ESL THEORY AND THE FRIES LEGACY

Joan Morley
Betty Wallace Robinett
Larry Selinker
Devon Woods

Abstract

With Director Charles C. Fries as its guiding force, in 1941 the English Language Institute was founded at the University of Michigan. The charge to the ELI was two-fold, to conduct research in teaching

Joan Morley. Associate Professor, Linguistics, Acting Director, ELI, The University of Michigan. Major interests — ESL theory and practice, instructional research, and the development of materials and methodology for ESL. Past second vice-president, TESOL; convention chair, TESOL '77; TESOL Executive Board, 1976-1978, 1979-1983; NAFSA-ATESL Team, 1973-1976.

Betty Wallace Robinett. Assistant Vice-president for Academic Affairs, Professor, Linguistics, previously Director of the Program in ESL, The University of Minnesota. Major interests — ESL methodology, teacher training, program development and administration, reading theory and practice, English phonology, and pronunciation teaching. TESOL president, 1973-1974; *TESOL Quarterly* editor, 1967-1972; NAFSA-ATESL National chair, 1977-1978; AAAL president, 1982-1983.

Larry Selinker. Professor, Linguistics, ELI Director, 1977-1982, The University of Michigan. Major research interests — interlanguage, second language acquisition theory, discourse analysis, English for science and technology (EST), and English for academic purposes (EAP).

Devon H. Woods. Assistant Professor, Carleton University, Ottawa; Visiting Lecturer and Research Assistant, 1978-1982, ELI, The University of Michigan. Major interests — second language research and teaching in Europe, Canada, USA, developing specialized teaching materials, teacher-trainer consulting, and applied linguistics.

English as a foreign language and to prepare and test new materials for the teaching of English.[1]

Ultimately the influence of the research, the methodology, and the materials developed by Charles C. Fries and the staff of the English Language Institute was felt around the world. Fries was a key visionary in the development of theoretical perspectives on second language learning and teaching. His work was a critical milestone in the development of our field.

Charles C. Fries had a particularly strong impact on the teaching of English in Japan. In an article in ELEC Publications, March 1960, Tokyo, Fries noted, "The Japanese pupil must have. . .a set of English materials especially adapted to his linguistic needs, if we want him to learn English well." A full explanation of the basic materials developed for teaching English to Japanese speakers is found in *Foundations of English Teaching* (C.C. and A. Fries, 1961).

In the near half-century between 1941 and 1984, perspectives on language learning and teaching have changed in significant ways. Nonetheless, whether one chooses to accept or to reject specific elements of the "Fries Legacy", one can neither ignore nor deny the importance of the impact of Charles C. Fries on ESL[2] and on the applied linguistics research underlying it.

In this presentation it is our purpose to do two things: (1) to review the development of Fries' work and its place in the history of ESL theory and practice; (2) to explore concepts of ESL theory today, specifically, a discussion of *the principles* according to which pedagogical decisions are made and *the processes* involved in the creation of these

principles.

The paper is divided into four parts. Part One outlines the historical perspectives involved in the development of the English Language Institute — international politics, linguistics, psychology. Part Two examines the theoretical foundations of the Oral Approach in two major dimensions — Fries' insights in framing clear statements of questions central to the second language learning/teaching process and Fries' unique attention to formulation of explicit statements of the principles which underlay the pedagogy of the Oral Approach. Part Three describes a regrettably *underpublicized* aspect of the *original* Oral Approach, specifically, the explicit functionally-oriented *language-as-communication environment* provided for students at the ELI beyond the classroom and the books. Finally, within the framework of ESL theory, Part Four examines the ways in which Fries attempted to bring about "harmony" among the various aspects of the learning/teaching process: the theoretical, the methodological, the interpersonal.

PART ONE. HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE INSTITUTE

Domains of Influence

The Inner Circle of Influence

In June 1941, the University of Michigan formed an English Language Institute and inaugurated an intensive course in English as a Foreign Language, the first ever offered on a university campus in North America. Most of the "students"

enrolled in the first intensive course were professionals – in medicine, law, engineering, finance, and psychology – who wished to do advanced study in their fields. They were all from South and Central America – Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Peru, and Venezuela.

The experimental intensive course was a resounding success and the English Language Institute was established as a permanent part of the university. By 1943, the ELI offered continuous eight-week intensive English courses throughout the entire calendar year. The first courses offered four hours of classroom instruction per day, with one hour of laboratory study soon added. From modest numbers of students during the first few years, enrollments rose steadily. During the 43 years since the ELI was founded, students from nearly a hundred countries have studied English on the Ann Arbor campus.

Also in the summer of 1941, the U.S. State Department provided a grant to the ELI for the development of an intensive Teacher Education Program. Since 1941, over 4,000 teachers of English from the United States and from countries around the world have participated in this teacher training certificate program.

In addition to the intensive course instruction and the teacher training programs, the ELI has had a continuing component of instructional research and materials development, both in language teaching and in language testing. Thirty-nine books on English teaching and testing have been published along with 17 sets of audio sound recordings and four video recordings. Since 1961, ELI has administered a world-wide testing and certification service which has processed as many as 12,000 tests in a single year. Forty-two individual tests, many with multiple forms, have been constructed and marketed.

Over the 43 years from 1941 to 1984 more than 1,000 people have been a part of the ELI staff and have contributed

to the following work: (1) teaching intensive English courses, (2) conducting research in language learning and teaching, (3) developing instructional materials, (4) training ESL teachers, (5) teaching linguistics and applied linguistic courses, (6) conducting research in language testing, (7) constructing and validating tests, and (8) editing professional journals. Today University of Michigan ELI staff "alumni" are located throughout the world, many in important and influential positions.

These on-campus activities alone represent a significant contribution to the field of English language learning and teaching. This domain of direct on-campus activity, however, is only an inner circle of even larger spheres of influence.

