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Situational Reinforcement: An Evaluation of the Method and Suggestions for Supplementary Lessons

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SITUATIONAL REINFORCEMENT:
AN EVALUATION OF THE METHOD
AND
SUGGESTIONS FOR SUPPLEMENTARY LESSONS

Jo Anne Isenburg

July 28, 1973

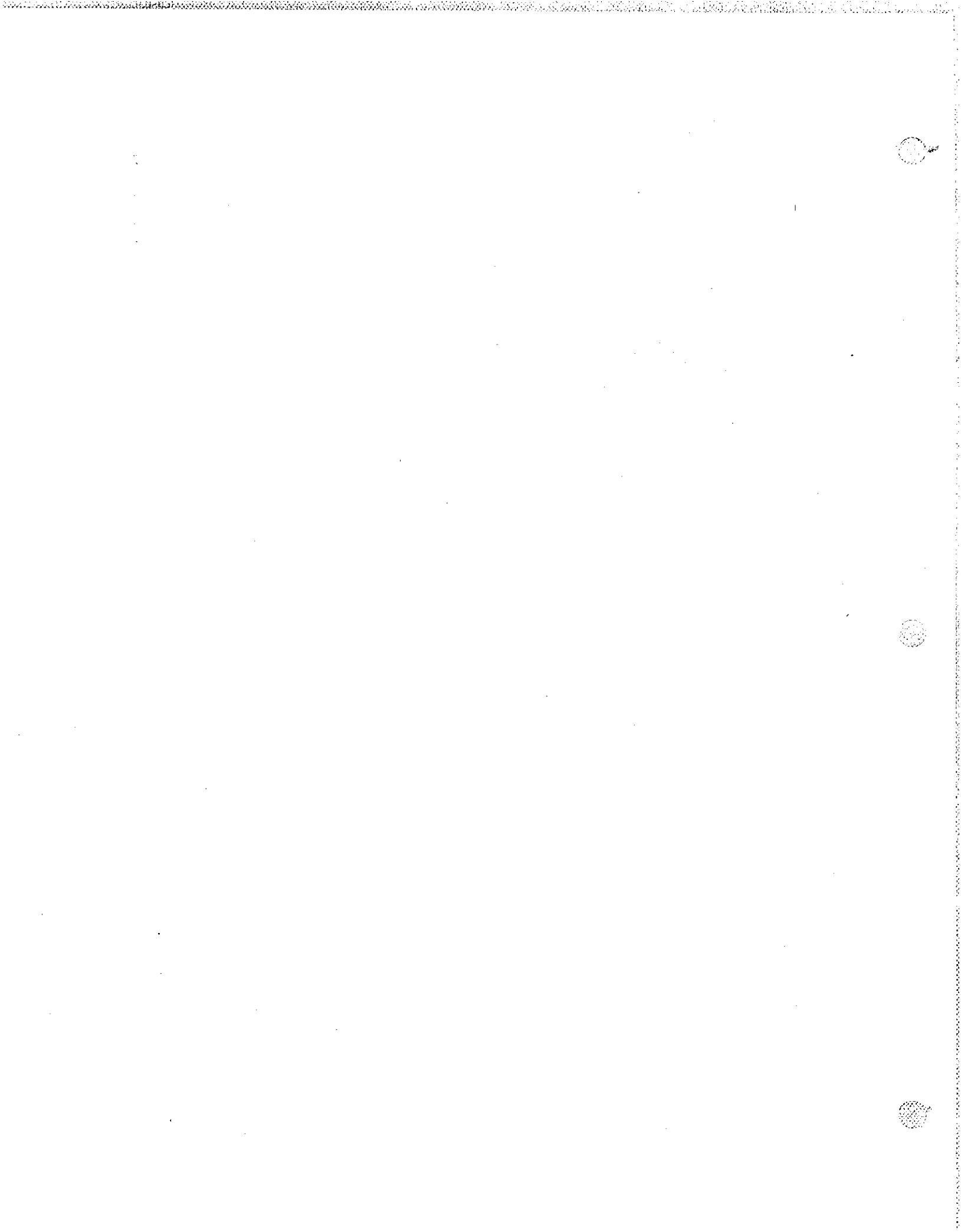


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The Teaching Situation

The class I taught was composed of eight students from Japan and two from France, all of whom were at the intermediate level of ability in English. The Japanese were between the ages of twenty and twenty-five and had studied English in high school and college. The two French students were teachers and had a less extensive background in English. There were five hours of class a day, including one hour of language laboratory work. Following the course, the students were to leave S.I.T. for home-stays in New York State, Maine, and Florida.

