

# Languages... a gift or a discipline?

Paolo Iotti

***Is a natural bent for the study of foreign languages a gift of nature or an ability within everyone's reach? We take a look at the natural ability of the students combined with the teacher's tone of voice.***

"I'm no good at languages..." "A second language? I understand it when I read it, but I find speaking a real problem..."

How many times do second-language teachers come up against this type of objection?

What does "to have no natural flair for foreign languages" mean? In this article, we will try to examine what factors constitute a natural flair for languages, and we will look at the techniques which the teacher can use in order to encourage these factors.

First of all, we can consider some facts:

A person who was born and brought up in a country where a Slavic language is spoken will not generally have much difficulty in learning the sounds of Italian, whereas a person born and educated in Spain will probably find it very difficult to detect and repeat the more subtle tones in the English language precisely; furthermore, the Spanish, Italians and English find it very difficult to approach a language such as Japanese, or the various languages derived from Chinese.

Dr. Alfred Tomatis (Paris) explains all this from the point of view of an analysis of the sounds in various languages: the way of speaking in Slavic languages

covers an extremely wide range of frequencies, whilst Spanish is based on a very limited range of sounds. Therefore, in short, it is easier for someone born in Moscow to learn languages than it is for someone born in Madrid.

Thus, a first answer to our initial question could be: whether someone has a gift for languages or not depends primarily on an auditory factor. We are gifted in languages when our ear is able to distinguish a wide range of sounds, and we are not gifted when the range of sounds which our ear perceives is narrower than that used in the language which we want to study.

However, the auditory aspect alone does not resolve the problem: in fact, we can see how it is possible to use a second language successfully without necessarily being able to pronounce all the sounds we hear when the language is spoken by a mother-tongue speaker: a desire to communicate is enough.

But it can not always be taken for granted that people want to communicate.

Many people, both adults and children, have a certain reluctance to relate to others, a reluctance of which the person is not always aware: most of the time, it is an unconscious defence-mechanism.

So here is a second answer: the more people feel at their ease when they communicate with others, where they do not feel it necessary to construct defence-mechanisms to protect themselves from the judgement of others or from their own desire to always give off their best, the better their ability when it comes to foreign languages.

Dr. Tomatis has highlighted that there exist very strong connections between auditory ability and the ability to relate to others: it is in fact possible to make an accurate calculation of a person's relational ability by considering the results of a particular audiometric test on their ear and on the bone-structure of their head. By combining various research studies in the fields of audiology and phonology, Dr. Tomatis has created a new field of study - audio-psycho-phonology.

Without entering into the medical aspects, we may try to examine some of the essential data in order to understand how a teacher may, armed with this knowledge, enhance his students' ability with respect to foreign-language study. In other words, we will try to see how it is possible to improve the auditory and relational capacity of the students who work with us.

### **Auditory capacity**

*"One of the most important functions of the ear is to load the brain with stimuli, in such a way that it can derive benefit from a great quantity of energy. In order for the brain to recharge itself, an enormous quantity of sensorial stimuli per second are effectively needed, for many hours per day."*

These stimuli can come from external sources, but they can also be produced by the subjects themselves, when they speak or sing: people are the first to listen to themselves when they sing. Earlier, the different ranges of frequency used in various languages was mentioned: British English is based on sounds which go up to 6,000 Hz, Spanish up to 2,500 Hz and so on.

This is as far as the spoken language goes.

If we look at songs, things change a great deal!

*It has been seen that a singing voice, under good listening conditions, and with the body correctly positioned, has an extremely useful characteristic for language teachers: it provides a high charge of acute frequencies, between 800 and 8,000 Hz; these*

*acute frequencies are perceived by the singer above all by means of transmission via bone vibrations; this characteristic makes singing a primordial source of cortical stimuli.*

To sum up, it seems clear from a medical point of view that singing, used systematically in our teaching programme, is an important method of dealing with the auditory problems of those students who are not strong in languages: far from being just a time-filler to use now and then!