The Outer Circle of Influence

A second domain is an outer circle of influence which ultimately touched the lives of far more ESL students and teachers than those involved in learning and teaching in Ann Arbor. This outer circle was made up of a network of English language programs developed in dozens of countries around the world, with ELI staff members working in cooperation with local language teaching personnel. The first program outside Ann Arbor was established in 1943 in Mexico City. With Albert Marckwardt as director, the United States government provided Department of State funds to establish this first American language institute ever sponsored abroad.

In the 1940's, 1950's and 1960's, the ELI was deeply involved in English language instruction on five continents. In total, during the years from 1941 to 1984, the ELI has conducted special programs in language teaching and/or teacher training in Ann Arobr and in over 30 host countries around the world.

This extensive diffusion of Fries' insights into many parts of the world was not without its problems. It was unavoidable in

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such a widespread process of dissemination that distortions of original intent occurred. The explicit principles of the Oral Approach of Charles C. Fries, as he wrote them in his classic 1945 text *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, sometimes became blurred and misinterpreted. Some aspects were blended and incorporated — out of context and in an unprincipled fashion — into subsequent versions of audio-lingual, oral-direct, mim-mem, and other varieties of orally-oriented methods and techniques.

In actuality, the "real" Fries program never left the University of Michigan campus, as neither the aura of the charismic personality of Fries himself nor the milieu of the Ann Arbor environment was "exportable". Although some of the essential aspects of the program were exported through books and training programs, staff members who worked in the original programs indicate that some aspects were not exported and, indeed, probably were not exportable.

**The Powerful Influence of the
Underlying Theory and Pedagogy**

A domain of influence more significant than either the inner circle or the outer circle lies in Fries' keen perception — in the late 1930's and early 1940's — of critical issues involved in language learning and language teaching, especially: (1) his precise focus in asking *the right questions*; (2) his formulation of *explicit answers* in constructing both his *theory* of teaching English as a foreign language and his linguistically-oriented *pedagogy*. (See Part Two)

**Historical Perspectives:
International Politics, Linguistics, Psychology**

Many facets of the climate of the times 43 years ago exerted

strong influence on Fries and the development of the English Language Institute. Important among these were the prevailing intrigues of international politics, the prevailing attitudes in linguistics, and the prevailing concepts in the psychology of learning.

Political Perspectives

It was not by chance that the first intensive course was offered to students from Central and South America nor was it by chance that the original textbook series was developed as an intensive course in English for Latin American students. The ELI intensive English course was part of a much larger plan, one which was based *not* upon an altruistic nor even a scholarly motivation, but one which was based upon political need. The first ELI intensive course and the textbook materials were developed in direct response to United States governmental concerns for strengthening international relations with Latin America. These concerns were related directly to President Franklin D. Roosevelt's "Good Neighbor Policy", a Pan-American corporation aimed at countering threats of European totalitarian influences which were moving into Latin America. The urgent need which resulted in the establishment of the University of Michigan ELI was the demand for English instruction in Latin American countries as a part of cultural exchange programs just before and during the time of the United States' involvement in World War II. In Albert Marckwardt's words:

This was a time when war clouds were gathering and our own entanglement in the struggle was not far off. The United States was becoming concerned over the cultural penetration by totalitarian powers into various Latin American countries. The teaching of Italian and German was an important element in this cultural effort. As a country, our response to this was the development of

English teaching in these same countries. We had to begin this by preparing materials for teaching. (Norris, 1968:2)

Linguistic Perspectives

It also was not by chance that Charles C. Fries was selected by the U.S. Department of State to develop this crucial intensive program in English as a foreign language. Marckwardt called it "inevitable" that Fries, whose reputation as a linguist and scholar was already well established, should be chosen to concentrate his expertise and his energy on meeting the government's demand for English instruction.

By 1939, the concern of the U.S. Department of State for the teaching of English in Puerto Rico and Latin America had reached crisis proportions. The result was a crucial invitational conference held on the Ann Arbor campus of the University of Michigan in the fall of 1939. Harold Allen reported:

The purpose of the conference was to decide upon the ideological basis for such teaching — as it turned out, to decide between the Basic English with pictures proposed by I.A. Richards and a linguistically-based approach advocated by Fries. The upshot of the conference was a grant to Fries to develop teaching materials for the intensive course in English that was experimentally offered in the trial summer program for Latin American students at Michigan in the summer of 1941. It was so successful an experiment that it led to the formal establishment of Michigan's famous English Language Institute with State Department support and helping funds from the Rockefeller Foundation. (Allen, 1978:2)

With this mandate from the State Department, Fries and his chosen staff began preparing instructional materials for the experimental program of 1941 and the succeeding courses. A number of key people were involved during the early years, but from personal accounts and from a study of historical

documents, it became clear that much of the credit for the initial and continuing success of English Language Institute activities must be attributed to the intellect, the strength, and the charisma of one person – Charles C. Fries.

In a dedication a few years later, Marckwardt made the following tribute:

It has always seemed to me that Charles Fries stood head and shoulders above his colleagues simply because in the course of a fruitful academic life he had three or four first-rate ideas, which is three or four more than fall to the lot of us. What is more, he had the vitality and persistence to see to it that these ideas have had a powerful impact upon the profession. This, in the barest outline, is the key to the extraordinary academic career of the man we seek to honor. (Marckwardt, 1965:3)

In the 1920's, when Fries began his career, there was a heated battle between the prescriptive dicta of traditional grammarians and a *then* "new breed" of structural linguists dedicated to descriptive analysis. Although Fries had allies in his efforts to demonstrate the unrealistic basis of the traditional perspective, it was his voice which was both persistent and persuasive as a proponent of structural linguistics.

When Fries turned his attention then to the development of English texts for non-native speakers, he characterized this work in the following way in the preface of *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*:

. . .an attempt to interpret, in a practical way for teaching, the principles of modern linguistic science and to use the results of scientific linguistic research. (Fries, 1945:Preface)

He deplored the fact that:

. . .naive and conventional views of language have been so much in control that it has taken a world war, with its practical contacts with a dozen languages little heard before, to provide an opportunity even to *try* materials and methods based upon scientific knowledge and research. (Fries,

1945:Preface, italics in the original)
(See Part Two for a discussion of Fries' explicit application of linguistic principles to materials development and teaching methodology.)

