

English Communication Through Practical Experiences

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Teaching English to a wide variety of students for more than thirty years has taught me that generalizations and stereotypical ideas concerning the way learning takes place is not nearly as important as it is for each teacher to discover the method of instruction or combination there of, which most matches his or her style with a group of students at a given time.¹ Through the writing of this paper I will endeavor to share some teaching methods both inside and outside the classroom and how they can be beneficial to the practical task of communicating in English.

As a young person teaching English to underprivileged Mexican- Americans in rural Indiana I discovered these children were more concerned with the food that would or would not be on their table for lunch than with sitting quietly learning how to read a book. Since their parents worked on farms in the area for a few weeks or months, and then moved on to the next town or state these children knew the names of the places they had been and had quite an interest in geography. Teaching the correct pronunciation of a given town or state and learning how to spell difficult names became a real challenge that was not only enjoyable to teach but fun to learn. Another practical learning experience these students could build on was to learn the English names of the various crops their parents were working in. Their parents spoke very little English and had little time to learn besides what was absolutely necessary for their daily existence. The children were often required to interpret or explain an idea to the American farmers, so it was necessary for the children to be able to communicate at basic level

As is often true of immigrant families, the first generation only learns the most basic vocabulary and grammar but the children, if given the chance, will learn to function better in the new language than in their mother tongue. These children traveled from place to place nine months out of a year, so received very little formal education in the American public school system. Because of this they had very few skills in reading or writing. But the program I taught in was trying to get them into the educational stream and I was free to experiment with a variety of educational methods in order to teach the fundamental skills of language. I found that "hands on" language worked best. For example; one day we went to the zoo and as we looked at each animal I would give the animal and the children would repeat the name over and over until they could say them with precision. Another hands on tactic I used to teach food names and the use of money was to have a store in the classroom allowing the students to play both clerk and customer. Just to "play store" is never as good a learning experience as really going shop-ping. Giving each child a small amount of money and letting them go into a store freely to buy something can become a pivotal experience in the motivation for learning language. These are just a very few simple ways to make language learning enjoyable but ways to make the student feel he or she is communicating.

Teaching reading to second language learners should usually come after some exposure to the spoken language. Hearing and speaking a language is usually learned at a faster pace than reading is. I can remember when I was studying Japanese five hours a day, five days a week and having a very difficult time learning to communicate, My children were six and eight years old at the time and everyday they would spend time playing with the neighbor children. They would come back at night with more new vocabulary words than I had been able to learn in a week. Not only did they learn vocabulary words but they learned how to live and speak in the language. Of course I went to language school for two years plus made friends with the neighbors and began to live the language little by little, but I will never be as skillful in Japanese as my children are. Therefore, students learning a foreign language need practical language, such as speaking and experiencing culture before they need theoretical language, such as; reading and writing.² But that is not to say that they don't need both. I feel that sometimes we teachers are so excited to teach language skills that we forget to teach students how to communicate.³ With the big class size that most schools have, it is easier to teach reading or translation than it is to give students the time to develop a discussion or a conversation in order to communicate. Therefore students who want to learn how to communicate go to language schools and spend extra money on things that should be taught in school. Without practical learning both in and out of the classroom learning how to live and communicate in a given language will never take place.⁴

One experience I vividly remember happened after having lived in Japan about four years. By that time we had assimilated in both the spoken and the cultural areas of the language. One day I went to the station to meet a couple who had just recently arrived in Japan. I could see them waiting by the side an. motioned for them to come. With my hand I put my fingers in a downward position and moved them back and forth. This gesture means "come here" in Japanese but this same gesture in the U. S. is a greeting. Therefore they waved to me as if to say "hi" and stood waiting until I could drive to the point where they were waiting. I didn't realize the reason they had not come when I had called to them with my hand gesture, but as we discussed the relationship between language and culture it came out that they had mistaken the meaning of my gesture for the American greeting. The mysterious part of this incidence is that I had not even realized I had used that particular gesture in a Japanese or American manner. It had just come naturally to me in that situation. If I were to have had that same experience in the United States I would have naturally used a different gesture with the same meaning because the setting would have been an American one. If a second language learner only learns to read and write a language without the speaking and cultural learning that is so important he or she will never become proficient in the language. As this couple has often mentioned since that time, with just that one experience they learned how to say "come here" and have never made that mistake again. They could have read how to say it in a book and spent time memorizing the way, but in just five or ten seconds that aspect of language was imprinted on their brain forever. Not only is it important to use practical ways to learn spoken language but also to learn to read. Before coming to Japan I spent several years teaching English to native speakers who had learning difficulties. These students could speak English as well as native speakers, but they had trouble with their reading and writing skills. They also had difficulty with the input and output of language, such as; organizing their thoughts into complete ideas and expressing their ideas completely. I found that many of the techniques I used to teach these students language skills I have also used in teaching second language learners.

