

Making Changes: Peace Corps Language Training

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A Brief History of Peace Corps Language Training

The Peace Corps Act of 1981 (Section 24), states, "No person shall be assigned to duty as a Volunteer under this act in any foreign country unless at the time of such assignment the person possesses such reasonable proficiency as the assignment requires in speaking the language of the country or the area to which the person is assigned." By 1968, the Peace Corps had trained over 50,000 Americans in 150 languages for service in 65 countries (Kulakow, 1968, p.8). In the 1960s, Volunteers received 300 hours of instruction during their pre-service training, almost all in the U.S., and primarily through contracts with universities around the country. These university language programs were coordinated by the Division of Language Training at the headquarters office in Washington, D.C. (Kulakow, 1968). In this way, Peace Corps not only kept abreast of trends and developments in language teaching theory and methods and experimented in different locations with different approaches, but was also able keep all training sites informed of successes elsewhere in the world. Most of the teaching at that time followed the Audio-Lingual method, a dialog-based method in which memorization and repetition are stressed.

Through the 1960s, there had been successful experiments with elaborate, intensive, "target-language only" programs that provided a total immersion experience for Volunteers around the clock. "Trainees in a recent Swahili and Luganda language program observed this rule [no use of English] so rigorously that when the deputy director of the Peace Corps visited the program, he was not permitted to eat in the dining room because he couldn't speak either language" (Kulakow, 1968, p.2).

In the late 1960s, there was a shift away from language training in the U.S., and by 1973, 85% of Peace Corps training was being conducted in the countries where the Volunteers would be serving (Rice, 1982). As training moved overseas, the management of language training became less centralized. By 1974 there was no central office or individual responsible for monitoring, supporting and guiding Peace Corps language programs (Whitney, 1985). As a result, individual countries and training centers tended to adopt and adhere to their own favorite approaches to language teaching. Some adopted The Silent Way, an approach in which colored rods and charts are used to build the sound system and the grammar of a language in a step by step manner. Other programs trained all of their teachers in the techniques of Community Language Learning, and a few incorporated elements of Suggestopedia into the instruction for Volunteers (for a description of these methods see Richards and Rodgers, 1986).

After the shift overseas, Peace Corps language training gained a cultural context, but lost much of its professional "cutting edge" quality. In 1981, a survey on the status of Peace Corps language training indicated that the most common teaching approach was still Audio-Lingual (Educational Testing Service, 1981). Use of English was not permitted in the majority of the classes, pattern practice drills were reported in 92% of the programs, and most programs required extensive memorization of dialogs (ETS, 1981). The same survey showed that language training programs were aware of learners' differing needs, and most programs said that they offered separate grouping options for older learners or for those who had little formal language learning experience. Only 26% of the programs said they were satisfied with the language training for older learners. This dissatisfaction intensified during the 1980s (ETS, 1981).

In 1984, Peace Corps launched a widely publicized initiative to recruit older Americans for service (American Association for International Aging, 1987, p.i). By the mid-1980s, recruiters had been so successful in the initiative that Peace Corps language classes were dealing with many outspoken older learners who declared that they simply could not learn languages through the kinds of instruction offered to their younger peers, still mostly Audio-Lingual (Whitney, 1985).

A dramatic change began in 1987, when a meeting between Peace Corps and the Center for Applied Linguistics led to the recommendation that Peace Corps adopt a competency-based approach for its language training curricula worldwide (Corey, 1992). This kind of curriculum focuses on the particular competencies or abilities that a specific group of learners needs. In the case of Peace Corps Volunteers, the curriculum is based on what Volunteers need to survive in everyday life and to carry out the requirements of their assignments. The idea of a competency-based curriculum was perceived as particularly appropriate for the kind of training Peace Corps carries out: intensive, short-term training, with readily identifiable survival needs. Perhaps most importantly, the competency-based approach was directly linked to adult learning principles (Grognet and Crandall, 1981). Changing the Peace Corps language curricula led to an increase in teacher training as well. Beginning in 1987, the agency began a series of reforms which led to teacher training workshops, several curriculum development projects, and the production of teacher training materials, both in print and on videotape. Peace Corps also hired a language training specialist to provide on-going support for its language programs and to support its rapid entry into the nations of the former Soviet Union. By the early 1990s, the number of Peace Corps countries had grown from 60 to nearly 100, and the number of languages being taught had increased to over 200.