In order to determine a direction for the course, I set two teaching objectives. Since all the students would eventually be traveling in the United States and living with families, I planned to emphasize oral work in English rather than reading and writing. I also planned to organize my teaching around the intermediate level of Situational Reinforcement, using Orientation in American English, Texts III and IV.¹ SR seemed well suited to emphasis on spoken English, since the method and materials propose to lead students to oral communication in the target language by a question and answer format. Because SR lessons give information concerning diverse aspects of American life, it would seem that the material would contain a sufficient variety of topics to hold the interest of a class.

¹ Orientation in American English, Text III, Eugene Hall, Elizabeth Farnam, Institute of Modern Languages, Inc., Third Edition, 1971.
Orientation in American English, Text IV, Eugene Hall, Institute of Modern Languages, Inc., c. 1970.

Situational Reinforcement

The following is a brief description of SR. Situational Reinforcement is an approach to language teaching, developed by the Institute of Modern Languages in Washington, D.C. SR concentrates on the conversational use of the target language rather than on structure or grammar.

The SR teaching materials include the six texts, Orientation in American English. Texts I and II form the beginning level of the SR course. Texts III and IV are intermediate level texts, and Texts V and VI, advanced. For each text there are workbooks, which reinforce material covered in class. SR tapes and tape books, intended for language laboratory work correspond with readers. The readers contain short articles and writing exercises.

The beginning level of SR requires the student to manipulate common classroom objects and to perform simple operations. In other words, the student is required to react to real situations, involving tangible objects. At the intermediate level, the student must react to realistic situations, as they would occur outside the classroom. Some of the situations presented in the intermediate texts are shopping at the supermarket or department store, eating at a quick-service restaurant, and using public transportation in American cities. Lessons focus on practical information about American life.

Each SR lesson involves five kinds of language activities, a Listening Practice, a series of question and answer Response Drills, an Appropriate Response Drill, a Conversation Practice, and a Reading. The Listening Practice uses a set of sentences, containing the subject matter of the total lesson. The students listen, books open, while the teacher reads the Listening Practice and explains new vocabulary.² The procedure used in teaching the Response Drills, listen, repeat, and respond is demonstrated on pages 4 and 5 of this report.³ After all Response Drills have been completed, an Appropriate Response Drill is taught, connecting the entire series of Response Drills into a connected discourse. The listen, repeat and respond procedures are again used to teach the series of questions and answers as a whole.⁴

A Conversation Practice follows the Appropriate Response Drill. There are suggested questions in the texts to stimulate discussion on the topic of the lesson. However, at this point students are permitted to use the information in the lesson to carry on a conversation in any way they wish.⁵ The last part of each SR chapter is a Reading. The students look at

² Situational Reinforcement Teacher's Manual, Eugene Hall, Institute of Modern Languages, Inc., Washington, D.C., c. 1969, p.36.

³ Ibid., pp. 37-43.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

⁵ Ibid., p. 46

the reading, as the teacher reads and explains new vocabulary items. The students then do the reading themselves. And finally, books closed, the class answers comprehension questions orally.⁶

The following is a brief demonstration of the way in which a Response Drill is handled:

- I. Teacher (indicating a picture of an asperin bottle):
What are these?
They're asperin tablets.

These sentences are repeated until the students understand.

- II. Teacher: What are these?
Students: What are these?
Teacher: They're asperin tablets.
Students: They're asperin tablets.

This procedure is repeated two or three times, pointing to the picture.

- III. Teacher: What are these?
Student A: They're asperin tablets.

The teacher gestures to Student A that he should do the drill with another student.

- Student A: What are these?
Student B: They're asperin tablets.

Student B asks another member of the class, and an 'action chain' drill continues until all students have practiced both the question and the answer.

