

# MASCULINE, FEMININE,

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**M**asculine, feminine, or neuter? Singular or plural? Past, present or future? Is it a verb or a noun? And don't forget the subjunctive, or is it the indicative? Whatever happened to learning to speak the language, to communicate with other human beings? At one point the idea that one could actually use a foreign language to communicate seemed to have been misplaced by foreign language teachers in the United States. Grammar and translation were the primary focus in a language classroom. However, in the last decade the emphasis in many foreign language classrooms has begun to shift. Teachers have become increasingly concerned with discovering ways to encourage active rather than passive use of the language by their students. Now more emphasis is placed on communicative, i.e. survival, skills and less on grammatical accuracy in the beginning stages of language learning. No, grammar has not been eliminated from foreign language study; nor should it be. It has only been removed from center stage to its rightful place as a convenient tool — a shortcut for adult language learners.

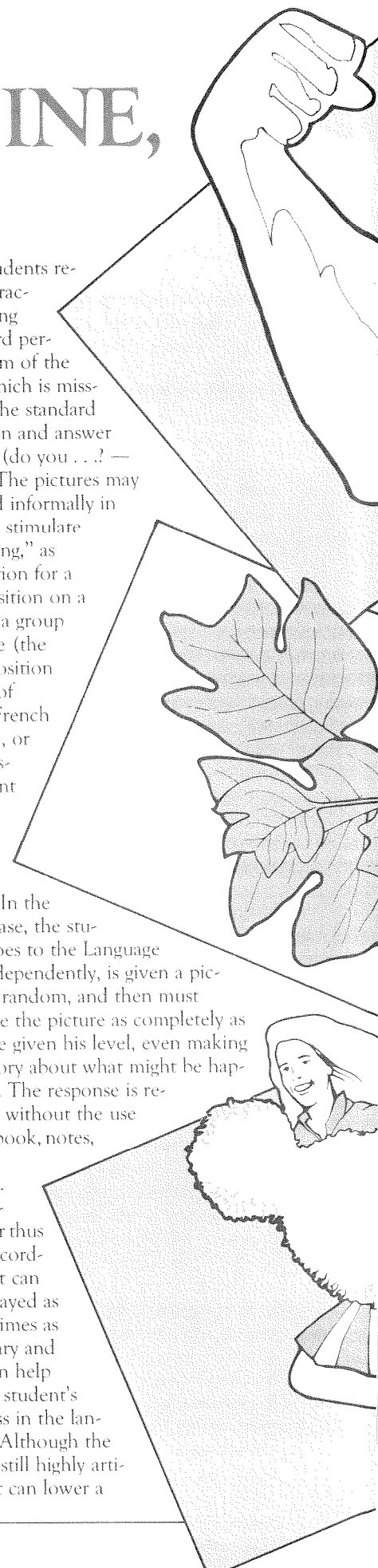
Obviously this approach places a greater responsibility on the teacher than the more traditional methods do, and it requires more imagination and flexibility. Also, it can be intimidating for both student and teacher. If the objective is to communicate information from the very first day of class, the teacher must know how to ask very simple questions, to vary them from student to student depending on the answer, and to tolerate a high degree of uncertainty. The student also has to learn to deal with uncertainty because there are no "pattern drills" here. Students have to think, to pay atten-

tion, not just to the teacher but to other students as well, to draw conclusions, to discover their own grammar rule based on usage, and to use their imagination.