Learning from Change

As efforts continue to enhance language programs by training and re-training teachers around the world, Peace Corps has learned that change is not accomplished as easily as administrators had hoped in 1987. Political, logistical and financial constraints, as well as other less tangible factors, have affected the pace and depth of the hoped-for transformations. In this process, Peace Corps has learned important lessons about developing effective language training programs. These learnings are presented below under three general headings: 1) recognizing the value of local traditions in language teaching and learning; 2) focusing on specific Volunteer language learning needs; and 3) assuming individual responsibility for learning.

Recognizing the value of local traditions

The first lesson is a seemingly obvious one: Peace Corps must work within the contexts and realities of the host country. This has meant the need to learn about and support the best of the traditions of language learning influencing teachers around the world. These traditions derive from language teaching methods and approaches prevalent in the countries where Peace Corps has established itself.

Taking into account the widespread use of Audio-Lingual techniques around the world, most of the video-based teacher training workshops carried out in the early 1990s included a dialog and drill design. Language teachers were re-introduced to the principles of the Audio-Lingual approach, and too often the result was that instructors already steeped in this approach felt that their teaching had simply been validated and that they could ignore ideas drawn from other approaches to language teaching. In recent years, there has been an emphasis on learning how to shift lessons from dialogs to more meaningful practice activities, especially ones involving pictures and charts. In this way, teachers have been encouraged to retain the dialogs or even re-write them, but to reduce the amount of rote memorization and repetition.

The meeting between the Silent Way tradition and a more eclectic approach to language teaching has also provided useful insights. Peace Corps in Thailand embraced The Silent Way as its one and only approach to language teaching beginning in 1974, when staff studied under the founder, Caleb Gattegno. After an initial period of enthusiasm for The Silent Way, Volunteers whose learning styles were not in harmony with this method voiced an increasing number of complaints, but the Thai language teachers were reluctant to modify their total dedication to The Silent Way. Shortly after a video-based teacher training workshop had been held for language instructors in Thailand, a jubilant training officer for Peace Corps Thailand reported that The Silent Way had finally yielded to what the Thai language teachers called "The Eclectic Approach" (Bartlett, 1991).

Several years later, it came to light that Peace Corps Thailand had not abandoned The Silent Way entirely. The rods had been retired, but the color-coded alphabet chart had been retained along with other Silent Way techniques used to introduce and support literacy in Thai. Using these techniques for only 90 minutes a day with a focus on literacy skills, 80% of the Peace Corps learners were able to negotiate reading lessons in Thai script unaided by systems of transliteration (Kaeowkahao, 1995). The same success has been reported by Peace Corps in Nepal, where Volunteers have continued to use The Silent Way to learn the Nepali script, based on the Hindi alphabet. Through this experience, Peace Corps learned the importance of blending "old" techniques with the "new."

The grammar-translation tradition of language teaching was encountered when Peace Corps established itself in Poland, Hungary, and other countries in Europe and the former Soviet Union (FSU) in the early 1990s. Under the grammar-translation method, there is a focus on the ability to translate lexical items and to manipulate grammatical structures correctly; learners change a text from one language into another, memorize grammatical rules, and master charts of grammatical paradigms. Language teachers in Central and Eastern Europe and the FSU have had the well-deserved reputation of being leaders in this approach to language teaching. Historically, there had been less of a need for teaching communicative language skills, so the teachers developed innovative and effective approaches to teaching the grammatical systems of a variety of foreign languages. Initially, teachers in the Peace Corps language programs in Central and Eastern Europe reacted negatively toward the competency-based curriculum because they felt that the curriculum precluded the teaching of grammar. Peace Corps language instructors saw this movement as the "banning" of grammar. This misunderstanding led to "covert" grammar teaching until the teachers realized that there were effective ways to combine communicative language teaching with the teaching of grammar and to have the best of both.

Focusing on specific volunteer language learning needs

Some Peace Corps programs have established a tradition of excellence in both language materials development and teaching while others are still striving to attain consistent quality in their training. As the overall quality of teaching and materials has increased, an acute awareness of specific language learning needs has emerged. Language training staff and Volunteers report substantial improvement in survival linguistic abilities, but recognize a clear gap between the ability to survive in the new culture and the ability to enhance the overseas experience for Volunteers and their counterparts by working on a daily basis in the local language. The identification of this gap has provided the motivation to add a language for specific purposes (LSP) component to Peace Corps language programs.

