THE ROLE OF BEHAVIOURAL OBJECTIVES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

This convention focuses on "meeting learners' objectives" and on "skill integration" - as well as on the connections between the two. So it may be useful to examine the studies on objectives that were carried on in the United States in the 50's and 60's, in order to assess the general validity of that approach in the light of later developments.

It is next to impossible even to mention all the major events that have intervened to supersede the behavioural approach to language learning; however, let me just hint at a few of them.

In psycholinguistics, Chomsky's theory — and, in particular, his criticism of Skinner's *Verbal Behavior* - marked the beginning of the mentalistic or cognitive approach. The concept of *competence* (as opposed to *performance)* widened the scope of analysis far beyond overt behaviour. And nowadays (I'm referring to Titone's glossodynamic model) a third level - the human personality one - has been recognized in order to take into account the speaker's willingness and intention to communicate, his/her attitudes towards language in general and towards each code or style, etc.

In education, the concepts of curriculum and of *mastery learning* (among others) have added new dimensions to the planning of courses; in this perspective, the definition of goals and objectives has acquired ever wider relevance.

Last, but most important to all of us, there has been the evolution of teaching methods, from audio-lingual or aural-oral approaches to present-day communicative designs. I shall say something on objectives within a 'communicative' framework later on. Now let us compare the Instructional Cycle - as presented by Bemis and Schroeder in 1969 - with a few graphs that have been prepared quite recently.

There are two features in this graph that are worth pointing out :

a) behavioural objectives are given a central position, which seems to place everything else — including goals — in a peripheral area, and

b) the purpose of behavioural objectives is explicitly stated. This cannot really be considered a separate step in the cycle, so its presence here is somewhat inappropriate. However,
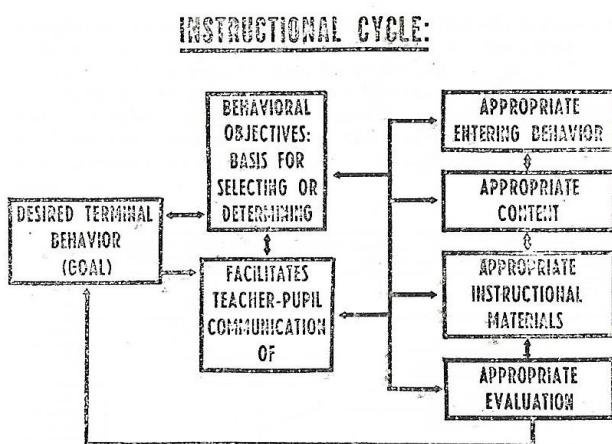

Figure 1

it reminds us that one of their basic functions is the clarification of short-term objectives and, indirectly, a more precise definition of desired goals, target levels of proficiency, and evaluation criteria. As Mager (1962) wrote, "with clear objectives in view, the student knows which activities on his part are relevant to his success, and it is no longer necessary for him to "psych out" the instructor ... considerable time and effort are frequently spent by students in learning the idiosyncrasies of their teachers; and, unfortunately, this knowledge is often very useful".

Accordingly, while talking so much about communicative syllabuses, let us not forget this essential aspect of teacher-pupil communication.

One more small point deserves attention: the two-way arrow between goals and objectives. The fact that the term *goal is* presented as the paraphrase of *desired terminal behaviour* shows that no clear distinction was made between goals and objectives.

We now tend to think of the decisional process as of an itinerary proceeding from the system of values

and the analysis of the teaching situation, to the definition of genera] goals, and from these to more specific goals.
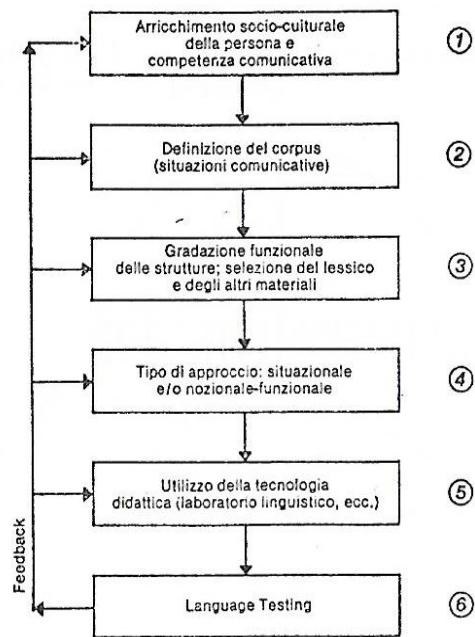