Psychological Perspectives

Fries defined language as "a set of habits for oral production and reception", thus embodying not only linguistic concepts but psychological concepts as well[3] (Fries, 1945:6). Learning a language was believed to·involve making the basic patterns of arrangement of the language – the grammatical forms – matters of automatic habit (Fries, 1945:3). In an earlier publication, Fries related the notion of automatic habit to "speaking without thinking of the forms of language":

. . . If he (a speaker) is to speak effectively he must give his entire attention to grasping clearly his *ideas* and to the choice and organization of the materials underlying these ideas in order to meet the needs of his hearers. Language *forms*, the grammatical apparatus of his expression, must come automatically. (Fries, 1927:124; italics not in the original)

As a crucial component of his position, Fries argued strongly that a language was not "learned" unless the automatic habits built up were *oral-aural at the outset*. Fries underscored the word "approach" – not method – in the following definition:

'Oral Approach' is a name primarily for the *end* to be attained in the first stage of language learning. . . That end is the building up of a set of habits for the oral production of a language and for the receptive understanding of the language when it is spoken. (Fries, 1945:8; italics in the original)

This perspective on learning, as outlined by Fries, played a

pervasive role in the subsequent materials and procedures development at the ELI. Note these comments from the preface to *Pattern Practice*:

This newest revision of our "Pattern Practice Materials" as we often call them, completes the series of thirty-four units from our *Intensive Course in English*. We offer them with confidence in their extraordinary effectiveness. They represent a new theory for language learning, the idea that *to learn a new language one must establish orally the patterns of the language as subconscious habits*. These oral practices are directed specifically to that end.

In *Pattern Practice* as developed at the English Language Institute and as embodied in these lessons, the student is led to practice a pattern, changing some element of that patterns each time, so that normally he never repeats the same sentence twice. Furthermore, his attention is drawn to the changes, which are stimulated by pictures, oral substitutions, etc., and thus, the *pattern itself, the significant framework of the sentence, rather than the particular sentence*, is driven intensely into his habit reflexes. (Lado/Fries, 1953: xv)

Final Comments

Thus, political, linguistic, and psychological perspectives each played an important role in the development of the Fries Oral Approach to language learning and language teaching. Fries gathered a staff and provided leadership and the intellectual spark in shaping theory and practices which moved out from Michigan to make a world-wide impact. We feel that a study of Fries is an important prerequisite to understanding many of the current issues in the field of ESL and applied linguistics.

The theoretical perspectives presented by Fries in *Teaching*

and Learning English as a Foreign Language are discussed in closer detail in the next part of this paper.

PART TWO. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS TO THE ORAL APPROACH

In terms of our view of ESL Theory, we consider Fries to be one of the most important figures of the century. It sometimes seems that everything that has come after Fries and much of what we do today is, in some important way, either following Fries or reacting to him, i.e., synthesis/antithesis.

In this section of the paper we describe two major dimensions of the Fries legacy to ESL Theory:[4]
1) Fries' insights in formulating clear questions central to the second language learning/teaching process — the same questions which continue today to be key issues in scholarly research and debate.
2) Fries' unique attention to the formulation of *explicit* statements of principles which underlie the pedagogy of the Oral Approach and support its pedagogical decisions — within the framework of the questions posed.

Major Criticisms

After 40 years it is easy to criticize this work in theoretical foundations of ESL. Therefore we discuss several areas of criticism at the outset.

One set of criticisms concerns the lack of empirical foundations for theoretical claims. First, the tenor of the times did not require empirical investigations of the type which we have become accustomed to in recent work in applied linguistics. Given the psychological foundations referred to in Part One of this paper, it was felt that the major principles of learning were well understood:

> The command of a language is a matter of practice. . .
> *Language learning is over-learning; anything less is of no*
> *use.* (Bloomfield, 1942:12; italics in the original)

Second, most of the tools we have become accustomed to —
tools developed for research in such fields as second language
acquisition, classroom learning/teaching, reading, ethnography,
ethnomethodology — have become available to us only rela-
tively recently. Thus, criticizing Fries, even implicitly, for not
using these tools is inappropriate.

An additional set of criticisms concerns the general form
of Fries' argumentation:

<div align="center">

Truism → Conclusion = Fact

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A detailed example of Fries' argumentation is in order here.
In the following quotation, Fries presents a series of state-
ments about children learning a first language.

> Very early as small children we master the sound system
> of our language. We learn to hear the significant sounds in
> sequences that become familiar, and then to produce these
> significant sounds and sound sequence with amazing
> accuracy. . . This mastery of the sound system of our
> native language has (for all of us without noticeable speech
> defects) become entirely unconscious and, like the ability
> to walk, we cannot remember the learning process. The
> same thing is true concerning our mastery of the use of the
> devices which our language uses structurally — the funda-
> mental matters of word-order and the patterns of form.
> These we learn to use automatically and they are not items
> of conscious choice. The ordinary adult speaker of English
> finds it extremely difficult to describe what he does in these
> matters, so thoroughly have they become unconscious
> habits in early childhood. But in matters of vocabulary the
> situation is entirely different. The "words" one knows
> depend upon the experience one has had. A child's experi-
> ence is much limited in its range. His vocabulary is therefore
> greatly limited. But he continually grows in experience

and also in the vocabulary that necessarily accompanies new experiences. . .

Based on these observations, Fries then presents some conclusions about adults learning a second language — stated in the form of "facts":

> In learning a new language, then, the chief problem is not at first that of learning vocabulary items. It is, first, the mastery of the sound system — to understand the stream of speech, to hear the distinctive sound features and to approximate their production. It is, second, the mastery of the features of arrangement that constitute the structure of the language. These are the matters that the native speaker as a child has early acquired as unconscious habits; they must become automatic habits of the adult learner of a new language. (Fries, 1945:2 & 3)

What appears to happen next in terms of argumentation is that there is a jump to what must occur in language teaching. In terms of teaching, for Fries, it follows that the explicit aim is to develop materials which would lead the adult learner toward making the sound system and the structural system automatic habits, using only enough vocabulary to make the systems work. Arguing for what *must* occur in language teaching based on analogies to what *appears* to happen in child language acquisition has been criticized in the literature (see, for example, Saporta, 1965, 1966). We feel that Fries' argumentation is vulnerable here.