A number of Peace Corps programs identified the "LSP" problem through the following statement:

A significant number of Peace Corps Volunteers are unable to adequately meet the sociolinguistic demands of their work environment in the context of Peace Corps' mission. This inability often leads to frustration and unmet expectations in fulfilling goals of Peace Corps and lessens the impact of its programs.

One of the first steps in addressing this problem has been to gain an understanding of language learning in the context of the workplace. With an understanding of the specific linguistic demands of the workplace, the language coordinator is able to work with other language specialists on developing appropriate materials and activities, designing the curriculum, and determining effective ways to train LSP teachers.

In a second area of language program development designed to better meet specific Volunteer needs, Peace Corps is experimenting with less centralized training designs in which language, cross-cultural, and technical training are integrated into a small-group, village-based experience. In this new design piloted in Nicaragua, Volunteers are spending nearly all of their training time in groups of three living in small villages. They spend the morning doing language lessons led by a teacher who also comes to live in the village. Afternoons are spent on community excursions, during which they may visit places of cultural interest, practice survival language, or observe local practitioners in a technical area, such as agronomy or public health. They return to the capital city on the weekend for more

formal sessions and to consult the Peace Corps training resources. This approach to language learning has implications for the traditional role of language teachers. It has raised questions about what kinds of teaching skills are most important and how independent learning skills can be incorporated in the model. This shift also raises questions about the design of the curriculum.

Assuming individual responsibility for learning

Lack of independence in learning can be a serious problem for Volunteers because it is typically essential that they be able to carry out their development work in the language of the host country. One of the potential drawbacks of a competency-based curriculum is that although it addresses learners' survival needs directly, it allows only a limited number of choices. As a result, when the class ends, learning may also end. No matter how relevant the curriculum or innovative the teaching techniques, learners rarely reach a high level of proficiency during three months of formal instruction. For this reason, it is important that training encourage learner choice. Several ideas that encourage choice include self-placement, on-going modification of content and schedules, and independent group projects.

The focus on learner responsibility has inspired language coordinators and instructors to experiment in their own programs. In Burkina Faso and Mali, formal placement testing of Volunteers who had previously studied French was replaced with a system of self-placement. Learners are given descriptions of different proficiency levels and make their own decisions about their placement. Later in the course, they make their own rules for implementing and enforcing an immersion policy. The result of this approach is that a group of learners can gain a clear understanding of the need for taking responsibility for their own learning. This responsibility is ultimately theirs, not the teacher's. Peace Corps intends to continue experimenting with innovation in this area since motivation and responsibility for learning play such an important role in the language learning process.

Change and Peace Corps Language Training

Language training in the Peace Corps context must be open to constant change and innovation. Volunteers depend on this training as the basis for their service in the host country. Their level of success as Volunteers often depends directly on the effectiveness of their language training. It is clear that Peace Corps must remain aware of developments in the field of language learning and teaching and that efforts must be made at regular intervals to ensure that the hundreds of Peace Corps language teachers in the world have an opportunity to learn about these developments. It is also essential to integrate the "new" developments with the locally accepted traditions of teaching and learning. The following four "lessons" summarize much of what Peace Corps has learned about language training over the past 35 years:

- Lesson One:** The most successful change is a blend of the "old" and the "new." It is important to validate the contributions that the "old" ways can make, especially when the "old" ways have proven effective and will be used anyway.
- Lesson Two:** Efforts must be made to maintain an acute awareness of Volunteers' language needs both in everyday life and in the workplace. In some cases this might mean totally re-designing the language training program to meet specific needs.
- Lesson Three:** The shift to a competency-based curriculum has many advantages, but also has the potential to limit independence in the language learning process. It is essential for Peace Corps to focus on developing self-directed, independent teachers, who in turn will train self-directed, independent learners.
- Lesson Four:** Peace Corps language training has gone through numerous metamorphoses in its 35-year history. Although each change has brought new insights and innovations in the agency's approach to language training, the most certain lesson is that there remain many more lessons to be learned.

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