Summary of the use of SR

At the beginning of the course, I followed the procedures previously described to teach SR. The time spent on SR a day

⁶ Ibid., p. 46.

varied from an hour to an hour and a half. This amount of time was more than enough to complete at least two Listening Practices, two series of Response Sequences, and the accompanying Appropriate Response Drills.

In the language laboratory, I tried to adapt sections of SR lessons for drill and listening comprehension, since the SR tapes and tape books were not available. I found that readings from the texts can be used as listening comprehension exercises. For the most part, the selections are too long to be handled as a whole. I therefore read two paragraphs of the material at a time and then asked the students to answer questions after each segment. All answers were written. The following day, the passage and questions were reviewed.

This exercise probably had more disadvantages than advantages. First, the only voice recorded on the student tapes was the teacher's. The students did not have the opportunity to listen to their own answers or pronunciation, as compared to a model. Second, it was not an exercise in spoken communication, since all answers were written. A better way to bring both listening and speaking into the exercise would have been to have let the students answer the comprehension questions orally on their tapes.

I also used Response Drills for practice in answering questions in the lab. I asked the question parts of the drills, which the class recorded, and then the students recorded their responses on their tapes. After each student response, I again gave the answer to the same question, so that the students would have a means of comparison.

Teacher: How late do hamburger joints stay open?

Student: They usually stay open twenty-four hours a day.

Teacher: They usually stay open twenty-four hours a day.

Although this exercise did not prove to be a very exciting one, it did serve as good practice in giving quick responses. However, I would say that if SR is done in the lab, it would definitely be advantageous to make use of the prepared tapes and tape books. They are specifically designed for practice in listening, repeating, and answering questions, using situations like those presented in the SR texts.

Detailed discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of SR will follow in a later section of this paper. However, at this point, it is possible to make some general comments on the SR material covered during the first days of classes. Some of the Response Sequences sparked more interest than others, the reason being that the students had more direct experience with the information in the lessons. For example, many of the students showed some interest in the lessons in Text III, which dealt with renting and driving cars in the United States because they were

planning weekend trips. However, they did not seem particularly excited about most of the SR material covered in class. When I asked for comments at the end of morning classes, remarks, since most of the students were Japanese, were polite but not enthusiastic. They commented that they had learned some practical information and vocabulary. The more critical comments indicated that they already knew about such subjects as restaurants and asperin tablets, since they had the same kinds of things in their own country. They asked for information about American customs, which were different from their own, and they suggested a number of topics that did interest them. I chose certain lessons from SR Texts III and IV that seemed to fit the students' suggestions and I adapted the SR method of teaching to fit topics not covered in the texts. The lessons I planned using the SR method were as follows:

- Week I- Text III, Lesson I -- asperin and quick-service
July 12-14 restaurants.

 The first three Response Sequences of Lesson II --
 vitamin pills and hamburger joints.
- Week II- The last sequence in Lesson II -- drive-in restau-
July 17-21 rants.

 Lesson III -- drugstore prescriptions and driving.
 A Response Sequence I composed about casual
 American greetings.

Week III- Lesson VIII, Part II -- newspaper ads. Text IV,
July 24-28 Lesson XI, Part II -- transportation in American
cities and travel in the United States.

Adaptations of articles from the New York Times.

Skipping chapters in the SR texts did not seem to pose a problem for my students. Although at times they found some material difficult to understand, in general, grammatical structures and vocabulary throughout successive lessons, and new items, are introduced in small doses. Relatively few SR lessons were taught during the third week period mainly because I found that I was spending more and more time on adaptations of SR and outside activities.

Furthermore, I did find that as I adapted lessons, classes became somewhat more lively. Conversation, questions and discussion seemed to flow more readily.

Adapting the SR method to other materials

What I attempted to do was to plan lessons based on short question and response exchanges, using the SR format. The following is an example of a Response Sequence I planned around casual greetings:

1. Hi, how are you?

I'm fine, thanks.

Alternates:

Pretty well.

Not so well.

I feel lousy.