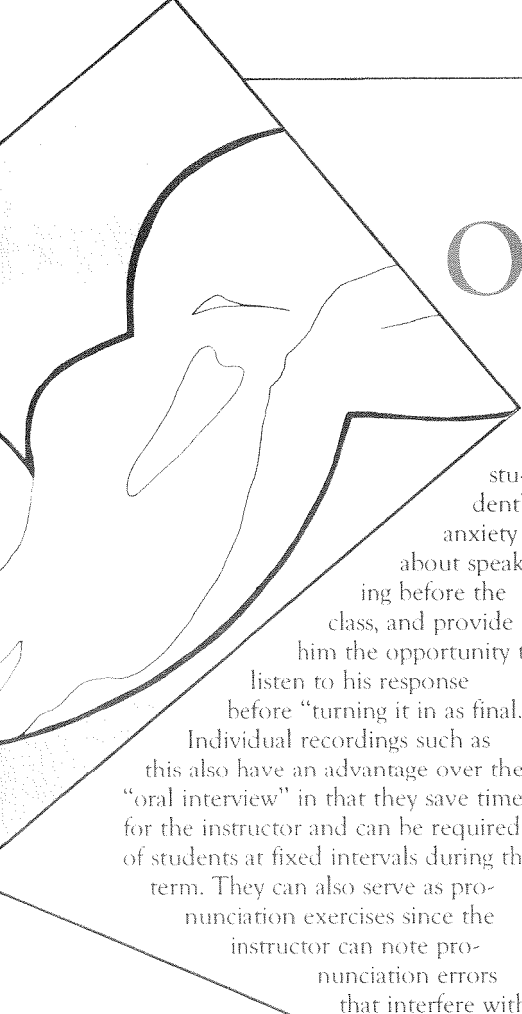
With this approach, everything becomes a textbook: television, especially commercials, movies, popular music, radio, newspapers, magazines, calendars, the telephone book, and even the Neiman-Marcus Christmas Catalog. And all of these everyday items can be used at any level of instruction, from 101 to 401 and beyond. With these tools students can practice any of the four skills: reading, writing, speaking, or listening comprehension. Using "authentic materials" (i.e. materials created for the native speaker, not for a foreign language classroom), students can create a dialogue about something they have seen or read, and then act it out for the class. Or, they can videotape it. After viewing a number of commercials they may write their own and perform it for the class. But perhaps the most interesting and varied activities stem from the "picture file."

The "picture file" is just that: pictures cut from magazines that show people engaged in different activities. Some are made into slides to use with class activities and some are mounted on 4 x 6 and 5 x 8 cards and laminated. These become flash cards and provide students with something to talk about. Students begin in 101 with simple descriptions. Is the person tall or short, fat or thin, pretty or handsome or ugly? What color are his hair, eyes, clothing? What is he wearing? What is he like? Is the person happy or sad, lazy or hardworking, intelligent or...? Use your imagination; make up something. Thus the students must recall vocabulary and arrange it in a logical sequence. In other words, they must communicate something in a meaningful, comprehensible fashion. This exercise also accomplishes the very practical objective of practicing adjective-noun and subject-verb agreement. In addi-

tion students receive practice using the third person form of the verb which is missing in the standard question and answer format (do you...? — I...). The pictures may be used informally in class to stimulate "speaking," as inspiration for a composition on a test, as a group exercise (the "composition orale" of many French classes), or as an assignment in the Language Laboratory. In the latter case, the student goes to the Language Lab independently, is given a picture at random, and then must describe the picture as completely as possible given his level, even making up a story about what might be happening. The response is recorded without the use of textbook, notes, or dictionary. The instructor thus has a recording that can be replayed as many times as necessary and that can help track a student's progress in the language. Although the tape is still highly artificial, it can lower a