Another set of criticisms concerns Fries' view of the relation of theory to practical problem-solving. In his book (1945, passim), Fries talks about applying theory to the solution of practical problems. This approach seems to us to be a fundamental error in the field. Fries was not alone in this fundamental error, of course, but with Fries (1945, passim) it took the form of a crucial assumption which went something like:

> One can build a technology of language teaching on a theory of language and on a theory of learning.

An alternative and potentially more fruitful approach to *validation* in the field is to clearly differentiate between "criteria for success" in a theory versus "criteria for success" in a practical problem; see Goguen (1979, passim) and Wiener (1979:2) for the source of this distinction.

The Contrastive Notion and Materials Development

One of Fries' long-term major contributions to ESL thought, in our view, was his explicitness to detail regarding the principles underlying his approach to language teaching. The Fries (1945) work has as its explicit aim:

> To interpret in a practical way for teaching, the principles of modern linguistic science and to use the results of scientific linguistic research. (Preface)

Teachers of ESL, it was claimed, "in order to be effective", should "know English, its sound system, its structural system, and its vocabulary – from the point of view of a descriptive analysis in accord with modern linguistic science" (Fries, 1945:Preface). Fries then framed an important truism, one which was to have substantive import in the development of the field:

> Foreign language teaching is always a matter of teaching a specific "foreign" language to students who have specific "native" language background. (Fries, 1945:Preface)

He commented further:

> The most efficient materials are those that are based upon a scientific description of the language to be learned, carefully compared with a parallel description of the native language of the learner. (Fries, 1945:9)

This notion, quoted widely and used to justify literally hundreds of master's theses in the 1950's and 1960's was the direct antecedent of contrastive analysis. In the subsequent work of Lado (1957), the comparison of the learner's native language to the language to be learned was explicitly hypo-

thesized as a predictor of learners' errors.[5] (cf. Lado, 1957: 2)

Out of the subsequent attempts to validate Lado's hypothesis arose "error analysis", one of the immediate percursors to the field of "second language acquisition".[6] We can easily believe that, without Fries' insights, the field of second language acquisition would not have developed, at least in its current very rich and active form.

Thus it appears that from the idea that the best materials arise out of a comparison between the native and the target language, we get the notion that such a comparison is able to predict the errors which learners will make and the problems which they will encounter. Finally, we find the conclusion that before one can prepare the best teaching materials one has to discover the learning difficulties through such a comparison.

The most important new thing in the preparation of teaching materials is the comparison of native and foreign language and culture in order to find hurdles that really have to be surmounted in the teaching. It will soon be considered quite out of date to begin writing a textbook without having previously compared the two systems involved.

Other advances in techniques of presentation of language and culture should not be neglected, but the linguistic comparison is basic and really inescapable if we wish to make progress and not merely reshuffle the same old materials. (Lado, 1957:2)

The Oral Approach

Fries was disturbed by the ESL teaching profession which he characterized as a field ripe with a "babel of conflicting assertions". He felt it was critical to raise serious, indeed profound, questions:

"Just what does *learning* a language mean?"

"When can one be said to have *mastered* a foreign lan-
guage?" (Fries, 1945:1; italics in the original)

In addressing these questions, Fries first presents answers
which were popular in his day; one such answer is that "learn-
ing a language" is taken to mean "learning vocabulary". He
easily demolishes this answer by referring to his research base
in structural linguistics. Using this base, he then provides an
operational definition of 'learning'.

A person has "learned" a foreign language when he has. . .
first, *within a limited vocabulary*, mastered the sound sys-
tem. . .and has, second, made the structural devices. . .
matters of automatic habit. (Fries, 1945:3; italics in the
original)

This definition of learning, Fries is careful to point out, is
relevant only to the *first stage* of language learning. He speci-
fies that "The practice which the student contributes must
be *oral practice*" (1945:6; italics in the original). The claim
is made by Fries that this must be the case, even if the final
goal is to read. Without this oral practice, it is claimed that
the reader cannot "enter into the precise particular way the
foreign language grasps experience" (1945:6). In a later
publication, Fries (1960:1-4) summarizes the two basic
features of the Oral Approach as follows:

Two important features characterize the heart and sub-
stance of the "Oral Approach" as the name is used here.
These two features make our "Oral Approach" much more
than any of the older "methods" and make it, indeed,
A New Approach to language teaching and language learn-
ing.

These two features are:
1) *A much more clearly defined goal for the first stage of
language learning.*
2) A much more complete understanding of *what is
essential in the materials* to be studied in order to attain
that goal. (Fries, 1960: 1; italics in the original)

With regard to the first feature, Fries state:

The goal for the first stage is such complete and thorough learning of the basic materials that they can be *produced orally by the pupils*. The word *oral* in the name Oral Approach is used to describe what the pupil must be able to do with each lesson that he learns. (1960:2; italics in the original)

With regard to the second feature, Fries states:

But to be successful the Oral Approach must have the *proper materials for the pupils to practice and learn. . .* Fortunately, the modern scientific study of language has within recent years provided a breakthrough in descriptive structural analysis which we have learned to apply with great success to the problems of building effective materials to be learned. (1960:2-3; italics in the original)

It was the choice, arrangement, and sequencing of items to be learned that Fries made highly specific practical use of the "linguistic scientist's technique of language description" (1945:7). Students who were educated in the tenets of structural linguistics can understand the immense attention to descriptive detail which is intended here. In the Oral Approach, the results of this careful descriptive work are presented in detail in the Lado/Fries series (1953, 1957). A point, seemingly unnoted in the literature, is that for Fries, "the principles of method" also grow out of these materials (Fries, 1945:7). "Method" for Fries is clearly on a lower level of organization than "approach". Fries is very careful to emphasize that the principles of his Oral Approach do not preclude a whole range of practices, including the use of written symbols. (Fries, 1945:8)