As I have written in a previous paper the use of video in the classroom is a powerful tool in helping break down language learning barriers that are often built up in Japanese students after years of studying grammar and translation. Most students that reach the university level in Japan have what we foreign teachers call "foreign language phobia" from all the detailed studying of grammar points or from all the long hours of detailed word for word translation of some very difficult passage that has nothing to do with everyday life.⁵ Showing a video with a theme that is relevant to student's lives can create a keen interest in language learning that will never be created from translating a passage or teaching an important grammar point. Having students record a conversation that they make with friends will often result in the use of current spoken language with a display of a different attitude on the part of the students. Of course there has to be preparation by learning the vocabulary for a given topic and by learning the grammar to be used in the conversation. But, by the time most students enter the university in Japan most major grammar points have already been taught without the teaching of true communication. Everyone learns language by speaking and living it, and without these two vital components it just becomes an exercise in gaining knowledge without it becoming an active part of the person's life.⁶ Recently when assigning students to small groups to prepare a conversation to take place at a restaurant I noticed how eager they were to begin their preparations. The following week the class was all a buzz with noise and laughter as if they were excitedly waiting to perform. When each group took its turn it was obvious they were having fun trying to communicate not only with words but with gestures and facial expressions. One group even brought donuts to serve to the entire class after they had performed their conversation in a make believe "Dunkin Donuts". We all laughed when certain students would swagger like a typical American or someone would say some current slang that was particularly appropriate to the situation. Real learning was taking place in a very natural way. When I thought about why this kind of assignment is so much more successful than simply reading a conversation about a restaurant in terms of teaching language, I came to the conclusion that these students had seen English-speaking restaurant scenes innumerable times on T. V. and on the movie screen and could feel comfortable emulating what they had seen and making it their own language.

Going outside the classroom to learn a foreign language is also vital to the practical learning component. In the past few years I have been experimenting with taking students abroad for short periods of time to live the language. Even for short periods of time (two weeks each) these times have been intensive in that they have included immersing the students in English with home stays and spending the majority of the time with people who do not speak any Japanese. The first trip was to the States where English is the native language, but the second trip was to Thailand where English is a second language as it is in Japan. The students who went on these trips were first through fourth year students with varying degrees of English ability. Some were English majors but there were students from most departments at both the Women's junior college and the University. In preparation for each of the trips I taught an intensive ten week course in basic English including the culture of the country. When students think they will have a chance to speak and live the language the interest in learning increases significantly. The students prepared reports on the culture and presented them in Japanese, but with many English references in regards to names of people and places. Because I am from the States it was much easier to prepare the students for the trip to the States, but on the other hand I had to study about Thailand in order to be able to teach about its culture which made the students and myself on an equal level. I feel this added to the students' zest in their preparation because we were all learners. Preparation for trips such as these is very important and the extent to which students involve themselves

in this determines whether they have a positive or negative learning experience.

The trip to the States began with a two day stop in San Francisco and a side trip to Yosemite National Park with a Japanese guide. This gave the students time to get over the shock of being in a country where Japanese is not spoken and to adjust their ears to hearing English spoken naturally. They then flew on to Chicago where they spent the rest of their time. Each host family agreed to keep two students making the students feel more comfortable. More learning will usually take place if only one student stays with each host family, but on the other hand some students can become frightened that no learning takes place and there is two weeks of silence. This is where it is important for the teacher to know each student extremely well and make that judgment carefully. One male student in my group requested staying alone with a host family and he was able to use his English significantly more than the others who stayed in pairs. Besides spending time with the host families I also set up a program at Judson College to have the students take part in the orientation for new students that is held at the beginning of a new school year. Although not all of it was appropriate I was able to choose what I felt the students would benefit from, such as; a karaoke party, roller skating, a boat ride, etc. The things that were most appropriate were those in a relaxed atmosphere where students could have fun trying to communicate with one another. Although the lectures on American college life, on how to study in the library, and on college financial aid were irrelevant for our visiting students, so I did not have them take part in those meetings. I also took the students to restaurants, the bank, shopping, sightseeing, etc. where they had to use English in order to meet their daily needs. Of course they made many mistakes, but they learned much more from this type of experience than they could ever learn in a classroom in Japan.