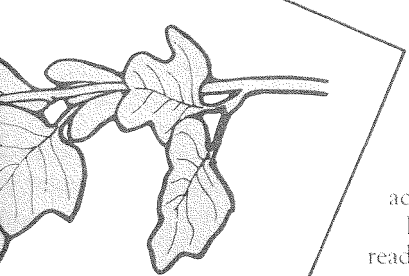


# OR NEUTER . . . ?

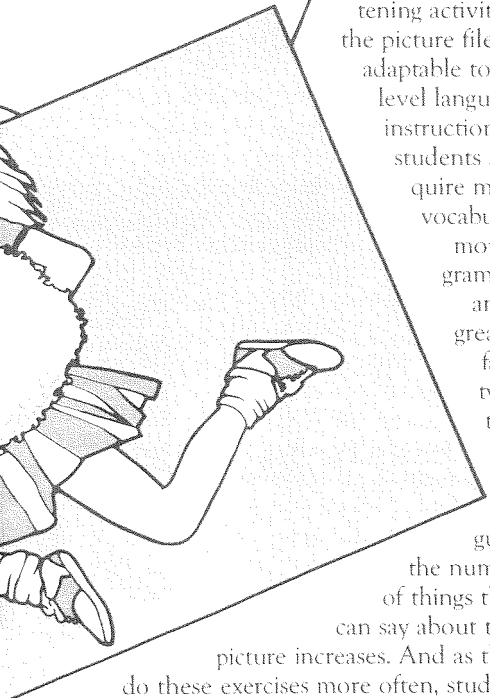


student's anxiety about speaking before the class, and provide him the opportunity to listen to his response before "turning it in as final."

Individual recordings such as this also have an advantage over the "oral interview" in that they save time for the instructor and can be required of students at fixed intervals during the term. They can also serve as pronunciation exercises since the instructor can note pronunciation errors that interfere with comprehension and advise and work with the student accordingly.



Like some reading and listening activities, the picture file is adaptable to any level language instruction. As students acquire more vocabulary, more grammar and greater facility in the language, the number of things they can say about the picture increases. And as they do these exercises more often, students



learn to look for details that lead to more elaborate descriptions. This, as well as the question answer format in class and the role-playing exercises, helps them prepare for the oral part of the final examination: a 10-15 minute conversation with the instructor.

Yet, the best teacher in the long run is probably the television. And limited access or no access to foreign language television is a serious handicap in many language programs. Fortunately we are able to subscribe to monthly video programs in French and Spanish that provide a range of information and commercials. The commercial is familiar ground to everyone, so students know what to expect. Some are very simple and beginning students understand the central message immediately. The added value here is that one can teach "cultural content": clothing, homes, schools, famous and not-so-famous places, history (through references to events), and geography. Everything is there. Students learn to listen for global meaning and then for details. The same is true for television programs and movies. It is the instructor's task to choose something that lends itself to very simple questions and answers at first and that can be "recycled" later on to elicit a higher level of language. The key is always to ask the student for an active, never a passive, response. Thus, for every commercial, every television program or movie used in class, there must be an exercise, either written or aural-oral.

Modern technology has transformed the language classroom in many ways by offering new possibilities to both language teacher and student. Changes in U.S. society due to the need to teach English to immigrants from non-Western cultural traditions, and a drive within the federal government to transform and improve foreign language teaching as a result of American experiences abroad, have also served as catalysts for the "regeneration" of the foreign language teaching profession. We must, as a matter of necessity and

even survival, have people who can actively use a foreign language and be accepted as competent by an educated native speaker of the language. Therefore, language teachers are increasingly concerned with what their students "can do" with the language and how to measure those skills. Unfortunately, devising classroom activities that promote active use of the target language is both the most difficult and the most important part of the language acquisition process. As a result, teachers are constantly searching for ideas, and, once found, they search for ways to prevent those ideas from becoming stale. However, in spite of the problems, current, "proficiency-oriented" approaches have an advantage over

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older methods in that the commonplace becomes the most valuable teaching tool. Students are familiar with commercials, movies, comic books and the like and, because these things are part of their daily lives, they are more likely to want to talk about them. And finally, students demonstrate that they have learned the rules, not by filling in the blanks for a grammar drill (although this can still be a useful exercise), but by using the language to communicate some bit of information about themselves, their family or friends, or the picture they have in their hand. Ultimately, as a result of much time, patience, hard work, and perseverance they will reach the magic, and elusive, stage that the general public calls "fluency." ●