Pattern Practice

Turning to the important concept of "pattern practice", Fries states that: "Pattern practice forms the most important

activity of learning a foreign language" (Fries in Lado/Fries, 1953, 1957:Preface). Fries claimed (personal communication) that some of those who followed him made the fundamental error of conflating two very separate notions into *their* concept of pattern practice.[7] Fries' argument is a bit involved here; it may help if we remember that in the "rainbow series", there is a green book and a red book. Let us equate one of Fries' notions with the green book (Lado/Fries, 1953, 1957, 1958, and Krohn, 1968) and the other with the red book (Lado/Fries, 1953, 1957, 1958). What we are calling "the green book notion", Fries entitles *"production with conscious choice"*; what we are calling "the red book notion", he entitles *"production as automatic habit"*. (Fries, 1945:9)

The procedure used goes as follows: the structural linguist describes the basic patterns of the target language which the learner of a *particular* native language needs to learn. He orders these basic patterns according to difficulty of learning as determined by contrastive analysis. These patterns of the target language are then practiced in two ways, first through conscious choice (the "green book way") – that is, with the learner's attention on the structural point being taught. Fries then made the simple, but penetrating observation that this type of practice is not enough, that this will *not* lead to freedom in the new language (1945:6). A second type of practice is necessary (Fries, 1945:6, 8, 9, 34, 36). That is, after a particular pattern has been learned through *conscious choice* using *green book* practice, the students need *red book* practice to achieve *automatic use*. Once again Fries is very precise:

> . . .the same patterns must become matters of habit productively and receptively. They must function automatically when the attention is centered wholly upon meaning and not at all upon the mechanics of the language. (Fries, 1945: 36)

If one can forget the apparent dogma, one removes much of

the controversy and sees the elegance of the system. The green book materials focus on *the learning of form* while the red book materials focus on *the automatic use* of these patterns while the learner's attention is on the meaning. The type of meaning involved with the red book materials is lexical and referential and is portrayed to the learner through pull-out pictures in the back of his textbook (see Chart 2). The predicted result for the learner is that, in Fries' words:

> . . .the pattern, the arrangement, and the appropriate forms of the words in that arrangement, . . .has become automatic and he freely uses it with all sorts of diverse content. (Fries, 1945:34)

Thus to summarize: the green book notion, the notion of *structural patterns*, involves exercises in which the learner's attention is centered upon conscious manipulation of grammatical patterns, whereas, the red book notion, the notion of *pattern practice*, involves exercises in which the learner's attention is centered upon a variety of meanings substituted in the previously learned grammatical pattern. We have tried to discover when and how these two notions were conflated, how in some cases, at any rate, the only notion of "pattern practice" taken over by others after Fries, seems to have been its *opposite*, the one Fries called "structural patterns", i.e., with no reference to meaning. That these two notions were conflated is evident from textbooks and courses which are still with us in which there is no clear distinction made between the *conscious learning* of forms and the *practice* to make the forms matters of automatic habit.

What is important to note is that many thousands of people learned to communicate in English (and other languages) through initial exposure to materials and teaching which grew out of Fries' Oral Approach. Why this is so would take cultural, neurological, and psychological speculation which is beyond the scope of this paper. Part of the answer, however, lies in going "beyond the books" to the realities and experi-

ences of the time and this we discuss in Part Three.

PART THREE: THE ELI: A TOTAL FUNCTIONAL LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT[8]

The facet of the Fries Legacy that comprises this section is a description of the *underpublicized* aspects of the Oral Approach practiced at the English Language Institute that Fries founded. He created "a total functional language environment" which was *basic* to his theory of language learning. The desired end result was the master of the *oral use* of language, hence the Oral Approach. The practices described here were developed as a result of Fries' search for answers to critical questions, the *same* questions still being raised today in language learning and teaching.

(1) How can we best help people learn a language?
(2) What kind of environment will produce the best language learning?

It was clear to Fries that learning a language was not just something that happened in the classroom; the learning process had to go beyond the classroom into the use of language in *real-life communicative situations*. What are described here are practices which are stated explicitly or implied in Fries' classic text, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* (1945). In the chapter entitled "Contextual Orientation" (Chapter 5), Fries describes the use of "vivid imaginative realization" in teaching the language through use; he emphasizes the need to relate cultural values to the language in which they are being expressed.

The belief that language learning had to be reinforced and complemented by experiences *beyond the classroom* resulted in the establishment, by Fries, of a very special functional language environment at the English Language Institute. This total program was never revealed in the textbooks so widely

distributed throughout the world. It was a program impossible to export with the textbooks — and yet it was a *vital* part of the success achieved at the Institute.

The aspects of the ELI program that are not revealed by the textbooks are those that are discussed in this section. The textbooks could not show, for example, the personalized nature of the program; classes were very small, usually no more than 12 students. Instructors thus knew their students very well and were able to tailor the class work to the special needs and interests of the students. Classroom atmosphere played an important part in the success of the program. The harmony evident in the classroom and in the other activities outside the classroom was an important motivating factor in the learning environment.

What exactly went on *outside* the classroom at the ELI? The program activities described below were an integral part of the ELI program during the years of the 1940's and 1950's. Instructors spent many hours with the students outside the classroom; indeed a number of staff members were housed in the dormitories with the students. In addition, most ELI instructors ate lunch and dinner in the dormitory with the students each day. (Although this might be seen to be a heavy responsibility by today's standards, at the time it was looked upon as an excellent experience for the staff; furthermore, it also constituted a fringe benefit as the meals were provided without cost to the staff!) The dining rooms were set up so that each table seated six to eight persons; each table included at least one instructor. The conversations were, of course, carried on in English. Sometimes they revolved around daily shared experiences but often they ranged far and wide. A significant cross-cultural exchange of information took place during those meal times.

