APPENDIX E: DIDACTIC

The teaching styles we classify under the didactic modes are designed to achieve objectives that are generally clear and relatively easy to formulate. These objectives include the mastery of a definite body of information or the acquisition of specific motor-kinetic skills or specific mathematical or verbal skills (in English as well as in other languages). The didactic modes thus stress either cognitive knowledge acquired primarily by memorization, or mastery of skills acquired primarily by repetition and practice.

Among the teachers whose classes we visited and whose teaching styles closely fell among the didactic modes were many whose classes—given the objectives of the teachers—were unusually effective. One of these, whom we shall call Professor Daniel Garcia, was recommended to us as one of the best foreign-language audio-lingual instructors in the United States. Professor Garcia’s field is Spanish. He often gives professional demonstrations of his drill techniques at modern language meetings; and observers, whether they know Spanish or not, find his talent extraordinary. In the drill work of the audio-lingual method, tempo must be varied, but it must also be regulated to the split-second if the drill is to be completely successful. Professor Garcia’s timing is as subtle and varied as that of a great actor. The audio-lingual approach is based on principles derived from Skinnerian psychology and structural linguistic theory, and the teaching methodology that has resulted from this combination has been developed by Professor Garcia to the finest point. Our admiration for Professor Garcia as a first-class craftsman was increased when he told us that his methodology was “in a somewhat confused stage” because within recent years, a new school of teachers of the older generation—of the school of transformational generative grammar—has called into question whether the principles of Skinnerian psychology are really appropriate for language learning.

Teachers of modern languages often work under paranoia-creating conditions, and their colleagues around the campus—including those in neighboring departments in other humanistic studies—scarcely understand the problems that beset the language instructor who wants to achieve excellence as a teacher. A large part of the language teacher’s frustration arises from the peculiar shape of his discipline, for in order to practice it, he is expected to be four or more different kinds of specialists. He is expected to be a teacher-craftsman helping students acquire language skills, but he is also expected to teach linguistics courses, courses in foreign civilization, and literature courses (where he must function at different times as literary historian, aesthete, critic, post-traditionalist, and text explicator). All of the facets of his discipline—except the teaching of language skills—merit by anyone’s standards the highest status in the world of traditional scholarship. But it is the lot of the foreign language teacher that he is often imagined by his colleagues to be a mere polyglot who is uninterested in ideas, inquiry, and intellectual exploration.

The teaching of language skills has its own distinctive excellence, and the craftsman who achieves this excellence must command our respect. But due to the nature of these skills, any teaching style by which they are taught must be classified among the modes we have called didactic. All of the other kinds of knowledge traditionally transmitted by the foreign language teacher, however—literature in all its facets, linguistics, civilization—constitute fields in which excellence can be achieved only if a professor is a teacher-artist. While the didactic modes were much in evidence as we visited various classrooms in the foreign language field, we also saw many classes in literature and civilization, and a few in linguistics, in which foreign language teachers followed evocative teaching prototypes.

The didactic modes are followed by teachers in a number of disciplines, particularly in classes where the skill to be acquired does not depend on reasoning and where the teacher’s objective is to develop in the student an automatic or semiautomatic response. When the teacher’s aim is to induce in the student an ability to respond immediately, without reflection, he would be teaching against his aim to encourage the student to reason out his responses for each exercise. Thus in sessions led by a teacher whose prototypic model falls in one of the didactic modes, the rationalizing processes are kept at a minimum, and the acquisition of the skill (or mastery of a body of information, if that is the objective of the course) is attained by repetition and practice, rather than by problem solving. In a skills course, the emphasis is placed on “learning to do,” rather than on “learning about.” In a course where a body of information is to be learned, the emphasis placed on the direct presentation and memorization of facts and generalizations, rather than on the process of learning through discovery or inquiry. But whether the objective in a class following a didactic prototype is the acquisition of a skill or the mastery of information, the teacher is regarded by all parties as the ultimate authority and the student is not at any time presented with genuine alternatives. Once he has decided to participate—and he faces penalties if he decides not to participate—he discovers that there is only one way to respond to each cue that is given by the commission or in a written test.

For each cue, there is only one response that the teacher regards as best.