2. You look a little down. Alternates:
What's the matter? discouraged
I'm tired. down in the dumps
disgusted
3. You seem unhappy. What seems
to be the problem?
I feel pretty bad. bored
disoriented
4. You seem pretty happy
today. How are you?
I feel great! full of pep and energy
encouraged
elated

This sequence worked well as an opening to SR in the morning. To teach the exchanges, I used the procedures, as they are described in the teacher's manual. All alternate vocabulary items appear in the response parts of the sequences. They were introduced during the repetitions of each exchange. And during the final respond step, students chose any of the answers they wanted from the sequence or alternate vocabulary. Because the material follows no progression of ideas or information, an Appropriate Response Drill would have been irrelevant.

The presentation and practice of the entire sequence lasted about ten minutes. I had intended the lesson to be short because the material was not at all difficult for intermediate

students, and the kind of communication involved in the sequences is usually kept brief in daily conversation.

In general, the lesson achieved several purposes. It gave students the opportunity to practice casual greetings as well as some descriptive vocabulary. The exchanges might later have been changed, putting the questions and responses into the third person:

He looks a little down. What's the matter?
He's tired.

He seems unhappy. What seems to be the problem?
He feels pretty bad.

The students then would have practiced using both the first and third person of the verbs.

Because my students also expressed interest in current political issues, I tried to adapt short articles from magazines and from newspapers such as the New York Times. I found that articles from the news and Summary section of the New York Times could be used for this purpose because information is presented concisely.

Articles in the New York Times contain sentence constructions and vocabulary that is generally too difficult for intermediate students. It was usually necessary to simplify the articles so that they sounded less complicated and less literary for the purposes of an SR exercise. The following news item is not an example of material which I actually used, but I will

attempt to show how a News and Summary item can be adapted. The original article is as follows:

The Nixon Administration sought to discourage speculation that a breakthrough in the Vietnam peace talks was imminent. Some officials appeared embarrassed by publicity given to Secretary of State William P. Rogers' weekend remarks concerning a possible settlement around election time. The White House said Mr. Rogers had made no 'flat prediction,' but had merely given 'a general assessment based on his personal appraisal of the situation.'

In rewriting the article, the sentences can be shortened and some vocabulary simplified. Material of this kind does, however, limit the teacher's control over the kinds of new grammatical structures and vocabulary to be introduced. One simplification of the above article might be as follows:

- The Nixon Administration discouraged rumors about a breakthrough in the Vietnam peace talks.
- Secretary of State Rogers had hinted at a settlement around election time.
- The Nixon Administration said that Mr. Rogers' statement was not a prediction.
- The statement was Mr. Rogers' opinion of the situation.

A Response Sequence could then be built on this set of sentences:

1. Who hinted at a settlement in the Vietnam peace talks?
Secretary of State Rogers hinted at a breakthrough.
2. When might the settlement occur?
Around election time.
3. Who discouraged the rumor?
The Nixon Administration.
4. How did officials discourage the rumor?
They said the statement was an opinion, not a prediction.

The first set of sentences could be used as a Listening Practice. The response drills and the Appropriate Response Drill would then follow. And finally, a reading of the real News and Summary article or the entire article corresponding to the summary could be assigned as homework, depending on the class's level of reading ability in English.

The major difficulty in trying to work out this kind of exercise is rewriting the material so that it resembles spoken English. Furthermore, even if terms and sentence constructions are modified, the lesson may still be rather hard for some intermediate students.

Following up on another suggestion from my students I taught a sequence on asking for bus travel information. The material was adapted from the S.I.T. Eclectic Method, devised by R. Clark.

1. Are there any buses from _____ to _____ in the morning?

Alternates:

in the afternoon

in the evening

Yes, there are. There's one at ___ o'clock, ___ o'clock,
and ___ o'clock. No, there aren't.

2. How long does it take to get from _____ to _____?
It takes _____ hours.
3. Do you have to change buses?
No, you don't.
4. When does the bus arrive in _____?
It arrives at _____ o'clock.

5. How much does it cost for a ticket to _____?
That's \$ _____.

Each student was given a copy of a bus schedule. The exchanges were then introduced, filling in the blanks with specific information for a trip from Brattleboro to another city. After the initial listen, repeat, and respond procedures were completed with this information, I allowed the class to practice the questions and answers, using any information from the schedule they wished. The principal value of this lesson is that it emphasizes common terms used in asking for information.