After dinner each day there was a short social period during which the staff interacted with the students informally. This included a variety of activities: conversations, games

(Chinese checkers was popular at that time), help with home-work that had been assigned, etc.

The "after dinner hour" was also used to plan the weekly Friday evening program. These programs were specifically instituted to allow for and to encourage the use of English in a social setting. Each of these weekly programs included a formal and informal aspect. The *formal* portion, which usually lasted about an hour, was organized around some central theme. These varied greatly and reflected the individual talents of the students in the Institute at a particular time. Sometimes, the students presented short two- or three-minute talks about a famous person in their country or about a celebrated historical event. The students prepared their pre-sentations and practiced them with help from the instructors during the week. At other times a musical program would be presented, capitalizing on the talents available among the students. These programs, too, would involve language prac-tice such as describing the music or talking about the compos-er. Sometimes a film on a somewhat controversial topic might be shown, followed by a discussion of the content. Staff members have fond memories of some of the skits prepared by the students for programs near the end of each course. These often depicted the foibles of individual instructors. They were all in good fun and eminently creative – all in English, of course.

The *informal* aspects of the Friday night program, which comprised the remainder of the evening, included singing (songs in English and other languages) and dancing. The dancing was also the combination of American and non-American ballroom and folk dancing. Sometimes before the dancing commenced, there would be group games.[9] These games were deliberately chosen to exploit the language used in playing them.

Typical American celebrations of holidays was another important activity. The Fourth of July picnic during the

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Summer Intensive Program each year is a good example. This celebration included a baseball game (with Fries as pitcher) and the usual hot dogs cooked over a charcoal fire. This all-day affair, like the other social activities, built a rapport between instructors and students that made for a very effective learning environment.

"Only English" was the watchword during the Friday evening programs, the holiday celebrations, and the meals and social hour after meals. Certainly the communicative use of English came alive to students at these times.

At the end of each eight-week session there was a banquet to honor those who had completed the course. In the early years of the Institute Fries always acted as host on these occasions. One or two of the students would be asked to talk and here again there was the opportunity to experience the use of English in a social setting of a more formal type.

Fries set the scene for the learning environment in his introductory talk at the beginning of each eight-week session. In the early days these talks were translated into Spanish for the convenience of beginning students, most of whom were from Latin America. One of the major points he made, in addition to his admonition to "practice constantly" (opportunities for which as we have seen were built into the program), was that there is no such thing as word-for-word translation. He stressed the importance of the relation of language to the culture of its users and to the situation in which it is used. Learning the language meant understanding the context in which the language was being used. *Those who say that Fries was not interested in meaning clearly have not understood his work in English as a foreign language.*

Fries' *Oral Approach* was descriptive of the *goal* to be reached: *the oral use of language.* Fries was adamant that it not be referred to as a method. His approach allowed for alternatives in how one 'approached' the material in the classroom. Instructors were able to use their own individual styles

as they wished to guide students to use the language. This approach allowed for teacher flexibility in the classroom. As discussed above, instructors were well acquainted with their students, and experiences shared in activities such as those described above often became useful language examples in the classroom. Many specific grammatical or phonological examples used in the classroom were drawn from such shared experiences.

This combination of *classroom work* and opportunity for practice in the use of the language with native speakers *outside the classroom* in social situations was essential to the highly successful program at the English Language Institute. Many of Fries' students have, at least in some measure, been able to export this kind of functional learning environment to their own institutions. To the extent that one is able to provide such an environment, one can enhance the language learning experience for students.

Over the years many colleagues who were not privileged to participate in what has been called the "Michigan experience" have been envious of that experience. Former ELI staff members count ourselves fortunate indeed to have played a part in the Fries Legacy.

PART FOUR: THE FRIES LEGACY AND ESL THEORY

Overview

An important feature of Fries' work was his concern with explicit answers to precise questions about learning and teaching a second language, answers covering a broad range of pedagogical issues — from theory — to curriculum — to classroom — and beyond the classroom. It is with regard to this concern that we feel Fries' work has particular relevance to many current issues in the fields of ESL and applied linguis-

tics. In this section we look at Fries' work as it relates to what we are calling the study of ESL Theory – study of the *principles* according to which pedagogical decisions are made and the *processes* involved in the creation of these principles. It is through the study of ESL Theory that we are attempting to make explicit the factors involved in pedagogical decision-making.

By pedagogical decisions, we are referring to the range of decisions which determine *the choice of language data* that learners are exposed to in the learning/teaching, and the *choice of activities* through which they interact with this language data. Input toward such decisions can potentially come from many sources: theorists and researchers – program organizers and directors – curriculum developers and textbook writers – teacher trainers and supervisors – teachers and tutors – and ultimately, learners. In discussing the principles and processes of pedagogical decision-making then, it is indeed necessary to include explicitly three things:

(1) theoretical perspectives,
(2) perspectives of those engaged to organize and carry out the teaching,
(3) perspectives of those involved in the learning, that is, the students.

Investigating Learning/Teaching Perspectives

An examination of the literature in ESL and applied linguistics over the past 40 years reveals a history of debate among language learning/teaching *theorists* about "the best way" to learn and teach a language. Yet we find that the details of these controversies are unfamiliar to many engaged in the second language learning/teaching process. This lack of familiarity is a serious concern since what happens in the learning/ teaching is often significantly affected by the outcome of

such controversies as reflected in the materials used, and instructions and advice provided for teachers and learners.

However, controversies about the best ways to learn and to teach a second language are not limited to theorists. Among *teachers* there is also a continual debate about what kind of teaching works best in the classroom and about what kind of teaching strategies produce classes which are conducive to learning. We find that the details of these debates among teachers are largely unfamiliar to many theorists; for the most part, teachers' techniques have been considered idiosyncratic by theorists and outside the scope of the theoretical debates at issue. This is also a concern as what happens in the learning/ teaching is significantly affected by different teacher perspectives – even when the same materials and method are used.