Figure 2

This chart is from a recent article by Gilberto Zani in "Lingue e Civiltà" and it is an adaptation to foreign language teaching of Pellerey's model, in which the six primary steps are arranged in a linear sequence. It is important to notice that the feedback operates circularly and acts upon each of the steps.
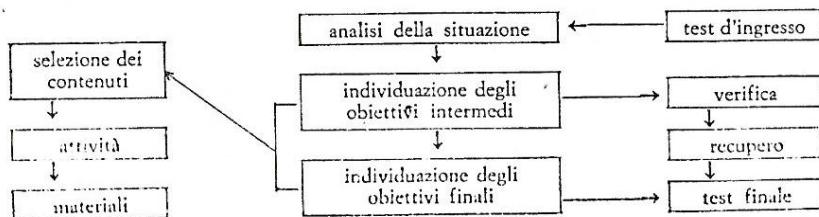

Figure 3

This sequence has been developed by Graziella Pozzo and it appeared in the July 1981 issue of LEND. I consider it a more complete model, showing, the role of testing and evaluation, as well as the relationship between objectives and the selection of contents, procedures and materials. The direction of feedback (from final tests to a new analysis of the situation) is not actually shown but it can be inferred.

I think it is possible to integrate most of the items in the three graphs, in order to provide one overall scheme. Although I am not completely satisfied with the results, I decided to present my own attempt at consolidating a number of relevant aspects.

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┌─────────────────┐   ┌──────────────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────┐
│ SISTEMA DI VALORI│   │ SITUAZIONE DIDATTICA    Chi?      │←──────│ Scheda           │
│ E RETE EDUCATIVE │   │ Come? Dove?  Quando?   Che cosa?  │        │ sociolinguistica │
└─────────────────┘   └──────────────────────────────────┘        ├──────────────────┤
                                                           ←──────│ Test d'ingresso  │
                                                                   └──────────────────┘
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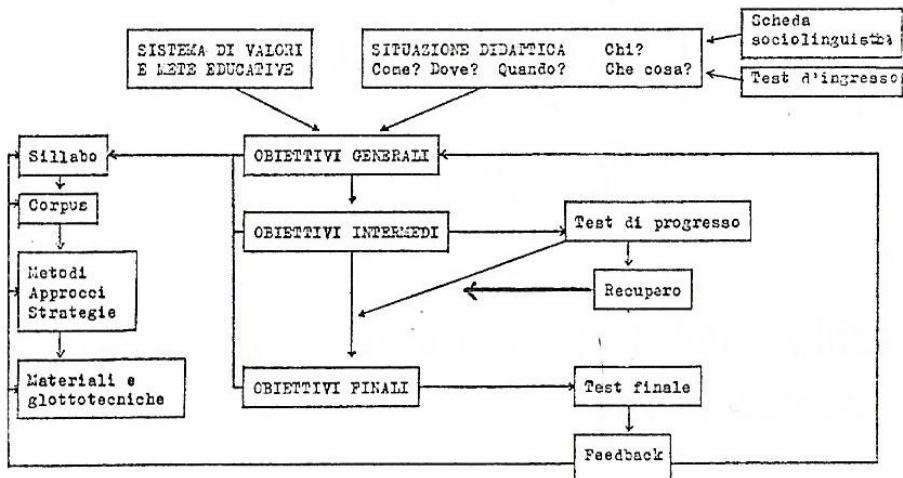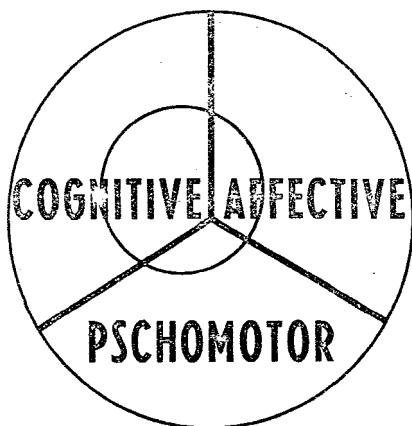
Figure 4