The SR Method can be adapted to almost any topic, newspaper advertisements, display and classified, or a driver's manual. However, dialogues between two parties are not adaptable to SR techniques. A dialogue forces the student to speak as someone other than himself. SR requires that the student be himself, involved in real communication.

Ways to vary the SR Method

Although adaptation of SR to materials outside the text is one way to satisfy the various interests of a class, the method itself loses strength, if it is over-used. During the three week course, I experimented with a number of techniques to vary and supplement the SR method. Some served as alternate ways of presenting new material, and others were used simply to reinforce SR lessons that had already been drilled in class.

Split Scenes --

One technique which I tried was adapted from a theatre game. I typed questions and responses from several SR lessons separately on strips of paper. Four students were then handed two or three of the strips and asked to act out a scene using the sentences. They were to include all the lines in their dialogue. The following lines were taken from Unit 10, Lessons I and II:

- It's a new car.
- What are they looking at?
- He'll have to repair his glasses.
- He taught her how to drive.
- It's customary to take a special for a headache.
- Yes, it is.
- Who's with him?
- He understood the last lesson, but not this one.
- Is there an other reason?

The scene worked out for the four students involved a traffic accident. Following the first scene, the lines were mixed up and handed out again to four other students.

Both scenes were short and amusing for the performers and the audience. Many of the lines were not used exactly as they appeared on the strips of paper. The exercise, therefore, did allow the class an opportunity to work creatively with SR sequences, keeping a situational context and a hypothetical question and

answer format. The theater game technique would probably not have been a successful way to introduce new material, but it did review vocabulary and structures already covered.

-- Role Play --

Somewhat similar to the split scene technique, role play can also serve as a way to liven up the routine of teaching SR. Though I did not actually try this technique with my class, I would assume that it would have been successful, judging from my class's enjoyment of the theater game. Situations for role play by the students might be planned in conjunction with the teaching of Lesson II in Text III. A first date situation might be acted out. Other role plays related to hitchhiking or catching a bus could accompany SR lessons on transportation in Text IV.

-- Operations --

Operations might also be used to vary SR material. An operation is a step by step description of the performance of some common or daily activity. They can be planned to incorporate the basic information of an SR lesson. They usually appear in the form of statements or commands. The question and answer communication format of SR is therefore impossible. The following is an operation transformed from a response sequence in Text IV, Lesson I:

How to deposit money in a bank

You fill out a deposit slip.

List cash and checks separately.

List each check you're going to deposit separately.

Take the deposit slip to the bank teller.

The operation described below comes from Text II, Lesson IV:

How to use a coffee machine

You put a dime in the slot.

You push the button for coffee (with cream and sugar).

You get your money back if the machine is out of coffee.

You take your cup of coffee from the machine.

Operations are taught with procedures similar to SR.

The students repeat each sentence after the teacher, who demonstrates the action with the aid of a picture or the real object. The teacher then performs the steps of the operation as the students describe them. And finally, the students direct each other through the operation.

The advantage of teaching this type of exercise is that real objects can be manipulated. The language stimulus is tangible.

-- Cue cards --

In addition to variations in the SR method, theater game techniques, role play, and operations, I found that cue cards provide an alternate way to reinforce SR material. Following

the initial presentation of a new lesson, cue cards marked with key words or phrases from the material are given to small groups of three or four students. In each group, a student leader is appointed. He is in charge of the question cues. The rest of the group uses cards with response cues to answer his cues. The words printed on the cards permit the students to either recreate sentences directly from the lesson or to create new questions and responses of their own, based on the cues. As the groups are working independently, the teacher has sufficient time to circulate, making corrections and answering questions from the students. The following is an example of the way in which cue cards might be composed. The actual Response Sequence is taken from Text 3, Lesson 1, page 1:

1. What are these?
They're asperin tablets.
2. When do you take aspirin?
You take aspirin when you have a headache.
3. How do you ask for aspirin?
You ask for a bottle of aspirin.
4. How many tablets in a bottle?
Usually 25, 50 or 100.

Question cues for this sequence might be simply the beginning "wh" parts of the sentences; that is, "...What...", "...When...", "...How...", and "...How many...". The corresponding answer cues might then contain the phrases "aspirin," "a headache," "a bottle of aspirin,:" and "25, 50, or a hundred."