We further discover, when we truly involve *learners*, that they often have specific ideas about what learning a second language involves, and about the best ways for them to accomplish this learning. We find that learners' perceptions of what occurs or should occur in a second language classroom or program may not correspond to the plan envisioned by the theorist or by the teacher. The learner, nonetheless, plays a crucial role in how the target language data is perceived and treated and how language learning activities are responded to. The following example is an illustration of this.

In theoretical terms, an *inductive* approach is one in which the learners draw a generalization from a number of examples which are provided. In contrast to this, a *deductive* approach provides a generalization which is illustrated or tested through the examples. Neglected in this distinction, however, is the learner's perspective. Learners who have already been given an explanation (or developed a personal one) may treat the examples which initiate an inductive approach as illustrations of their explanation or tests of their hypothesis. On the other hand, learners may prefer not to develop an interpretation

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when the rule is initially stated (or they might not be listening at all), so that the ensuing examples are not illustrations of the rule, but rather the "raw data" which they treat "inductively". Under practical conditions then, it may be the case that this conceptual distinction disappears. Thus, an approach, in practice cannot validly be considered independent of the learner's perspective — the learner's perceptions of the learning/teaching, and the learner's response to the way in which language data is provided and learning activities are carried out.

We find that in the perspectives noted above — those of the theorist, the teacher, and the learner — a strong conviction exists that how the teaching and learning is carried out affects whether the outcome is successful or unsuccessful. However, there are many questions underlying these convictions. First of all, what does each of the groups judge as constituting "success"? To what extent do conceptual distinctions proposed by the theorists play a role in *their* view of success? To what extent do factors discussed by teachers play a role in *their* view of success? Frequently attempts have been made in the literature to attribute a "success" or "failure" of teaching to a particular theoretical perspective, or "approach"[10]. In our view, an essential prerequisite to clear statements about the success of lessons, programs, or methods is a deeper understanding of the interrelationships among the perspectives of the theorist, the teacher and the learner.

The Study of ESL Theory

It has become a prime objective of our view of ESL Theory to provide a *framework* for systematic investigation of the processes of interaction among those involved in second language learning/teaching processes, out of which pedagogical decisions are made, and out of which pedagogical principles evolve.

In order to meet the above objective, it is necessary, in our view, to bring into the *same arena of analysis* the range of diverse decisions which determine what learners face in the learning/teaching process as potential data for the study of ESL Theory. This includes three elements:

(1) the range of decisions leading up to the choice of language content and/or language data which learners are exposed to,

(2) the range of decisions determining the activities and interactions learners will carry out with language samples and,

(3) the range of decisions reflecting attitudes, beliefs and expectations about language learning and teaching which learners face, and which they themselves bring to the task.

Such an analysis might investigate, for example, decisions related to some of the following areas:

(1) organizing a program around a particular theoretical or philosophical approach;

(2) developing materials for learning/teaching;

(3) sequencing language content or learning activities;

(4) determining criteria for grouping learners into levels and/or classes;

(5) grouping learners within a class period for a particular activity;

(6) carrying out particular learning activities inside (or outside) the classroom;

(7) engaging in a particular exchange during such a learning activity.

A primary underlying concept of this paper, and of the study of ESL Theory as we have defined it, is this: the actual carrying out, in daily practice, of activities for learning *is the culmination of an extremely broad range of decisions*, some carefully thought out, some spontaneous, but all relatable in important ways to previous experiences. An awareness of

the patterning of this range of decisions and the factors under-
lying them would give us insights into why we consider some
approaches, programs, methods, courses, lessons and tech-
niques successful, and others unsuccessful. It may also help
us to better understand the ways in which some courses seem
coherent and harmonious — courses in which the students,
teachers, and materials seem to be in enthusiastic agreement
about where they are going and how they are getting there —
while other courses seem to be pitted with conflicts and
disharmonies.

The use of such terms as harmony, coherence and unity
for referring to language learning/teaching situations is not
new. These terms have been used often in the literature
over the years, by Fries (1945), Anthony (1963), Stevick
(1980), among others. The notions represented by such terms
are difficult to define, and perhaps impossible to control for
and measure empirically. Yet, there is good reason to suspect
that when learners, teachers, and materials are united about
the learning objectives and about the means to achieve these
objectives — with respect to the interpersonal, methodological,
and theoretical or philosophical aspects of their shared effort
— this harmony or coherence or unity plays an important part
in the success of a program. In the case under consideration
in this paper, we find among our colleagues divergences in
opinion about the reasons for which the approach developed
by Fries and used during that period was considered so suc-
cessful. There is also divergence of opinion as to the factors
involved in that success. However, amid the theoretical con-
troversies regarding whether or not pattern practice *should*
work (see, for example: Saporta, 1966; Brown, 1971; Diller,
1971; Lamendella, 1978), is the realization that students
taught in the Fries tradition *did* get target language data, and
were inspired to do something with it. Perhaps for these
students, and their teachers, there was never any doubt that
it would work.

The fact that harmony is largely unquantifiable and difficult to define does not mean that it is impossible for us to investigate the factors which seem to foster it or to hinder it. Nor does it mean that it is impossible for learners, teachers, and theorists to become more aware of such factors. It may be that the very process of investigating the notion of harmony, along with an attempt to make explicit our understanding of theoretical notions (such as pattern practice, for example) will increase our awareness of potential conflicts in the learning/teaching process and their sources. It is in attempting to develop this awareness that we feel that the study of ESL Theory is related to concerns of harmony and success in ESL learning/teaching.

Fries and ESL Theory

Let us consider then, the ways in which an examination of Fries' work is relevant to the study of ESL Theory today, and to the notion of harmony in ESL learning/teaching. It is not only that some of the principles of the Oral Approach — and the processes involved in their creation — may be relevant to current pedagogical decision-making that is of interest to us here. It is also that Fries' work provides us with an excellent model for explicitly taking into account a full range of pedagogical considerations in the learning/teaching process, including those of a theoretical nature and those of an implementational nature. In our view, it is important for all of us as ESL professionals to have background knowledge for, and experience in, examining pedagogical decisions at a variety of levels, and ultimately in making decisions. It is important for us to develop an awareness of and appreciation for the complex network of factors which connect the carrying out of learning/ teaching to the various theories and beliefs held about learning and teaching second language. For this reason, we wish to attempt to avoid the traditional tendency to separate theore-

tical background, on the one hand, and methodology, on the other. Such a split suggests that the validity or lack of validity of a particular classroom activity or technique is unrelated to theories or philosophies of language, learning, and teaching.