There is one addition I have introduced and consider essential; it refers to higher values and educational goals. Our specific objectives do not depend on the analysis of the teaching situation only, but also on our ideas and principles a-bout the full development of man's personality in all its dimensions (spiritual, social, physical, etc.).

As a tool for the analysis of the teaching situation, a sociolinguistic survey is probably even more important than a good entry test. The latter tells us something about *what* to teach, whereas the former can give us a more precise understanding of *who* we are going to teach.

This graph is not so specifically oriented towards foreign language teaching as I would have liked it to be, but I found it difficult to include more details without overloading it. However, it may prove a useful framework for further specifications in the various sub-areas.

Now, going back to the objectives themselves, let us examine other sides of the problem.

Learner verbally corrects his own error,

Figure 5

We can recognize three main areas or *domains:* cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Any objective (represented by the inner circle) belongs dominantly to one of the sectors, although the other two are always present. This is a dominantly cognitive objective.

The example is not formulated in a satisfactory way (perhaps for the sake of brevity). The subject is *Learner:* this is an essential requisite but it is not enough in itself to obtain a behavioural objective. The PURPOSE is not stated;   in other words, we are not told *what* the learner is doing this *for.* The OVERT BEHAVIOUR is not clearly defined: what exactly do we want the learner to do? Shall he repeat the whole sentence again, without making any mistakes, or just replace the wrong element with the correct one, said in isolation? (And, of course, there are many more possibilities). Nor are the CONDITIONS and the CRITERION stated with sufficient exactness. We only know that the correction is verbal, but how many attempts is the learner allowed to make? What is the minimum acceptable performance?

Similar remarks could be made about this example of a dominantly affective behavioural objective
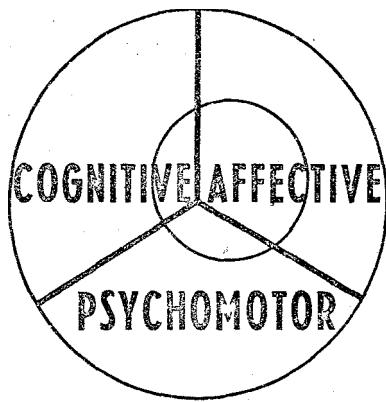
Learner spontaneously reads a book which he has selected from the reading corner.

Figure 6

and this example of a dominantly psychomotor objective.
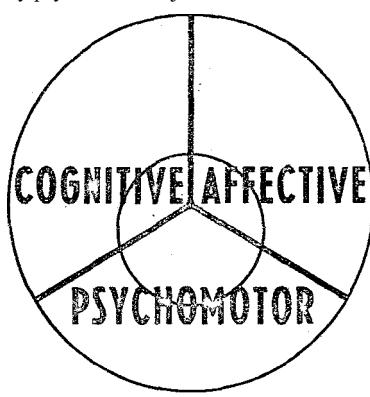
Learner throws a ball to a classmate

Figure 7

One of the main features of the taxonomies of objectives is their hierarchical structure. Each level incorporates and presupposes all the lower ones.

Bloom's taxonomy of the levels of the cognitive domain can be shown in this way:

HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE LEVELS
OF THE COGNITIVE DOMAIN:

