

# **HOW TO TEACH A FOREIGN LANGUAGE**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649082674

How to teach a foreign language by Otto Jespersen

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Cover @ 2017

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# HOW TO TEACH A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

By

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TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH ORIGINAL BY

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"This was sometime a paradox, but now the time  
gives it proof."—Hamlet.



LONDON: GEORGE ALLEN & UNWIN, LTD.  
RUSKIN HOUSE, 40 MUSEUM STREET, W.C. 1

FIRST EDITION	<i>March</i>	1904
REPRINTED .	<i>January</i>	1908
" .	<i>February</i>	1912
" .	<i>August</i>	1917
" .	<i>October</i>	1923
" .	<i>July</i>	1928
" .	<i>September</i>	1928

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## PREFACE

WHEN, in accordance with a wish expressed by English and American friends, I determined to have my *Sprog-undervisning* translated into English, I found it difficult to decide what to retain and what to leave out of the original. So much of what I had written appeared to me to apply more or less exclusively to Danish schools and Danish methods, and I had too little personal experience of the practice of English teachers or of English school-books to be quite sure of the advisability in each case of including or excluding this or that remark. I have, however, made my choice to the best of my ability, and if some parts of my criticism are not altogether applicable to English methods, I hope I may be excused on the plea that what is now the really important thing is less the destruction of bad old methods than a positive indication of the new ways to be followed if we are to have thoroughly efficient teaching in modern languages.

OTTO JESPERSEN.

GENTOFTE,  
Near COPENHAGEN.

## I

ABOUT twenty years ago, when I began to be interested in a reformation of the teaching of modern languages, there were not, as there are now, numerous books and articles on the subject, but merely scattered hints, especially in the works of Sweet and Storm. It was not long, however, before the movement found itself well under headway, especially in Germany. In Scandinavia it began at the appearance of the adaptation which I had made of Felix Franke's capital little pamphlet, "Die praktische spracherlernung auf grund der psychologie und der physiologie der sprache." At just about the same time, Western in Norway and Lundell in Sweden came forward with similar ideas, and at the Philological Congress in Stockholm in 1886 we three struck a blow for reform. We founded a society, of course, and we gave it the name *Quousque tandem* (which for the benefit of those not acquainted with Latin may be rendered "Cannot we soon put an end to this?"), that Ciceronian flourish with which Viëtor had shortly before heralded his powerful little pamphlet, "Der sprachunterricht muss umkehren." Our Scandinavian society published some small pamphlets, and for a time even a little quarterly paper. But the movement soon reached that second and more important stage when the



teachers began to put the reform into practice and when the editors of school-books began to give it more and more consideration, until at present it may be said that the reformed method is well on the way to permanent favour, at least as far as younger teachers have anything to say in the matter.

What is the method, then, that I allude to? Well, if the question means, what is it called, I find myself in some embarrassment, for the method resembles other pet children in this respect, that it has many names. Though none of these are quite adequate, yet if I mention them all, I can perhaps give a little preliminary notion of what the matter is all about. The method is by some called the "new" or "newer"; in England often "*die neuere richtung*"; by others the "reform-method," again the "natural," the "rational," the "correct," or "sensible" (why not praise one's wares as all dealers do in their advertisements?); the "direct" comes a little nearer, the "phonetical" indicates something of its character, but not nearly enough, likewise the "phonetical transcription method," for phonetics and phonetical transcription is not all; the "imitative" again emphasizes another point; the "analytical" (as contrasted with the constructive) could perhaps also be applied to other methods; the "concrete" calls attention to something essential, but so does the German "*anschauungsmethode*" too; "the conversation-method" reminds us perhaps too much of Berlitz schools; words with "anti," like the "anti-classical," "antigrammatical," or "antitranlation" method, are clumsy and stupidly negative—so there is nothing left for us but to give up the attempt to find a name, and

recognize that this difficulty is due to the fact that it is not one thing, but many things that we have to reform, and that is of course the reason why the reformers themselves fall into so many sub-parties: the one lays all the stress on one point, the other on another point. However, there is certainly enough to do for any one who wants to get better results out of the teaching of foreign languages than have hitherto been the rule.

It also speaks much in favour of the reform that it is impossible to name the "new" method after some founder, just as in olden days we had Lancaster's, Hamilton's, Jacotot's methods; later, Robertson's, Ollendorff's, Ahn's, Toussaint-Langenscheidt's, Plötz's, Listov's methods, and as we of later years have Berlitz's and Gouin's methods for the teaching of foreign languages. If in old Norse mythology, the god Heimdall had nine mothers, our reform-method has at least seven wise fathers. In this respect it differs essentially from all the methods just mentioned: each one of them is named after a single man, and he in return is as a rule only remembered as the originator of his method. Our method, on the other hand, owes its origin to men who, for other reasons, may claim a place among the most eminent linguistic scholars of the last decades (Sweet, Storm, Sievers, Sayce, Lundell, and others), and the ideas which they have conceived have been adopted and applied to life with many practical innovations and changes by a large number of educators and schoolmasters (I may mention almost at random Klinghardt, Walter, Kühn, Dörr, Quiehl, Rossmann, Wendt, Widgery, Western, Brekke); on the boundary between both groups stand

especially Viçtor and Paul Passy. That shows that it is not with theoretical sophistries that we have to do ; it is not the whim of one man, but the sum of all the best linguistical and pedagogical ideas of our times, which, coming from many different sources, have found each other, and have made a beautiful alliance for the purpose of overturning the old routine. Modern languages, which were formerly treated like Cinderella in our schools and universities, begin to feel of age, and want to have a word to say, because they cannot put up with various arrangements which may have been more or less satisfactory for the classical languages, but do not suit modern languages at all. These want to be treated as *living*, and the method of teaching them must be as elastic and adaptable as life is restless and variable.

What is the *object* in the teaching of modern languages ? Well, why have we our native tongue ? Certainly in order to get the most out of a life lived in a community of our fellow-countrymen, in order to exchange thoughts, feelings and wishes with them, both by receiving something of their psychical contents and by communicating to them something of what dwells in us. Language is not an end in itself, just as little as railway tracks ; it is a way of connection between souls, a means of communication. And it is not even the only one ; expression of countenance, gesture, etc., yes, even a forcible box on the ear can tell me what is taking place in the mind of one of my fellow-creatures. But language is the most complete, the richest, the best means of communication ; it bridges the psychical chasm between individuals in manifold cases when they otherwise would