In this light, we wish to consider two aspects of Fries' work: (1) his completeness, and (2) his explicitness. Fries' work in ESL can be characterized by the term *completeness* in that it offers a careful tying together of diverse threads — theoretical factors, material-related factors, teacher-related factors, learner-related factors — into what clearly seems to have been a coherent and harmonious whole. Departing from the "special techniques of descriptive analysis of the modern scientific study of language by which a trained linguist can efficiently and accurately arrive at the fundamentally significant matters of structure and sound system", Fries moved to the "application of these techniques to the development of satisfactory materials for learning and teaching" (1945:5).

The role of the learner in the process was clearly laid out. "Even with such materials the desired result does not follow inevitably without the thorough cooperation of the student. The student must be willing to give himself wholeheartedly to the strenuous business of learning the new language". (1945:5) Fries elaborated in some detail what this wholehearted cooperation entails — the type of attitude necessary, the type of practice required, the kind of difficulties which must be overcome — for the scientifically selected and sequenced items of language to be learned.

Although in retrospect, Fries can be criticized for his excessively strict application of theoretical linguistic principles to questions of pedagogical nature, he was nonetheless *explicit* in this application. As noted in Part Two above, he began his *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language* by *explicitly* framing the often implicit questions which must necessarily be part of any attempt to learn or teach another language: "What do we mean by 'learn' or 'master'

a language?" and "By what process can we best arrive at this 'mastery'?" He then provided answers to these questions by explicit reference to principles of structural linguistics and to anecdotal information. It is Fries' explicitness which helps us to understand how he came to the conclusions he did, and what the factors were that he considered most important. It is also his explicitness which allows us to be explicit in our criticism of his conclusions.

Fries stated that the mastery of the basic sound and structural arrangement was only the *first* stage (1945:3). He then clearly linked this first stage to what he considered the ultimate task of "attaining as complete a realization as possible of the common situations in which the language operates for the native speaker" (1945:58). The subsequent stages of language learning — after mastery of the sound system and the basic structural devices — involve presentation of vocabulary for "general areas of experience", and then for "special areas of experience" related to "the special fields in which he (the learner) will be active." (1945:51). Ultimately, Fries stated the learner must "try to enter into the whole range of experiences that the native speakers of the foreign language have grown up with". "Only in so far as such contextual orientation is achieved is the foreign language really 'mastered' " (1945: 61). Fries has a deep concern for culture, not simply as a handy way of providing a teaching context for linguistic items, but as a prerequisite to gaining the ability to put language to communicative use. Thus, the importance of the aspects discussed in Part Three of this paper is again underscored.

A careful reading of Fries reveals that theoretical aspects did not exist independently, but rather had to be operating hand in hand with methodological aspects and with interpersonal or humanistic aspects. At one point, Fries quoted a philosophical statement of DeWitt Parker: "Scientific truth is the fidelity of a description to the external objects of experience; artistic truth is a sympathetic vision — the organization into clearness

of experience itself", and then added: "the goal of language as a communicative art is akin to that of all artistic effort. . .vivid imaginative realization" (Fries, 1945:57). From that statement, it is difficult to interpret Fries' view of language learning and language teaching as being "mechanistic", an unfair charge too often applied to his work.

A careful study of Fries' work both in terms of its content and its argumentation, is vital to ESL professionals today as a background for understanding contemporary issues in our field. To fail to take the Fries Legacy into serious account in one's own formulation of theories and practices is to fail to recognize an important milestone in the development of our field. Fries was a key visionary in the development of theoretical perspectives to second language learning and teaching.

Footnotes

[1] *Proceedings of the University of Michigan Board of Regents*, March 26 and October 15, 1941.

[2] The abbreviation ESL will be used throughout the paper to denote both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL).

[3] We do not wish to enter into a debate of whether or not Fries was a "behaviorist". We feel that assigning such labels is counterproductive to our attempt to understand Fries in his own terms. Such categorical labels may give the reader a false impression of grasping Fries' position by equating it with what one knows of behaviorism, and may keep the reader from going to the original sources. It is clear, from a close reading of Fries, that he did not hold what we characterize today as the extreme "strawman behaviorist position". It is equally clear though, that he did accept the dominant psychology of the day, one greatly influenced by a broader behaviorist perspective. We should like to acknowledge our appreciation to Peter Fries for the extensive information he provided us concerning Fries' statements regarding psychology.

[4] Sources for this section of the paper are portions of Fries' classic text, *Teaching and Learning English as a Foreign Language*, and personal communications from Fries to Selinker in which Fries expressed deep concern about having been seriously misunderstood in his writings on the theoretical foundations of the Oral Approach. *Our* concern for

his concern is part of the motivation for this paper.

[5] The history of this development (see Lado, 1957) is, of course, more complex, especially in that the influence of structuralist bilingual studies (e.g. Haugen, 1951, and Weinreich, 1953) was strongly felt.

[6] Once again this may appear to be an overstatement of the facts in that another immediate precursor to the study of second-language acquisition was the development of the study of first-language acquisition. Discussion of this aspect would pull us too far afield.

[7] We can see this problem even in more recent discussions. For example, in Lamendella (1978) and Klosek versus Lamendella (1978), this distinction is not noted.

[8] This section was written by Betty Wallace Robinett who worked as an assistant to Fries for several years.

[9] Dorry's book, *Games for Second Language Learning* (1966), reflects her experience at the ELI where she often directed the games during these programs.

[10] In using the terms 'approach', 'method' and 'technique', we are refering to Anthony's distinctions (1963:64). We have used these distinctions as a basis for developing a framework for analysis of the learning/teaching process. (forthcoming)

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