But we also have to take other medical data into consideration in order to help our work to progress. If we want our students to be able to store and re-use what they have learned, memory is a fundamental notion.

*"It has been noticed that, with the help of stimuli with acute frequencies on the cybernetic network (of the neuro-physiological system), the traces which make up the memory are multiplied. Contrary to what is commonly believed, the memory is not exclusively located in the brain - it is distributed throughout the body, via the various circuits of nerves present.*

We all know by experience that, the more intensely our body takes part in learning something, the more effective our memorisation of it (see TPR). We have all realised that it is easier to remember a text if it has been put to music and if we sing it. This is not surprising, since it is the melody which imprints itself on

our minds first: *the body, and therefore the person's memory, already remembers it thanks to the action of the vestibular ear (in the inner ear): the words only arrive later, and are imprinted on the underlying rhythmic cadences.* In short, the music is the plot, the background and the support: the words are added later.

Singing thus activates our whole body via our inner ear, which has a reciprocal and complete relationship with the rest of the body.

Thus we shall verify (as if there were any need to do so) the importance of knowing how to choose music and songs which are appropriate for our students; they are suitable because of their vocal extension, because there is a good relationship between music and text, because the mixing is well-done (see Paolo Iotti, "How to choose and use songs in Language Teaching" in Resource n.2 1996, pp. 11-12).

For students who do not have a flair for languages, songs therefore constitute an essential tool that cannot be neglected; it may only be substituted, perhaps, by a long stay in a country where the target language is spoken.

Having said this, we should now examine the specific effects of singing on the individual, thinking particularly of our teaching methods and our students. Here is some more medical information, whose practical significance will immediately be explored.

*"Singing acts on the vestibular cochlea (inner ear) in such a way as to determine the position of the body, that is to say its verticality. In a vertical position, which is more suitable than others for listening actively and attentively, a*

*person's control over the voice reaches maximum effectiveness. Under these conditions, a sort of 'audio-vocal cycle' allows a person to control his or her voice well. This cycle runs between the larynx and the right ear, via transmission through bone vibrations. In this process, certain disturbances (discharge sounds) are eliminated and one obtains a better perception of fundamental sounds, enriched by a mass of sounds which are as acute as they are dense."*

We should not be intimidated by the complex terminology; in practise, it means that, through a series of chain reactions, singing provides a considerable charge of energy which is capable of reawakening the memory circuits. Thanks to acute frequencies, from a certain level onwards, the stimulus itself reaches ever deeper areas of the memory, until it disappears, so to speak, into the reservoir of the mind.

To recap, singing improves one's self-image and it facilitates the memory by causing resonance in the body, which is effectively the 'operations room' of the memory. In the light of what has been shown up to now, let us try to analyse what actually happens in a classroom when we sing together; each person hears his or her own voice, and the voices of the others. As we have seen, this will produce in all those present a very intense bodily (cortical) change, and a vertical position suitable for active and conscious listening. At the same time, it frees the memory, enhances self-awareness, and puts everyone in a situation which is more conducive to creativity.

Personally, I have verified that if periods of listening to material recorded by mother-tongue

speakers are preceded by a period of singing together in the second language, surprisingly good results with respect to the acquisition of an incredibly well-formulated pronunciation are obtained.

I have noticed that at least 4 or 5 minutes of singing are needed; if the period of singing is too short, it does not enable all the above-mentioned phenomena to be set in motion.

We can thus make a fundamental observation about our initial theme, which is also our first operative answer: the act of singing together leads to the creation of some conditions which are exceptionally favourable for interiorisation, listening, and acting as a group, since everyone feels part of it. Let us ask ourselves: is this not exactly what every language teacher hopes will happen during the lesson?

#### **The ability to relate**

As we said at the start, ability in languages or the lack of it is not only an auditory problem, but also a relational one.

In cases where sound perception is good, but the student has little desire to expose himself or herself personally, language learning will be incomplete and not very functional.

