

MOTIVATIONAL ASPECTS OF FL STUDY: SELF-EVALUATION CRITERIA

It is an interesting psychological observation, whose causes are not obvious, that the individual engaged in the study of a FL (foreign language) has some very definite ideas about the progress he believes he is making. Perhaps this pertains to the area of "folk linguistics" which Hoeningwald (1966) brought to our attention in a most interesting and perceptive article. People appear to have strong feelings about what constitutes knowing a language and who is or is not a bilingual. A person who is capable of uttering a few mechanical and superficial sentences in a FL with good pronunciation and accurate syntax is a "good bilingual" and "knows the language well" while a person who is quite fluent and is capable of communicating over a wide range of situations, but whose pronunciation is foreign and whose syntax is inaccurate, but perhaps not more so than the conversational speech of the average native, is nevertheless not considered to be a "good bilingual." A student capable of reading advanced materials in a FL but who cannot understand the spoken language may minimize his actual achievement and knowledge of that FL. A student who speaks a FL with halting hesitations and uses stylistic circumlocutions to make up for a lack of vocabulary richness may grossly underestimate his actual knowledge of the language by a tendency to compare this performance to the effortless and automatic expressiveness he experiences in his mother tongue.

It is not known to what extent these kinds of self-generated presumptions affect the student's maintenance of motivation in FL study but it is not unreasonable to suppose that they may sometimes be a source of discouragement and a cause of loss of interest. The FL teacher can help the student develop more objective and more realistic evaluation criteria for assessing progress and achievement. Students can be given some insight into just how complex a system language is by pointing

out the amount of knowledge they must have in order to be able to speak their mother tongue as they do and not be misled by the apparent effortless with which they speak it. They may thus gain a greater understanding about why it is that learning a FL requires so much effort and perhaps view with greater respect the "modest" achievements they attain at various stages. The FL teacher could further carefully examine his own brand of "folk linguistics" to see whether he is rewarding meaningful achievement rather than superficialities. Does he insist on an inordinate degree of correct pronunciation and syntax too soon or even at any time? Does he appreciate the student's achievement in terms that are relevant to the latter's ability and effort rather than in terms of some general standard that may be unrealistic or irrelevant for this particular student? Does he have realistic expectations about how much progress can be made under the conditions he is teaching? These are important questions because the teacher is a source of feedback for the student whether this process is made explicit or remains unconscious and unstated.

Finally, the student's parents and their version of "folk linguistics" may be an influential source of encouragement or discouragement to him. In view of the widespread social, cultural, and political forces in favor of FL study which has traditionally existed in this country, this mounting negativism is both paradoxical and alarming. Much of it can undoubtedly be attributed to a gap between what the parents define as progress in a FL and what their judgment is about how close or how far their children approximate it. Again, are their expectations realistic? Are their evaluation criteria accurate and relevant?

To take proper account of the existence of folk linguistics would involve activities of the following sort: to determine what notions the student has about language and critically discuss their validity with him; to make the student aware of the true complexity of language so that he may appreciate the difficulty of the task he sets for himself; to justify in terms that are meaningful to the student the relevancy of the classroom activities and study assignments.

