

言語学習に不可欠な人間性

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PUTTING HUMANITY BACK INTO LANGUAGE-LEARNING

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要 約

言語学習は本来楽しい挑戦であるべきものだが、たいていは進歩も喜びもない骨折り損のくたびれもうけに終わってしまうことが多い。何故こうなのであろうか。我々が自然にゆっくりと母国語を身につけることでもわかるように、誰もが言語学習に必要な姿勢は身につけている。さらに子供たちの中には、同様の過程を経て成長しながら、二か国語、三か国語を自由に話すようになる者も出てくる。20才の英語学習者よりも英語がネイティブの6才の子供の方が会話らしい会話を楽しめるという事実をふまえると、言語学習及びその教育に伴う方法については様々な疑問点があげられるであろう。

強調したいのは、本来言語は人間性或いは芸術の分野の学習体系に属するということである。そこで、教師も学生も言語を科学を扱うようなやり方で体系化の方向に持っていくべきではない。言語は人間や文化に密接に根ざすものであり、ゆえに文化、社会、歴史的状況の中で学習することが理想といえよう。この方式を使うことにより、さらに観察と模倣を中心とした子供のような学習方法も組み合わせることで、言語習得の完璧な型が生まれるであろう。

もし、完全な英語漬け方式が授業時間だけに制

限されるならば、効果はあるであろうか。理論上は可能といえる。しかし、実際上は無視されるか拒否されることが多いのは、多分その単調さが現代社会のハイテクぶりと現在の教育風潮に合わないからであろう。

教師は、新しい言語の吸収や学習にあたって、少なくとも学生の母国語への依存を弱めるように目指すことはできる。幼児と比較してあらゆる言語学習者にいえる最大の弱点は、その思考がコミュニケーションと理解にあたって一定の枠組み、即ち母国語に既にプログラムされてしまっていることである。これにより、いかなる新しい言語も、翻訳から再翻訳というめんどろな過程を経るうちに、その意味する事柄や概念との間で絶えず破壊的な方向へと追いやられることになる。もし流暢で直接的なコミュニケーションが達成されるべきならば、この方式はバイパス化されるべきであろう。

このように、多くの問題点が未解決のまま残されている現状で、何らかの満足できる結論を見出すことは困難である。しかし、我々のいまの変革の世界において、国際的交流や調和の必要性和重要性はますます高まっており、一か国語だけにとどまっていたは不十分といえよう。

To embark upon the study of a new language—be it English, Arabic, Sinhala or Nepali—should be to set out on a great adventure, leading one into unknown territories of the linguistical world, full of anticipation, obstacles and the ultimate achievement of conquering some of the foothills, at least, of the desired goal. But all too often the reality is very different: bogged down by grammar, burdened by syntax and stumbling in a veritable quagmire of irregular verbs, the “great adventure” becomes fraught by technicalities, tedium and lack of progress, so that, at best, the enterprise is only continued out of obligation, deprived of joy and enthusiasm, or else is abandoned as an impossible wild goose chase.

Where and why do things go so wrong? What is to blame for such disillusionment?

The aptitude for learning a language—arguably unlike that for many other things, including sport, music etc—is one which we all possess, unless afflicted by some congenital defect or other impairment. We all succeed in mastering our native language with relative ease—indeed, virtually unconsciously—within the first few years of our existence. We may not all have the ability to go on to become great poets, novelists or rhetoricians, but we acquire an *instinctive* grasp of the structures and mechanisms of our mother-tongue before we even know of the existence of prepositions, paradigms and pluperfects. The evidence for the existence of this innate skill is even more impressive in cases where children are brought up to be bi- or even tri-lingual, and can converse with equal fluency in any one of the two or three languages which they have so easily acquired.

On returning to the U. K. this past Summer, and being surrounded by native English speakers for the first time in six years, several things were very apparent from my standpoint as an English language teacher. For one thing, the English I heard, with all its colloquialisms, slang, truncations and grammatical deviations, seemed worlds away from the English I was teaching in the classroom. How would my students, taught to say “Thank you very much Goodbye!” cope with “Ta, luv Ta-taa now !” . . . ?

