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Report on the XVth Congress of FIPLV, JULY 22-26, 1985 Helsinki, Finland

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This brief paper is both an impressionistic view of this writer's first visit to Helsinki, and, a relatively straight forward report on the proceedings and program contents of the XVth Congress of FIPLV.

Helsinki. Light rain, intense green. 21 degrees centigrade in the last week of July. Sunlight 22 hours a day, coming through the hotel curtains at 2 a.m.

Helsinki. Stone architecture, buildings abutting each other all around each block forming open courts in the center of which lay protected, hidden gardens. Straight streets, wide, tree lined. Blocks of buildings interspersed with parks and lakes.

The Senate Square. The Senate Building, the Cathedral, the University, the Municipal Government Office. Monuments to order and design.

Clean air. Industry exists but other than ship building, one does not see it in the city proper. Sweet water. The best tap water ever tasted. Natural when you think about it. Thousands and thousands of clean fresh water lakes in a country the approximate size of Japan and with only about five million people. Helsinki, the capital has only about 300,000 people, approximately the size of Sasebo. In fact, there is so much water from the rivers flowing into the Helsinki harbor that one can almost never taste real sea

water, there is never enough salt in it.

FIPLV-Federation Internationale des Professeurs de Langues Vivantes. (International Federation of Teachers of Modern Languages.) An umbrella organization for organizations of language teachers such as TESOL, IATEFL, SUKOL (Suomen Kieltenopettajien Liitto or the Finnish Foreign Language Teachers' Association), etc. FIPLV is a non-governmental, category B, UNESCO organization. It has a congress once every three years, the next one being in Canberra, Australia Jan 3-8, 1988. (Re FIPLV World News-in Support of the aised programme, copies available from FIPLV Head Office, Seestrasse 247, CH-80-38, Zurich, Switzerland.) The advantage or benefit that FIPLV can accrue to its member organizations is twofold: One, help with organizing conferences and making contact with prospective speakers that might otherwise never come to the attention of any one particular organization. Two, if a member organization can contact and get a pledge of cooperation from five national UNESCO committees, e.g., Japan, Korea, China, Phillipines and, say, Indonesia, UNESCO headquarters in Paris will provide financial support. The Congress was much like any other international conference focusing on a given scholastic endeavor, in this case language teaching. However, the organization or more accurately the way things were done really resembled more the Japanese way than the 'Obel.' For instance, the opening ceremony was formal and with a bit of pomp. The flags, the flowers, the many formal addresses by just about everybody, which, I was told, was very typical of the Finns. Last, but not least, opera. Right. Opera. It is very popular in Finland these days. So we had a short recital as part of the opening and closing ceremonies.

I attended all the plenary sessions and perhaps ten of the so-

called free papers. Dr. Edward M. Batley of the United Kingdom and President of FIPLV, with a certain apologetic tone to his audience, suggested that because our efficiency in teaching languages is so low (he means all around the world), we may be an association of 'unnatural language acquisition'.

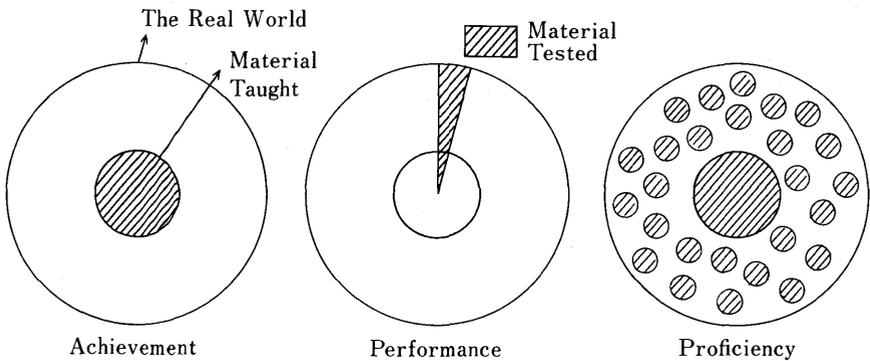
Prof Charles Parish of Illinois State University, said all teachers should challenge any theory that comes along, basing one's challenge on personal professional experience in the classroom. Nevertheless, he said we should be more open to 'Innovative Methods' (Silent Way, Community Language Learning, Suggestology, Total Physical Response, etc.) Adding, however, that affectiveness might well be the most single important factor in foreign language acquisition, more so than cognitivity. He ended by suggesting that all foreign language teachers should attempt to learn a third language using the very same methods he uses when teaching his second language to his own students. In other words, those teachers in Japan at secondary levels using Prince or Horizon, or those at the tertiary level using the grammar-translation method with short stories and/or novels, should try to learn, say, French or German, using the very same methods they use in their own classrooms. Good advice.

