
An Interview with H. Douglas Brown



Pasaa :

To what extent does motivation contribute to the learner's success in learning a second/foreign language ?

Prof. Brown :

It contributes a great extent to the rate of success. I think it's a kind of foundation stone to success because it is a sort of springboard to driving a person. One of the things that I talk about a lot is intrinsic motivation, which is different from extrinsic motivation. Sometimes we think of motivation as being a series of

rewards. So, we think that the teacher can motivate all the time by giving praise or grades or gold stars or privileges, but those are extrinsic because they come from outside the learner - from the teacher to the learner. The key to motivation in language learning is intrinsic motivation so that the learner rewards himself rather than being dependent on teachers or somebody on the outside rewarding. In that way, learners will keep on learning. (This is different from instrumental and integrative motivation.) Intrinsic motivation is a sense that a student enjoys something or does something

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without needing an external reward. For example, experiments have been done where people have been assigned a task, like teaching a game to little children. You have Group A and Group B. In Group A, the people were told that they should teach the game to those children and if they do it well, they will get a prize or reward - a movie or concert ticket, or money. Group B was just told to teach the game to the children. In these experiments, Group B without the rewards consistently did better. They taught the game better, they enjoyed it more (reported more enjoyment in doing it) and they taught it faster and more efficiently: No rewards. The reason is that the first group (Group A) was focused on the reward rather than focusing on their behaviour. So, if learners are focused on, let us say, an examination - the entrance exam to college or a final exam for a course - then they are learning English only for the extrinsic reward (the examination); then the language itself, the meaningful part of learning, is lost because they are just doing it for the exam.

Pasaa :

What if students are not intrinsically motivated at all? They are there because they have to take those courses. Does that mean they will not have any motivation at all?

Prof. Brown :

No, you cannot expect students to have intrinsic motivation from the start. Part of the job of the teacher is to create it and help create it. I think you can help create it by having students see the usefulness of the English language, students to have fun, to do interesting things when they are learning English, and to become more interested in each other by having more interactive activities. Also, make sure that some of the things that they do in the class apply to things that are outside the class. (Thus, if they are learning to ask questions in class, it is not just that they can ask a question in class, but maybe they could use it outside. Alternatively, they could listen to TV programmes or movies, or read books, or

newspapers, or whatever, outside of the class and maybe even get a sense of some strategies that they could use outside the class, so in that way it becomes their own learning). I think the teacher can help slowly; it is not a magic thing to create intrinsic motivation within students.

Pasaa :

How do you reconcile learners with different motivation in the classroom? If they are not all intrinsically motivated or their intrinsic motivation is different from each other how can we reconcile that?

Prof. Brown :

I think that probably even though there are many different interests among learners, there are some things that are in common - they all are ultimately interested in each other, in succeeding in life, in having fun. Then if you get people involved in activities that are interesting, that point them towards success and so forth, then a variety of activities should appeal to different people. If one person wants to learn English only to read, then you have some reading, but you also have some writing, listening and speaking. If one person is only interested in computers, then you have something about computers, but you also have other things in there to interest other learners. I think the variety of topics, the variety of skills and the variety of activities will eventually hit everyone a little bit and what will tie them together will be their interest in each other and in competing against themselves or working cooperatively in the classroom to achieve common goals.

Pasaa :

If they are all motivated in getting a good grade, would you call that good motivation?

Prof. Brown :

I would not say that is good intrinsic motivation because grades are actually very low indicators of intrinsic motivation. In fact, grades do not tell you much of anything at all. They

are just numbers on a page; they do nothing about how well the learner did compared to how well the learner himself can do. It says nothing about how much effort the learner put into it. It says nothing about the progress the learner has made from the beginning of the class to the end of it. It says nothing about the specific things the learner has done. A grade, as a motivator, is an empty kind of extrinsic thing and, even though it is necessary, it is probably not the highest possible motivation.

Pasaa :

How do you propose that we evaluate then?

Prof. Brown :

Evaluation grades are necessary in that the system demands them. What we do at the American Language Institute (A.L.I.), for example, is this. The students each have four teachers from whom they get a whole page in the mid-term and at the end of the semester divided into four sections. Up at the top is their name and then "Section 1 : Conversation," let's say, there is a grade and then there is a whole paragraph, maybe two or three inches of : "OK, Pavinee, you did a great job on the listening skills and you did especially well with listening for the contextual clues of this, this and this, and you did a good job on that. Those areas that you still need to do some work in are the following : when you are speaking, try working out pronunciation," and things like that. Narrative evaluations really help. I think grades are OK, they are not evil things, but there has got to be something more.

Pasaa :

If we only teach them for three or six months, how can we evaluate their success and whether they have learnt anything or not?

Prof. Brown :

We have twelve week sessions at the A.L.I. and after six weeks they get a mid-term grade sheet just like that - a mid-term grade and a paragraph for each class telling them what they have done well and what they have not.