For a relationship between teacher and student (or between person and person, regardless of whether they are children or adults) to be considered satisfactory, three conditions need to be satisfied within that relationship:

- that each person can accept himself or herself
- that each person can accept the

**other person as he or she is - that each person knows how to give and receive information.**

Let us look at the details of these three factors:

#### **1) that each person can accept himself or herself**

Being part of a relationship, at any level, means exposing oneself to some extent, whether one wants to or not, whether one is aware of it or not.

The acceptance of oneself entails one's self-perception and awareness as a physical entity and as a person who has particular qualities.

There are people who feel that they have no flair for foreign languages because, unconsciously, they perceive themselves as unworthy of communicating freely, either because they do not accept themselves completely, or because of a deep-rooted pessimism which prevents them from seeing their own positive qualities.

This does not mean that the teacher has to be a psychologist, but it should be remembered that for a student, especially if adolescent, a poor relationship with his or her own body is enough to produce a loss of interest and a decline in performance in the second language; if the student does not feel in tune with the surroundings, that may be enough for him or her to feel incapable of using the second language as a form of communication.

We should not forget, either - especially if they are at primary school - that the younger the

students are, the more their own self-perception is based on the affection which the teacher communicates to them, especially through non-verbal language and tone of voice.

As teachers, we should remember that getting to know our own merits and defects, that is to say, learning how to accept ourselves, is a key step towards professional success. Furthermore, we should not forget that our own self-image, and our opinion of our profession, will be evident from the way we behave; it will be clear if we are in love with our work as teachers, or if it is just something we tolerate as the lesser of two evils, but an ill nevertheless.

## **2) that each person can accept the other person as he or she is**

A relationship is meaningful and deep when I have a true idea about the person or people who are involved in the relationship with me. There can be no relationship if I always create my own ideas about people before knowing them. This is true for both children and adults. I know adults who have considerably improved their ability to learn languages since they realised, after a careful self-analysis, that they were much more interested in speaking and giving their opinions than in making the effort to listen to others.

If we start out with the idea that only we know what to say, we end up incapable of relating to others: what use is learning a foreign language if one is incapable of communicating?

As teachers, we should be aware

that accepting students as they are is decidedly difficult, because our acceptance implies an awareness of their potential, their abilities, and their specific ways of learning.

On this subject, bear in mind what Gardner says about multiple intelligence: traditional systems of education tend to reward only those students who learn in a logical-mathematical and linguistic way in the narrow sense: and yet there are students who will not learn if they don't see, do, or reflect, or if they don't have the time to re-elaborate what they have learned mentally.

The way I used to teach, I had an instinctive tendency to neglect to leave time for students to mull over new information in an intrapersonal, imaginative way. I unconsciously neglected those students who learned primarily in this way, and considered them not very gifted in languages. And although I was unaware of it, I undoubtedly communicated this message to them: "You are no good at languages." I contributed to the creation, within these students, of a far-from-positive self-image and, what's more, projected this image to the rest of the class. The truth is, I didn't have any students who were 'no good' at languages, it was my way of teaching which didn't take their way of learning into account...

Thinking especially of students in primary school, a few steps in one direction or another are enough to facilitate or inhibit a positive self-image.

Again, we as teachers should not forget that our students, especially in primary school, learn to accept others when they see how we accept them.

## **3) that each person knows how**

### **to give and receive information.**

This third factor is a direct consequence of our work on the previous two: the more a person works towards accepting himself or herself, the more he or she will be capable of giving information; the more we work towards accepting someone else, the more that person's ability to listen to others in an active manner will increase.

And communication starts to function.

### **The importance of the voice**

From a theoretical point of view, I believe that the vast majority of those who have taught, even for only a few years, will instantly agree with what has been explained above, and will believe that they act accordingly.

But between our desire to communicate and its effectiveness lies our tone of voice.

Independently of the content of the single words which we use with our students, we communicate other content and meaning through our manner and the tone of voice which we adopt both consciously and unconsciously. Our way of using our voice tells students if we value their dignity or not. And if, deep down, we do not value our students' dignity, we should not then complain if they seem ill-disposed towards communicating with us in a second language: fundamentally, this doesn't depend on the second language at all.