Figura 8

The picture has to be read starting from the bottom. Each level would need further clarification and specification in terms of operations and skills for the several s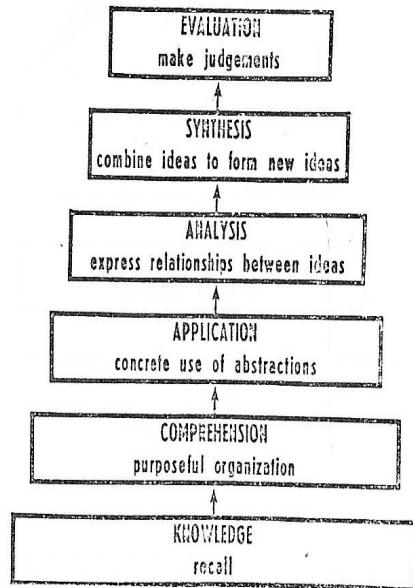ubject-areas. As to us, we are lucky enough to live in the third year A. M. (After Munby); his analysis of micro-skills is extremely useful and valuable. This, unfortunately, does not mean it is always easy to decide what operations are required by any given task or problem-solving activity. Accordingly, the identification of the levels to which single objectives belong may at times be very complex.

HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE LEVELS OF THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN:

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        ┌─────────────────────┐
        │       IDEALS        │
        │   total philosophy  │
        └─────────────────────┘
                   ↑
        ┌─────────────────────┐
        │    ORGANIZATION     │
        │   form value system │
        └─────────────────────┘
                   ↑
        ┌─────────────────────┐
        │       VALUING       │
        │  committed to stimulus │
        └─────────────────────┘
                   ↑
        ┌─────────────────────┐
        │     RESPONDING      │
        │ do something about stimulus │
        └─────────────────────┘
                   ↑
        ┌─────────────────────┐
        │      RECEIVING      │
        │   perceive stimulus │
        └─────────────────────┘
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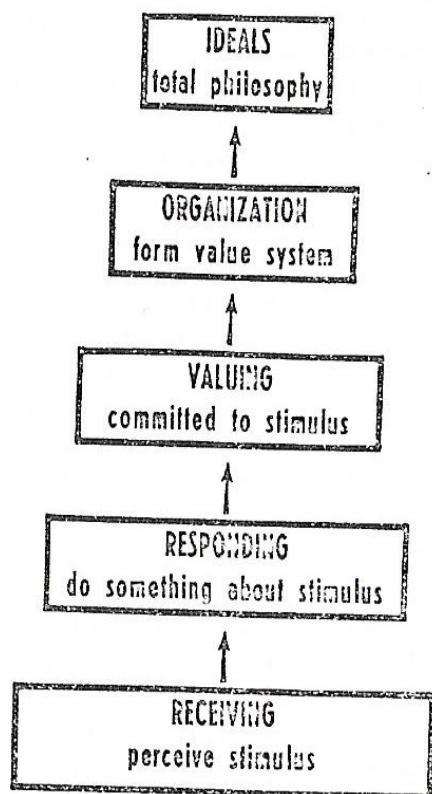
Figure 9

A similar structure, based on Krathwohl's taxonomy, applies to the affective domain, ranging from the simple awareness that something relevant is happening, to a total philosophy, a *Weltansicht.*

Again, the psychomotor domain is presented in much the same way, following Simpson's classification. Here we proceed from perception to co-ordinated motor skills.

HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE LEVELS OF THE PSYCHOMOTOR DOMAIN:

