

Blast from the Past: Revival of the Audio-Lingual Method

by Touria Ghaffari

Forming a habit is part of a learning experience, and the audio-lingual method is associated with this through rote repetition and substitution exercises. Although this method has long lost its popularity and use among curriculum designers and teachers, it nevertheless remains a familiar way of learning with older language learners.

Upon arrival in the United States, the non-English speaking immigrants in particular get absorbed into their own communities and may remain there for life. The security these environments provide would mean that they will see no need to learn English and instead depend on their family and friends to perform their daily tasks. The availability of cable programs and press in various languages and access to the Internet has greatly reduced the need for learning English.

During the summer of 2015, I had the opportunity to teach some groups of older adult English language learners who had been in this country anywhere from one to thirty years. They had taken language classes regularly, but could hardly communicate beyond a beginner level. After a heart-to-heart conversation and getting their feedback, I realized that they were confused by the spiral curricula, which are structured to build on previous knowledge but which to them were rather an unconventional way of presenting materials for learning the language. What they most wanted was to be able to speak without the need to think about the sentences and their structures. It was then that I dug out two books I had not taught for decades: *English Sentence Structure* (Krohn, 1971) and *English Pattern Practices* (Lado & Fries, 1958). With the help of a more visual book, *Everyday Situations for Communicating in English* (Rauff & Rau, 1993), I picked frequent situations in which these learners might find themselves, including a bank, a post office, a restaurant, a train station, an airport, and a city street.

A limited but high-frequency vocabulary was identified for each situation, and some sentences were prepared purely for repetition. These varied in length, and backward buildup was used to ease the utterance when needed. Where it was possible, other relevant words were substituted and dialogues were created to expand the practice. Once students were comfortable with the sentences and their meaning, they were grouped in pairs or in small groups to practice the phrases they had learned by looking at the corresponding picture in the book and describing what was happening in it.

The following is an example of one substitution exercise. The teacher asks and writes the question on the board. Then the answer is written and the word being substituted is underlined. The students repeat it a few times, and when the teacher decides that they are comfortable with it, the sentence is erased off the board.

T: What can you see in the street?	T: I can see a <u>man</u> .
T: Man:	S: I can see a man.
T: Woman:	S: I can see a woman.
T: Dog:	S: I can see a dog.
T: Cab:	S: I can see a cab.
T: Bus:	S: I can see a bus.
T: Pedestrian:	S: I can see a pedestrian.

The exercise is then continued by substituting other subject pronouns.

Another practice is based on repetition of sentences describing different sections of the picture. In the following set of sentences, chosen from the many prepared for this lesson, the modal verb “can” and the dummy subject “there is” are also targeted in the practice:

I can see a man walking in the street.

I can see a man getting on the bus.

I can see a car in front of the hotel.

There is a man at the bus stop.

There is a mailbox on the sidewalk.

There is a subway station near the pharmacy.

The lesson continues with the practice of a few short dialogues and role plays by the students. One conversation might be:

A: Where can I buy a bottle of shampoo?

B: You can buy a bottle of shampoo at the pharmacy.

A: Is there a pharmacy near here?

B: Yes, there is a pharmacy next to the deli.

By the end of the summer, the miracle that this method brought about was to give students greater self-confidence and motivation to speak and perform tasks on their own at the bank, in a restaurant, and at the post office, among many everyday places in which they would find themselves. What is worth noting is that if the exercises associated with the audio-lingual method are used within limits within the materials that an ESL book provides for beginner levels, they can result in the formation of correct patterns for the adult learner and the risk of their relying on second-language fossilization will be greatly reduced.

References

- Krohn, R. (1971). *English sentence structure* (5th ed.). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Lado, R., & Fries, C. (1958). *English pattern practices*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Rauff, R., & Rau, R. (1993). *Everyday situations for communicating in English*. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Online Resources

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Audio-lingual_method

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Language_pedagogy

<http://esl.fis.edu/teachers/support/factors.htm>

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