Then I was amazed at how fluent and advanced the speech of a 6-year old English child could be. Why was it that I could have a far more interesting and stimulating conversation with such a tiny tot than with a mature Japanese student of about 20, who has been actively studying English for eight years or so?

The implications of such observations are profound and limitless. Of particular interest are their significance in the context of language learning/teaching as a whole. If the same person can learn one language in infancy with the greatest of ease, but then struggles painfully to acquire a second in adolescence, who or what is to blame for the apparent discrepancy? Teaching methods? The student’s approach to learning? Both? Or neither?

What sometimes—indeed, all too often—gets forgotten, consciously or otherwise, in

the habitual round of language learning and teaching is that languages are *Humanities* or *Arts*. Too frequently, at either or both ends of the teaching/learning process, an attempt is made to systematize and codify languages, to push them all into neat boxes, make them subject to rules and pseudo-algebraic equations of the “ $x+y+z^2=y^4$ ” variety. Not only is this pointless and impossible, it is also deconstructive. Such systems “work” only within the realms of Science, defined as “knowledge which can be made into a system and which usually depends on seeing and testing facts and stating general natural laws”. If Science is “anything which may be studied exactly” then languages, as a branch of the Humanities, must be the opposite and therefore, by implication, are unable to be systematized with any such mathematical, impersonal exactness.

If any equation *can* be made, then maybe it is “Language+People=Culture”. Languages do not exist in some sort of clinical void, to be studied and grasped as a mental exercise in the same way as algebra. Languages are living organisms which have been evolved over the centuries by the peoples of the world as a means of communication and self-expression. They are thus directly connected to the cultures, history and traditions of the societies in which they have evolved, and have themselves been shaped and developed by the fortunes and lives of the people.

In relation to this, it has sometimes been said that although the development of Esperanto as a truly independent, universal language has been repeatedly advocated by a band of enthusiastic devotees, it has always failed to be adopted as such, and *will* always fail to be so. This is primarily because it is an artificially created language, with no cultural-socio-historical background of its own. It has been arbitrarily fashioned and has not evolved organically. It has no roots and is therefore “cold” and impersonal for all its avowed potential.

It could be argued, therefore, that a language should not be seen or studied as an independent entity, but in a cultural-socio-historical context: only then can its richness and subtleties be fully understood and appreciated, and only then will it assume the necessary sense of humanity.

In conjunction with this, the “back-to-babyhood” method of language learning, by continued observation, listening and repetition, can and does work extremely well for an adolescent or adult learner, especially when actually living in the long-term in the country which has spawned the language. In such (ideal) circumstances, one becomes aware of the socio-cultural variations and complexities of the language, in addition to being totally submerged in it, 24-hours a day.

In my own case, during my residence in Thailand I never had a formal language lesson, never possessed a grammar book—only a simple English-Thai dictionary—never so much as thought about syntax and structure: yet after four years my comprehension and speaking abilities were sufficient to enable me to have a fluent conversation in Thai on almost any


subject—and to be able to do so with *confidence* and *enjoyment*. These skills were acquired simply by reverting to what might be called a “linguistic childhood” and constantly asking “what is this?”, memorizing, and by total immersion in the flood of Thai day after day. True, my reading and writing abilities were negligible—though not totally non-existent—but my prime needs, as are those of most language learners, were to be able to communicate *verbally* and to understand what was being *spoken* to me, *not* to master a writing system which I would have infrequent cause to use. By contrast, I sometimes feel rather regretful that on coming to Japan I didn’t remain true to the same naive, natural approach which worked so well in Thailand, but instead have become enmeshed in the intricacies of grammar and structure. The result is that after two years here I feel that I’m drowning in the murky, apparently bottomless waters of Japanese, rather than keeping buoyant, and feel decidedly flustered and unsure when it comes to speaking the language, even though I know far more about its written forms now than I ever did about Thai.

