavic languages would be that it would eliminate the enrollment of true beginners. As we know, such enrollments can go a long way toward justifying to the institution's "bean counters" the expense of the course.

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9.2 Task-based approach. The basic motivation for this approach is well-known: by involving higher intellectual faculties in language learning we achieve a more permanent, less ephemeral learning, especially where it is possible to generate genuine interest in a task. In our experience the combination of content- and task-based instruction did indeed have this effect (i.e. of stimulating genuine interest in material). It should be borne in mind that not all tasks which generated genuine interest were connected to content-based instruction. For example, a unit on using personal ads from a magazine, culminating in compilation by each student of a personal ad (seeking companionship) and an attempt by the group to determine which student had authored each ad, generated a most animated response and effective, innovative language use from most students.

Implications of the task-based approach go far beyond their application in a conversion course, and can be linked to the preconditions for successful communicative activity in any elementary course. Specifically, as a precondition for beneficial communicative activity it is necessary to get the skeleton of the grammar introduced as soon as possible. In the conversion environment this is not an issue, since we assume control of a linguistic system related and congruent to that of Serbo-Croatian. However, for a non-conversion elementary course, preparation for communicative activity implies at least this one principle of course organization. An approach which introduces the case system slowly across the entire first year makes a task-based approach with its associated benefits impossible, or at least introduces artificial limitations which will unnecessarily handicap any effort at communicative activity. A "first pass" through the case system must be completed early in the first term. Experience shows that this is quite practicable.

9.3 Textbooks. It is time to realize that the primary resource for language teaching is the instructor, not the textbook. A textbook, after all, is fundamentally a record of how some instructor has organized his or her course. It provides a valuable reference, but when employed by another instructor it inevitably robs a course of spontaneity, and the instructor of the opportunity to meet the needs of a particular group of students and to harness his or her own talents and inclinations. This is true even if the textbook being used is itself based on authentic materials. Our experience suggests that one can not only make do without a text, but if (hopefully current) authentic materials are available and skillfully utilized, the gain in flexibility and spontaneity, augmented by the increased possibility of generating genuine interest in the content itself, can make possible a rate of proficiency growth be-

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yond that which could be achieved in a textbook-based course.

Implications of a reorientation away from textbooks (as as a basis for course organization!) are of course far-reaching, though they are really no more than corollaries of what is already known about the components of effective language teaching. One of the most important of these is the time devoted to daily lesson planning. Any experienced instructor can "wing" a class, but building into a daily plan curves of complexity and oscillation in pacing (fast-slow), planning how to build students up to a task, but most importantly defining the goals for a class and adapting activities to meet those goals, is a time-consuming process. In a non-textbook-based course even more time must be spent on class preparation, though the pay-back is worth the effort. The obvious inference to be drawn from this is that language is best taught by someone who can devote his or her full energy to the job (i.e. not professors). Institutions, and especially small colleges, will not be comfortable with this conclusion, but it is obvious and unavoidable. At the same time, there is a certain tension between this conclusion and the need for instructors who understand the structure of the language. In the absence of a textbook, which contains someone else's articulation of the grammar, the instructor is left to his or her own background in deciding how to structure the course and schedule the introduction and discussion of grammatical topics. Thus, ceteris *paribus* (though of course they never are), the ideal language instructor is one for whom this (as opposed to scholarly research) is a full-time occupation, who is trained in language-teaching methodology, and has a solid grounding in the structure of the language (e.g. an M.A. in Russian or Slavic linguistics). The worst possible outcome of elementary language teaching can be predicted for an instructor who lacks any of these characteristics. Again, small colleges in particular will feel uncomfortable with this point of view, but it is no more than a restatement of what is otherwise known about effective language teaching, given new impetus here

by the opportunity to put into effect new principles of course organization which promise to yield a superior ratio of outcome to time of study. There is ultimately nothing new in emphasizing the benefits of having language instructors concentrate their full energies on that occupation.

Nevertheless, in the absence of textbooks, we require, especially in order to meet the needs of analytical learners, reference grammars structured so as to corre-*spond to their intended use*. A project to identify the attributes of a useful reference grammar, and where necessary produce such grammars for the Slavic languages, would allow instructors to devote their energies to matters of course organization, materials development and daily lesson planning.

9.4 Classroom as the locus of instruc-*tion*. Virtually every language course is conducted in a classroom. Excursions are exceptional or indeed rare. One might argue that outside the target culture this is unavoidable. Our experience at DLI suggests another approach. Over the course of the ten effective weeks our attitude gradually shifted from one of using the classroom as the locus of training toward one of using it as a "home base" where we prepare for training exercises which simulate real life. Though ultimately only a small proportion of student time was spent out of the classroom, to the extent that our attitude changed not only did morale and interest in language acquisition increase, but students did indeed rapidly develop the ability to deal with real or simulated situations out of any proportion to what could be expected of first-year students regardless of previous experience with another Slavic language. This result is not unexpected. On the one hand, military personnel typically use a classroom only where necessary for pr*eparation for training*, actual training exercises themselves being conducted in as realistic a setting as possible. It should not be surprising, therefore, that our students felt confined in a classroom and relieved when they were able to perform in a more realistic setting. On the other hand, the project-based approach to teaching is no more than taking the task-based ap-

proach to its ultimate logical conclusion. The same considerations which would lead us to predict an increased rate of acquisition using task-based instruction would lead us to predict the maximal rate of acquisition using a project-based approach. Of course the classroom, with its blackboards and assorted other accouterments, remains a useful, indeed invaluable tool. All I am suggesting is that it is time to reevaluate its function in the language training process.

9.5 Testing. Finally, I have not gone into this topic in detail because some lessons are self-evident, while I have no specific new suggestions to put forward based on the experience of this course. It goes without saying that a task-based and content-based conversion course requires entirely new models of testing, but these remain to be devised and explored. Ultimately, proficiency — the ability to perform specific tasks and the degree of facility in performing them — is the final arbiter of success.

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Ребенок — это остров любопытства в море вопросительных знаков.

Если вы стали похожи на свою фотографию в паспорте, срочно идите в отпуск.