The trip to Thailand was different but the same kind of learning was experienced from being able to live the language in yet another setting. The students were exposed not only to English but to Thai and Karen language, Even though there were two other languages besides English the students never confused the two. They learned greetings and partings in Thai and Karen but for the most part used English as the main form of communication. They were very surprised that Thai people can speak English quite fluently Tribal people speak two other languages besides English generally. Before we went to Thailand the students were worried about communication because Thailand is an Asian country like Japan and they couldn't imagine English would be widely used, When we arrived at the airport in Chiang Mai they were shocked to see Thai and English words written in the advertisements. They were also worried whether they could understand another second language learner's English pronunciation. I had been to Thailand previously and had no trouble understanding their pronunciation for the most part, but I am a native speaker and accustomed to hearing English spoken by second language learners. Therefore I had no idea whether they would find it difficult to understand the Thai's pronunciation of English or not. The students were greatly relieved to discover they could understand their pronunciation quite well because they speak more slowly than a native speaker. They relaxed and began to show a confidence in their speaking ability I had never seen before.

On our first night in Thailand we were invited to a dormitory for students from the Karen Hill Tribe. The students were approximately the same age as the Japanese students and dressed in tribal dress as our students dressed in yukata. As we arrived at the dormitory I could feel the tension building in our students but little by little as the Karen students began to ask questions in English our students answered quite adequately. The Karen students, using English, asked how to say simple phrases in Japanese making the Japanese students relax and before the evening was over the two groups of young people developed a lasting bond. As we left I could hear the tearful good byes being said from relationships having been made in English, a second a second language for both groups of students. This was truly an interesting phenomena and proved to me that living the language is an important practical aspect towards the mastery of a foreign language

From this point on these students took taxis and went shopping on their own using English to talk to the taxi drivers and bargaining with the shop keepers in English very successfully. After they returned from their daily expeditions they would talk over what they had said and how much they had paid for things and how they had bartered in English with great pride in their voices. One group of students went to a Buddhist Temple and met some priests who spoke English very well. After talking with them for a period of time a young priest came out who spoke Japanese. At first the students were thrilled to meet a Thai who could speak Japanese, but later became disappointed because there was no need to continue talking in English. As I listened to them talk I thought how interesting this experience was for them and how they were becoming citizens of the world.⁶ Whether these students were in a country where English is the first language or in a country like Thailand where English is a second language they had come to experience English as an important part of their lives.

We were able to spend valuable time with some English-speaking expatriates who gave the students another unforgettable experience. In one group of expatriates the students were able to experience an Australian, English, Swedish, American, Myanmarese (formerly Burmese) and Japanese speak English with various accents. This could have been very confusing to them, but they enjoyed hearing the different pronunciations and experiencing the international atmosphere of this kind of group.

Probably the most meaningful experience of the trip to Thailand was a homestay that took place in a remote village in northern Thailand. Accompanying the students were two of us who could speak English and Japanese; one person who could speak English, Japanese and Thai; and one person who could speak a little English, Thai and Karen. We did not know if any of the village people would be able to speak English but we did know that no one would be able to speak Japanese. When we first arrived we were all nervous, even myself. We were introduced to the minister who could not speak any English. His greeting was translated into Japanese for us and then we were taken to the various homes to be introduced to the families we would be staying with. The home I stayed in included a large family of three or four generations. The patriarch did not speak English except for a few words which he was quick to use with us. He soon introduced us to his grandson who began to use a few halting phrases of English. Since I was the native English speaker and the teacher I somehow felt I had to translate for the students. But they soon let me know that they now had confidence in their English and began to ask questions and talk with the young man quite comfortably. They even went outside with him and were introduced to some of his young relatives. He had begun studying English four months previous to our arrival and already was able to carry on a conversation remarkably well. He was able to explain how we were to take our bath in the river and to tell us he would take us there but would return to his house 'to rest' while we bathed. He told us the names of most of the trees and plants in his garden except for one. That was the mango tree which he said he could not remember. The students were able to communicate with these people on a different level than I was able to do as a native speaker. The family talked with the students using very basic English, but communication took place and the students left the village with great compassion and love for the people.