Our voice depends on our breathing, but we should add that, in its turn, our breathing is inextricably linked to the ability to identify, confront and deal with our own inner tensions; if I am not yet able to accept and love myself as a person, it is unlikely that my breathing will be deep enough to allow me to speak in a sure voice: in some cases, my voice will sound arrogant, in others, yielding, but never sure and sustained.

It should also be added that, if I can control my breathing, I can also balance my heartbeat, and

deal with tension better; and those who have taught, even for a short time, know that tension is rather frequent in a teaching environment. This is how that which is commonly called 'the students' natural bent for language study' can depend partially on a long and patient self-analysis or the quest for deep and regular breathing. This is, in short, because every person's voice is directly connected to the relationship which he has with himself and his own body, as well as with his own physical make-up. Even at an unconscious level, our voice tells a lot about what we have inside and what we are: under certain aspects, our voice is our persona. Certainly, our physical make-up is also influential: a small, flat nose which lacks space between itself and the pharynx will have difficulty in amplifying low sounds; nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that one cannot modify one's own voice. Much of our interior balance and our ability to listen can be found in our voice. Not only is it possible to work on these aspects, it is a duty to do so.

To start off with, one efficient way is to ask oneself often: "With what tone of voice did I say that? What meaning did my voice add to my words?"

And again: "What did my tone of voice reveal - including unconsciously - to the other person about the consideration in which I hold him or her? (How often, teachers answer students in a tone of voice which tends to inhibit or ridicule them?)

The next step is: "What does my

way of acting, the voice of my self-esteem, say? In either a positive or a negative sense, my way of presenting myself reveals the image that I want others to have of me..."

Starting to think about one's own being and voice in these terms means freeing oneself from false goals, and from implicit messages which sometimes invalidate our communication. Starting to pay attention to one's own voice is a first fundamental step both towards a 'better' voice, and towards a better relationship with oneself.

Perceiving oneself as a voice which has the potential to express if and how we value others is an excellent gift to oneself. Nor can it be taken for granted, since in today's world, we are increasingly forced to adopt an inhuman work rhythm. Techniques of autogenous training, yoga or other methods can be useful, but much more simply, aside from various techniques, we need to redimension ourselves on a personal level, and to redimension the 'right' spaces amid life's troubles in order to gain a greater sense of calm. My students' ability to study languages depends, among other things, on my ability to be at peace with myself.

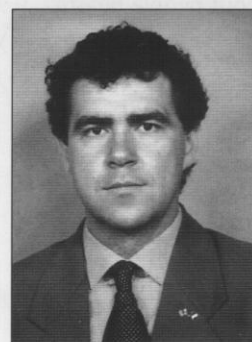
Examining the expression "to have a natural flair for languages" is an exciting challenge for language teachers: it compels us to look at ourselves, our own values, the way we see ourselves, both as... individuals and as a voice which communicates. It also compels us to review theoretical aspects and operative techniques.

The teacher's attention is thus drawn to an incredibly rich universe which needs to be explored, and compels us to study.

So we see that it's never enough to simply say, "Those students of mine have no flair for languages."

**Notes:** The parts in italics have been taken from texts by A. Tomatis, particularly from "*La nuit utérine*", ed. Stock; I have also considered the lecture given by Prof. Michel Corsi from Marseilles University at Gazzada (Varese, Italy) during the Universa Laus congress in 1983.

For a practical look at autonomous voice training, see Paolo Iotti, "*Dare Voce alla Scrittura*" ("Giving a voice to written words"), Ed. Dehoniane, Bologna, pp. 16-22 and above all pp. 63-76.



**Paolo Iotti** is a teacher at Scandiano Primary School, in the province of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and he's also a teacher-trainer

and musician. For many years he's passionately been studying and researching the influence of sound and voice in learning foreign languages, working with his primary pupils and in teams with other teachers.