The advantage of using cue cards, I discovered, is that the class is delegated entire responsibility for practicing the material. The groups make use of the cards in question-answer order, thereby retaining the communication format of SR.

-- Pictures --

After experimenting with various uses for pictures, I hit upon a good method of stimulating discussion in class. The pictures I used were not directly related to SR material, but there is no reason that the following technique would not work, adapted to SR.

Pictures or cartoons with several frames, relating an amusing incident are effective in initiating description or narratives from the class. The students first describe the picture, asking as many questions as they want to obtain vocabulary and information. They can then create a dialogue or narrative, if the picture portrays a sequence of actions. This activity can be taken one step further, in order to work on specific structure or grammatical errors in the class's oral description or dialogue. That is, the teacher takes dictation, as the students give their description, types copies for the class, and the following day, goes over the most repeated or most important grammatical errors.

In order to adapt this exercise to SR material, it would be possible to use pictures from the SR texts or pictures from other sources that are related to specific lessons. The

description of a picture could serve as the introduction of a new Response Sequence or Reading. The picture technique would have the advantage of varying the SR method, presenting the material in an interesting manner. It would also give students the opportunity to work creatively with a lesson, which might otherwise become dull if it were taught using the straight SR method.

-- Telephones --

SR becomes more relevant to the environment outside of the classroom when it is used to perform practical tasks. The following lesson was designed to combine and reinforce some of the SR material, which my class had covered:

For about an hour and a half over a period of two days the class practiced common telephone phrases. On the third day each student received an assignment to use real telephones on the S.I.T. campus. These assignments included:

- calling directory assistance to ask for telephone numbers in other cities,
- calling the bus station to ask for information concerning the bus schedule from Brattleboro to other cities,
- calling the travel agency in Brattleboro to ask about airplane flights to various cities in the U.S.,
- calling local information to find out if there is a weather number for Brattleboro and then calling that number,

calling information to find out if there is a telephone number for the Audubon Society, which gives reports about birds seen in the area.

The class was asked to report back with the information they had gathered.

I found that this exercise was useful in providing practice in dealing with operators and directory assistance, and in putting to practical application some of the lessons covered in class.

Review technique: reversed Response Sequences

Review activities are not mentioned in the SR Teacher's Manual. However, I did use one technique which served as a quick review of Response Drills. I reversed the exchanges. I gave the responses and the students fed back the questions.

Teacher: They usually stay open twenty-four hours a day.

Students: How late do hamburger joints stay open?

This exercise simply requires the students to make questions from statements. It can be used to replace part of the respond step of the SR method, although it has been pointed out to me that this kind of reversal exercise eliminates the question and answer communication format of SR.

The following telephone dialogues can be found in the International Teachers' Catalogue File at S.I.T.:

O: Your call please.

C: I'd like to call long distance, station to station to area code 716; the number is 395-5022.

O: What is your number?

C: My number is 257-7751.

O: When the party answers, please deposit 50 cents for the first three minutes.

O: Your call please.

C: I'd like to call long distance, person to person, to area code 716: the number is 395-5022. I'd like to speak to _____.

O: What is your number?

C: My number is 257-7751.

O: One moment please. I have a call for _____.

D: This is he/she.

O: Please deposit 50 cents for the first three minutes. Go ahead.

O: Your call please.

C: I'd like to call long distance, person to person collect, to area code 716; the number is 395-5022. I'd like to speak to _____.

O: What is your number?

C: My number is 257-7751.

O: May I have your name?

C: My name is _____.

O: One moment please.

I have a collect call for _____. Will you accept the charges?

D: Yes, I will.

O: Go ahead, please.

Final Evaluation of SR

During the three week course, I observed a number of advantages and disadvantages in teaching SR. On the positive side, the SR method is designed to give students as much practice as possible in communication in the target language. Students are required to use the information presented in lessons almost immediately after it has been introduced. The question and answer response drills put the information into a format that facilitates communicative language activities.

The SR texts use vocabulary and structures which appear commonly in every day spoken English. Once a structure has been presented, it is then repeated throughout following lessons in different contexts. Reinforcement of structures is programmed into the sequencing of lessons. There is, consequently, no need for pattern practice drills, which may tend to become tedious. For example, in the first lesson in Text III, the colloquial expression, 'you can get' is introduced.