The great question is, given that comparatively few people start to learn a language outside their own country, can this type of total immersion method work if one is still living in one’s native land, and the “immersion” is therefore necessarily limited to inside the classroom? In theory it should be possible, in a modified form of some kind, at least with absolute beginners who have no preconceptions or smattering of knowledge about the language which they are about to embark upon learning. And yet, paradoxically, somehow this method is all too often rejected or neglected *because* of its very simplicity. In this age of high tech, it takes a very confident teacher and some very trusting, responsive students to spend possibly a year learning without any text books, written material, paper, pens etc, but simply using the “natural equipment” with which we have been created—eyes, ears and mouth.




If the image of reverting to a child-like state in order to learn a new language, with the teacher as the parent-model to be observed and copied, is too idealistic, or simply too impractical, then the teacher can at least aim to wean his/her pupils away from total dependence on their native language as the yard-stick by which everything else is measured.

Whereas the developed mind of a young adult or mature learner has possibly the greater potential for absorption and understanding of a new language, in comparison with that of an infant, it has one considerable disadvantage: it has already been cluttered by one linguistic system which provides a verbal definition for everything that is perceived or felt, and a set system for expressing everything that needs to be communicated: that is, his or her own native language. To put it another way, every object or concept has already been assigned a linguistic definition, so that there is a set program—a kind of dictionary—already existing in the mind.



eg  = ball

 = tree

This program is automatically brought into use as a sphere of reference when learning a new language, pushing itself obtrusively--and potentially destructively--between the new language itself and the object/idea represented by the word(s).

Thus, one of the inevitable problems that all language teachers have to face to a greater or lesser degree is the tendency of their students to translate everything and anything back into their own language, work out the solution to/meaning of what is being asked, and then translate it back into the language being taught. In the case of a Japanese student learning English, the process would approximate to the following, give or take a few additional loops on the "circuit": Where is the ball? ⇨ Where=どこ ball=ボール⇨ボールはどこですか? =  ? ⇨  =ボールはきのしたです⇨ボール=ball
き=tree  した=under ⇨ The ball is under the tree.

This type of process is not only extremely time-consuming and cumbersome, thus making fluid, instant communication impossible, but is diametrically opposed to constructive, meaningful language learning, which must aim to provide a *direct* correspondence between word and image.

For the child learning its own language, there is no such clumsy intermediary: the words spoken must, if they are to convey anything, have a *direct* relationship to the thing described/context. So, for an English-speaking child: Where is the ball? =  ? ⇨  = The ball is under the tree.

Foreign words *can* come to have a meaning *in their own right*, without recourse to translation, and indeed *must* do so if any level of linguistic skill, fluency and *enjoyment* is to be attained. To give a parallel, non-linguistic, example: a person who has always been accustomed to measuring distances in miles and who then moves to a country where kilometres are the standard, will, at first, do the necessary calculations to convert the kilometric distances given on road signs etc. back into miles, for only then will they have any real, significant meaning. So, during this stage, 40 kilometres=25 miles, a mentally understandable distance. Eventually however, 40 kilometres will assume a significance in own right, independent of any other code of reference. The need to convert first in order to give it a meaning has been by-passed. In exactly the same way, a foreign language is capable of assuming a meaning/significance of its own, without the need for translation.

When such a stage of linguistic proficiency has been attained, then the language has begun to percolate through to the subconscious: individual words or phrases of it may start to figure in the world of dreams; common words may be uttered as a type of verbal reflex action; an enormous chasm has been bridged.

This should be the place for conclusions: but what is there to be concluded? It is fanciful to suggest that every child should automatically be brought up to be bi- or tri- lingual, thus

pre-empting the learning pains of later years. It is probably an impossibility for the total immersion method of language teaching to be practical, both in terms of what is expected in the classroom and the amount of time for language studies available per student per week. Only the lucky few will have a chance to go on a homestay programme in the country whose language they are studying and thus experience its full socio-cultural implications as well, or have the opportunity to learn a language whilst actually being a long-term resident abroad.

Yet world events are inexorably pushing nations towards greater cooperation, greater closeness, greater understanding. Out of this will come a need to communicate, whether it be for economic, social or humane reasons. Surely it is insufficient—not to say conceited—in such an international context to remain stubbornly mono-lingual? Perhaps *this* will be a motivation to grapple more resolutely with a second or third language: perhaps the sense of adventure will triumph after all....