The purpose of our trip to Thailand was two fold; to use English and to do volunteer work. The students prepared five children's Bible stories in English drawing pictures to illustrate the stories (kami- shibai, in Japanese). They spent many hours looking for the best words to use in the stories and then practicing the stories with voice intonation and appropriate expressions. They were able to perform all the stories at least twice and one time they even performed for English speaking children at an international church. Of course they were most nervous performing for the international children, but as I watched the children and listened to the students I was impressed with the improvement in their language skills in the short time we had been in Thailand and how they had begun to make the language a part of themselves. Our visit to the English language Church was at the end of our stay and by then I was able to see a transformation in the student's thinking and being. Their body movements had even changed and they walked with their heads held high and a confidence I had never previously experienced.

The first trip of this kind we had taken to the States and ended with the students returning to Japan while I stayed in the States for six months. Therefore, I was not able to see how the experience affected the student's lives after they returned to Japan, I wondered how the Thailand experience would effect their lives and language when they returned to Japan. It has been very interesting to watch the difference in the students who went and those who didn't go. Because only seventeen out of 60 members of "The Fellowship" went to Thailand they could have gone unnoticed but those who went are much freer to speak English when I meet them or talk to them by phone. I r also have taken more of a leadership position in the club and are much freer to express themselves, even in Japanese. Many of the students who did not go have noticed the differences also and have made comments like, "He's changed since he went to Thailand" or "What happened to him in Thailand".

In conclusion, it has become apparent to me that more than teaching methods or curriculum, a language must be experienced. This does not mean that grammar, reading, writing and speaking do not all need to be taught, but it means that along with these skills the language must be experienced before it can become a part of a person's being. In order for a person to be truly skilled in a language it must become a part of his or her being or in other words, a person must live the language. It is a great challenge, as a language teacher, to try to give students various kinds of opportunities to live the language, but it is also very rewarding to be able to see a student make English become a part of his or her being.

NOTES

1) E.V. Gatenby writes in an article, "Conditions for Success in Language Learning" about a lecture delivered at Harvard University by George Ticknor (1791-1871) entitled, "The Best Methods of Teaching the Living Languages" (1832) and how for the first time recognized the fact that there is no one method of teaching lan- guages, but that the teacher must vary his method according to the age and attainments of his class, and further, select and arrange his materials to suit the individual needs and capacities of his pupils. In this paper I have gone even further in this idea of saying that student must be given the opportunity to live the language he is studying in order to make it a part of his being.

2) A.S. Hornby, in "The Situational Approach to Language Teaching" describes the learning of all the names of the animals in Aesops

Tales, Tales of Robin Hood, Shakespeare Retold as having very little to do with language useful in practical affairs. He goes on to state that language is needed for situations and should be taught with situations as the starting point.

3) In "Conditions for Success in Language Learning", E.V. Gatenby says that often times the language teachers, exasperated by the inability of student to learn, or of himself to teach, a foreign language cuts out hearing, speaking and writing and concentrates on reading only.

4) In "Kenesics and Cross-Cultural Understanding" Genelle G. Morain writes that being able to read and speak another language does not guarantee that understanding will take place. He continues writing that words in themselves are too limited a dimension and the critical factor in understanding has to do with the cultural aspects that include many dimensions of nonverbal communication.

5) In an article entitled, "Technemes and the Rhythm of Class Activity" by Earl W. Stevick it is suggested that "exposure to the language" and morale is vitally important to the learning of a language. That if a student is to continue to feel motivated in learning a language he must feel a continuing sense of progress in the learning process. If a student sees no chance or development in communication skills he or she soon loses interest in studying.

6) Sylvia Ashton-Warner points out in her article entitled "Shaping the Curriculum" that 'learning to speak another's language means taking one's place in the human community'. In other words it means reaching out to others across cultural and linguistic boundaries. She also points out that language is far more than a system to be explained. It is our most important link to the world around us. It is culture in motion. It is people interacting with people. The most effective programs for learning should involve the whole learner in the experience of language as a network of relations between people, things, and events.

7) In an article by Anita L. Wenden entitled, "How to Be a Successful Language Learner: Insights and Prescriptions from L2 Learners" living and studying in where the target language is spoken helps the student to learn to live in the language. She writes further that going to a country where English is spoken as second language has some advantages in that it may be easier to become a part of that uses English as a second language.

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