Professor Christopher Brumfit, Chairman of the British Association of Linguistics, stated that most of the views and attitudes about language acquisition are simplifications of reality. He would like to see foreign language speakers who become foreign language teachers to use language in a fluent way and accept in their students the kinds of mistakes (*vis a vis* errors) that native speakers make. In passing, he also said that the OHP was the language aid of the past.

The following day, Dr. Ray Clifford of the United States

Defense Language Institute, talked about criteria for evaluating spoken language, i.e., testing. Referring to Dr. Brumfit, he apologized for his method of presentation, for, in making his presentation, he used an OHP. First he defined the differences between achievement tests, performance tests and proficiency tests with the following figure.

Figure 1



He also mentioned the problems that inter-language causes and stated the main thinking of the American Council of Language Testing and outlined an interview test. Mr. James W. Brown, in his free paper did much the same thing, only making the form of the interview test even more clear to his audience.

Stage 1 Enter room and ask simple questions about the student and his immediate environment.

Stage 2 Ask several prepared questions from a list of questions based upon text.

Stage 3 Variation of stage 2, i.e., why, etc.

Stage 4 Wind down the interview, in the foreign language, bringing the dialog between teacher and student back down to a level comfortable for the student. This is to leave the student with a feeling of confidence at the end of the test, to avoid a feeling of

defeat by the student. Then give the student his grade right then and ask if he understands.

The Finns' self-image. A nation that is silent in two languages, Finnish and Swedish. The Silent People. Prof Kari Sajavaara of Helsinki University, in his talk of the same title, partially tongue in cheek, partially seriously, said that the following are Finnish discourse strategies :

1. First of all, don't speak.
2. Second, if you must speak, before beginning drink as much alcohol as possible.
3. Avoid direct address.
4. Never mention the addressee's name.
5. Avoid short greetings. (Formal ones can not be avoided).
6. When being spoken to, do not smile and do not make eye contact.
7. While the other person is talking, make no sounds that might encourage talk and thereby force you to respond, or worse, express your own opinions.
8. Never ask anything in the classroom.
9. If asked a question by the teacher, look outside the window, scratch your head and try to look thoughtful.

The Finns are indeed quieter than perhaps are some other peoples, the international airport of Helsinki had none of the excited squeals one associates with American airports, friends and relatives greeting one another exuberantly. Moreover, the toleration for silence during conversations is much longer with Finns than for other Europeans.

On the other hand, the Finns are not passive listeners. There are a lot of 'hmm', 'ya', 'yoo' signals given while listening, though less than one would expect from a person of another European culture.

In fact, if a Finn gives too many of these signals, he'll make the speaker believe that he is drunk. Another point is that among Finns, the listener does not interrupt and when he does interrupt, little attention is given him by the speaker, as not interrupting is an expression of respect for the speaker.

It should be pointed out that Finns are not really any more silent than other people. In fact, when they speak, they actually speak faster than do native speakers of English, though the number of words in a given time unit may be less than English. This is because Finnish words have many more syllables than do English words. When one measures the actual amount of information passed in conversations among peoples of varying languages, the Finns really are about the same as most. The Image and the Reality.

Finally, in the Closing Ceremony, Dr. Sauli Takala, stressed a need among our profession for an historical perspective. What methods did we use in the past, texts, etc. and how much time was devoted to foreign language teaching? Which brought him to a real sore point among teachers of English in Finland. The number of hours in secondary school for English has recently been cut from 650 to 575 hours. Still, he noted that overall, listening and speaking skills have improved under the new system. At the end of his talk, he made the very valid point that language learning should be an activity that continues after school into one's active working life. A point well taken, for the main purpose of this paper is simply to reiterate the fact that many educators around the entire world are deeply concerned with the state of foreign language teaching/learning, convinced that foreign language learning should not stop when class is over. After all, the normal situation in this world should not be monolingualism but multilingualism, for, how else are we to communicate, how else can we break down cultural

barriers (at the same time respecting cultural differences), how else can we remove from the world's various military arsenals destructive power literally millions times more powerful than that used on Hiroshima and Nagasaki? Indeed, how else can we survive as a species?

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