Accelerated learning of foreign languages in the USSR

To master a foreign language well enough for use as a means of communication is extremely difficult. Nature and society provide children with the conditions necessary for learning their mother tongue, but it is impossible to reproduce these conditions in adult life.

People are not, as a rule, faced with the need to use a foreign language until they have completed their education and have embarked on their careers. While they are still studying, it is a problem that appears remote and not very real. Study of a foreign language is thus most often undertaken out of necessity. Foreign languages are usually included as part of secondary and higher education. They are included in the general curriculum and the general timetable, with no allowance whatsoever being made for the special features of language learning. The result is that the length of the language courses and the infrequent contact between teachers and students create conditions that are completely contrary to the general principles governing the acquisition of language skills.

In secondary schools, it is thus only possible to learn the rudiments of a foreign language, making further study necessary. Non-specialized higher-educational establishments usually give students the ability to do no more than find their way about in the literature of their speciality. People wanting to master a foreign language thus enrol for special intensive courses using accelerated teaching methods.

The term 'accelerated teaching methods' covers not only all the teaching processes but also the content, the use of technical and other equipment, the organization of the educational approach and the 'psychological atmosphere' established in the class.

Improving any of these factors, singly or in combination, will bring about a great increase in the educational effectiveness of each unit of teaching time, or, to use an expression now current, will make it more intensive.

Studying a foreign language involves in particular: (a) memorizing a very large number of speech units, a large proportion of which are difficult to classify; (b) mastering these units thoroughly enough to be able to use them automatically; and (c) learning how to use these units in accordance with the rules of the language, and using them in a suitable way from the point of view of the needs of communications.

Accelerated language-teaching involves a considerable concentration of lesson time, with at least four hours of lessons every day, the purpose of this being to prevent students
from forgetting—the chief danger when learning a foreign language.

There are two main ways of accelerating the teaching of foreign languages. The first is to ensure that the content, methods, organization and equipment used correspond exactly with the objectives being pursued. The second way is to exploit the students' characters to the full by introducing personalized teaching. These two approaches are closely related, but each has its own peculiarities and sphere of application.

With regard to the first, research is being done to establish the theoretical basis for the choice and classification of linguistic material, and to establish the proper quantities and order of presentation. Any linguistic material that has no direct application in the oral practice of any particular group of students is cut out. The speech units selected are grouped together on the basis of oral learning situations which reproduce the speech activities typical of non-academic contacts. In language teaching, the principle of starting with easy, simple, everyday material and going on to more difficult, complicated and remote subjects is applied through exercises in communication.

Great care is taken to ensure that the teaching structure conforms to the principles governing the assimilation of material. The theory of the stage-by-stage development of mental processes, evolved by psychologists under the direction of P. Y. Galperin, is leading to the emergence of a method of directing the teaching process which aims to inculcate habits and skills on the basis of a general guide for action including the characteristics of a linguistic phenomenon or situation, linguistic or pragmatic rules and instructions, and model operations or activities with subsequent exercises which provide a smooth transition from subject-based activities to extra-linguistic and then mental activities.

Special importance is attached to the planning of the teaching process and to the correct combination of the various kinds of teaching. For each lesson or series of lessons there is an objective, expressed as specifically as possible, the attainment of which can be verified.

To accelerate the teaching process, consideration is being given to making appropriate use of various kinds of visual aids and technical equipment. These help to create a background situation, reduce the time spent on giving explanations, provide linguistic stimulus and correct mistakes. Their use also increases the amount of speech practice out of lesson time, etc.

The extensive application of modern technical aids, both in preparing lessons and in giving them, sometimes leads people to call the method used in these courses an audio-visual method. Its resemblance to the audio-visual method is only external, however.

The pure audio-visual method is not used in the Soviet Union for a number of reasons, the main one being that it is based on ideas that divorce thinking from cognition. Thus in the inculcation of a particular skill, no consideration is given to understanding the mechanism underlying it.

However, very wide use is being made in intensive language-teaching today of variations of this method, or individual features of it, based on the widespread use of graphic situational and linguistic material created through a combination of technical audio-visual aids, the co-ordination of technical and non-technical sources of information, the wide use of local material, and a close link between classroom and laboratory work.

Independent study includes reading, written exercises and listening to recordings. A compulsory part of the course consists of a large amount of rapid reading (up to twenty-five pages a day).

In addition to increasing the effectiveness of the teaching, the question of how to increase the students' capacity of assimilation is also being studied.

Experiments have been made with teaching during natural sleep, 'hypnopædia', or in conditions of rhythmic sleep induced by the use of