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            ┌─────────────────────────────┐
            │   COMPLEX OVERT RESPONSE    │
            │    series of coordinated    │
            │        motor skills         │
            └─────────────────────────────┘
                          ↑
              ┌───────────────────────┐
              │      MECHANISM        │
              │        habit          │
              └───────────────────────┘
                          ↑
            ┌───────────────────────────┐
            │     GUIDED RESPONSE       │
            │     tutored behavior      │
            └───────────────────────────┘
                          ↑
          ┌───────────────────────────────┐
          │             SET               │
          │     readiness for action      │
          └───────────────────────────────┘
                          ↑
        ┌───────────────────────────────────┐
        │           PERCEPTION              │
        │    awareness via sense organs     │
        └───────────────────────────────────┘
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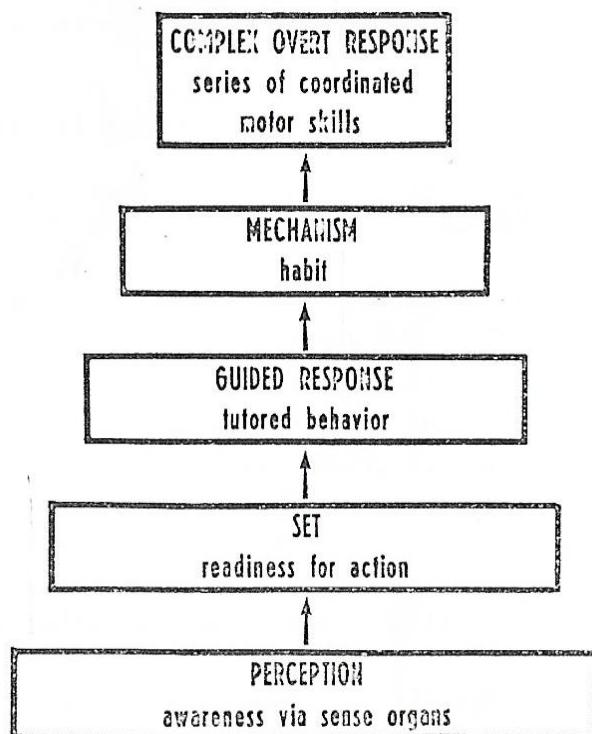
Figure 10

How should we judge these taxonomies? First of all, the recognition of three domains of behaviour (instead of, say, two or four) is to some extent arbitrary and has a mainly heuristic function. Besides, they do not refer to language learning exclusively, but to school activities in general.

Depending on how we interpret language and language acquisition, we may come to different conclusions. As a matter of fact — and just to quote an example — Valette and Disick developed a considerably different set of taxonomies specifically related to modern language learning. There, for instance, mechanical skills are the first step in their subject-matter taxonomy (a classification that is almost entirely cognitive).

The variety of approaches and solutions clearly shows at least two things: first of all, since all the sciences connected with foreign language teaching are subject to constant development, our evaluation of behavioural objectives is bound to undergo frequent reassessment; secondly, it is very hard, in the field of education, to devise all-purpose classifications and programming procedures - and even if it were possible, one could seriously question whether it would be advisable.

However great the theoretical difficulties may be, the u-se of behavioural objectives has determined a number of important changes. For example, in the latest Scuola Media programmes and in the specifications for the final examinations, the emphasis is on what *learners* are expected to do - though, of course, documents of this kind cannot and must not be formulated in terms of strict and binding operational objectives. If we compare them with earlier programmes, we find that there the *teacher* was the subject or agent in most. paragraphs.

Another advancement lies in the awareness that many verbs commonly used to describe learners' performance are vague and do not refer to overt behaviour. Instances of such verbs are "to appreciate, to

understand, to know, to master".   Expressions like "to really understand, to critically appreciate, to fully realize" are equally ineffective in behavioural terms (and besides, they are split infinitives!).

One suggestion often given by experts is that teachers should always try to set objectives above the lowest rank in the hierarchy. By doing this, we can counteract the tendency to rote learning or *nozionismo.* This is a very good piece of advice to teachers in general, but we, as teachers of English to speakers of Italian, ought to keep another criterion in mind. What objectives are coherent with a communicative approach? In the Valette-Disick taxonomy, *communication* is level 4 (out of 5): "using the foreign language and culture as natural vehicles" obviously calls for a high standard of competence and performance in both receptive and productive skilIs. When we teach beginners, it is often impossible to set immediate high-level objectives. It is perfectly legitimate, I think, to develop intermediate objectives pertaining to lower levels (transfer, knowledge, or even simple mechanical skills) provided that we make sure there is basic coherence between these intermediate steps and the general and final objectives.

When I first wrote about behavioural objectives nearly ten years ago, I said I had no idea how they would be received in Italy, since the general attitude towards teaching methods and programming was still largely traditional. Even though not everybody agrees that the present approaches to needs analysis, curriculum development, and so on, represent   the most correct solution to date to the problem of planning in education, we all have learned to focus our attention on learners' needs and target performance. With this perspective in mind, I am convinced that behavioural objectives are here to stay, and that trying to define and develop them as accurately as we can is an endeavour well worth pursuing.

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