Where can you get aspirin?

You can get aspirin at a drug store.

The same expression again appears in a later part of the same lesson and in Part I of Lesson II.

One of the major advantages in teaching SR is that the method presents material clearly. Students learn new vocabulary in a situational context. The pictures provided in the texts and the logical sequence of ideas from one response sequence to the next aid in the introduction of new material. Furthermore, according to the teacher's manual, students receive complete explanation of all new vocabulary items, before practice of individual response drills begin.⁷

Unlike the audio-lingual method, SR does not require students to memorize material. The method of teaching SR concentrates to a large degree on language activities leading to communication. Vocabulary alternates often accompany response sequences, in order to allow students some freedom of choice during drill of lessons.

Although SR materials are not always particularly interesting to students, the strength of SR lies in the fact that the method can be implemented without the materials.

Although I did find advantages to using SR, I also encountered several difficulties with both the materials and the method. The materials at the intermediate level are organized around situations which exist outside of the classroom. Students are forced to react to pictures rather than the real

⁷ Ibid., p. 36.

situations. As a result, SR loses much of its communicative value, unless the information from a lesson is put to practical application.

Other problems can be attributed to the actual procedures that are supposed to be used to teach SR. The method does rely heavily on repetition of response drills and appropriate response drills. The teacher's manual states that after class repetition of each individual response drill, every student must have the opportunity to practice both the question and answer parts of the drill.⁸ Consequently, the class hears and repeats the same sentences over and over again before the lesson has been completed. This kind of repetition does drill the material but tends to be tedious.

The presentation and practice of response drills must move rapidly or the informational content of the lesson exhausts itself. By the time Conversation Practice is reached, the students have little interest in the topic of the lesson.

One of the objectives of SR is therefore to push students to use their new language in conversation. In order to accomplish this, I would recommend that a teacher plan lessons carefully, choosing response sequences from the texts, which will be of interest to the class. He should also adapt the method to materials other than the texts, which will be meaningful to the students. In teaching the method with any materials, the teacher has to be sensitive to the speed at which the class picks up

vocabulary, structures, and pronunciation, in order to keep repetition practice to a minimum. The faster a class assumes complete control of practicing the lesson, the more chance there is that the material will succeed in stimulating conversation.

And finally, it is difficult to determine how much time should be spent on SR per day. At the beginning of the course, I taught SR an hour and a half a day. However, by the second week, the disadvantages of teaching SR outweighed the advantages. It seemed that a five-hour class day required a diversity of teaching techniques, which would hold the class's attention and interest. For this reason, it is advisable to vary the method as much as possible with outside language activities such as are described in the previous section of this paper. From my experience with SR, I would recommend that the method not be used for more than an hour daily. The time spent on SR response sequences should be broken up into half-hour intervals. A possible time schedule for teaching SR might be as follows:

- | | |
|-----------|---|
| 8:10-8:20 | Warm-up language activities, not necessarily related to SR. |
| 8:20-8:50 | Introduction and practice of SR material. It would probably be possible to complete a Listening Practice, Response Drills, and Appropriate Response Drill in this period of time. |
| 8:50-9:15 | Supplementary activities using SR material. |

- 9:15-9:30 Class break.
- 9:30-10:45 Games, writing exercises, materials from sources other than the SR texts, activities unrelated to SR.
- Quick review or activity related to previously covered SR material.
- Beginning work on new SR material, perhaps a lesson from outside the text or using a teaching technique varying from the SR method.
- 10:45-11:00 Second class break.
- 11:00-11:30 Games and time for student comments.
- 1:00-2:00 Completion of SR material begun during the morning session.
- Supplementary lesson, not necessarily related to SR (readings, students' reports, etc.).
- 2:00-3:00 Language Lab.

Conclusion

The principal objective in teaching any language course is providing language learning activities that are meaningful to the students. SR can, in part, facilitate this process. The material, whether taken directly from SR texts or adapted from other sources, may be arranged into situational contexts, which offer opportunities for practical application of the target language. However, I would say that SR alone does not adequately provide meaningful language learning opportunities to students. By supplementing the materials and method, SR can succeed in building language skills that are useful and meaningful.

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