When you hand back papers, instead of just putting a number on the paper, put comments. Sometimes teachers just put grades, so it is important to put some comments: "I like this" or "you did this part well" and then work on this paragraph and get people to understand why they did something well. A lot of the time, students get a paper back, a task or whatever, they look at the number - "77" - and they put it into it a folder and never look at it again. You are giving feedback all the time - everyday you are giving feedback - so the mid-term or the final is just a summary of the feedback you have given previously.

Pasaa :

Is interactive teaching synonymous with communicative language teaching?

Prof. Brown :

It is not necessarily synonymous, that is, interactive teaching. Interaction is a part of communicative language teaching. Communicative language teaching is something that has a number of different elements to it. One of the elements is an emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language. Interactive teaching is that part of communicative language teaching. Also, authentic language is part of communicative language teaching. This is Nunan, but I agree with him, focusing on the learning process, on strategies of learning is part of communicative language teaching. The relevance, not topics, is important, and then getting people to focus on things outside of the class. I would say interactive teaching is an important element; in fact it is number one on my list of communicative language teaching.

Pasaa :

What is the role of grammar in communicative language teaching and learning?

Prof. Brown :

I would put the notions of fluency and accuracy in here with this question. Most of the time classes need to focus on fluency,

focus on getting people to use language, to "do" language in conversations or meetings or whatever it happens to be. Grammar becomes a kind of a way to check on their fluency, or a way to pinpoint problems, or a way to edit what it is that they are doing. I use the analogy of a zoom lens and a wide angle lens. Wide angle lens language teaching is what we do most of the time, we want to get people to focus on the gist of the conversation or a paragraph, on general meanings of a sentence that somebody says, without getting hung up on one word in a sentence. When the time comes (it might be in the same lesson or it might be five minutes later or it might be a week later) people can focus and the teacher can say "let's look at this thing and think about what you have been doing." In the Vista series I gave the example of how people get involved in conversations practising the imperatives even though they do not realise it: "You shouldn't park here," and "you shouldn't smoke there," "don't do this and don't do that." They are practising it and then the teacher can point out at the end of the lesson "here is what you have been doing with your practise and here are the grammatical points and here is why you have misunderstood something." In another lesson, if somebody says something like "I am here since January. " you can then point out the error - grammar becomes a way to point things out, to give people hints rather than a beginning. You begin with a wide angle lens and then the zoom lens is grammar. So you zoom in on a point and then you look at it, and then you back off - zoom in, back off. Grammar is the zoom lens of language.

Pasaa :

If, or when, grammar is to be corrected, how should it be done?

Prof. Brown :

That's a complicated question because teachers are always having to make choices when they are correcting and about when they are going to correct something and when they are not. I have suggested a model that comes

from a study by Vigel and Oller on fossilization that suggests that there are two levels of feedback that teachers give, right on top of each other. One level is affective feedback of simply recognizing the person and saying "I'm willing to listen to you. You have something worth saying to me, "and that sort of thing. In other words, paying attention. Then another level is of feedback on the message itself, or on the grammar, or whatever. So, once you pay attention and give the person the sense that I can talk now and that's O.K., then you have to make a decision on when you're going to give feedback or what it is you're going to treat. In fact, there is a whole host of questions that I think you have to ask yourself to figure out whether you should correct something that the students are saying. The rules of thumb that I will give are: keep communication flowing, keep it flowing so that people don't get stopped in the middle of their thoughts, especially if somebody is really trying to express something about an idea or whatever, let them go and if there are mistakes, then I think usually teachers' can make notes of these. Then, once a person has got a thought out and they're done, the teacher might go back and say: "No, there was something that wasn't quite clear and it was this word or it was this sentence and maybe it was because of your grammar and you want to try repeating it? Only when communication is just not understandable would you jump in and say: "Wait a minute, wait a minute. I don't understand you. Start over. Work on this particular word if that is what you're trying to get out". So I think the same principle of fluency, accuracy, and zoom lens and wide angle applies with error correction; you keep the wide angle lens, you keep the fluency going, and then when the fluency is such that you can not understand it or it's not fluent at all, then you do something about channelling the river of language. I like the idea of the river too because, you know, 'to flow.' If language is flowing like water down through the mountains, then sometimes things get blocked in the flow and then everything floods and

so your error correction can be unblocking that flow. Or if it's not flowing in the right direction, I mean if the water is supposed to flow this way, and it's going this way off to the side, then you can help to put some dams or channels in there. That's what error correction does. I think error correction is very helpful in small doses.

Pasaa :

If the teacher were to adopt the principles of interactive teaching/learning, what preparations should be made on the part of the teacher as well as the learner?

Prof. Brown :

The preparation the teacher should make for interactive teaching is very complex, I think I've been talking here about principles of language learning and I think one of the things that teachers should understand is that, they should not go into a class with the idea that there is one method that's going to work for them: one method is not the answer. Nor is the whole profession in a state here where we've got a method that works for all times. Instead, the insights of method, can apply. Thus, if total physical response is a method, you don't just do total physical response, but you do, maybe, a total physical response activity at an appropriate point, so what you should not do is assume that there is one method for preparing a person to be an interactive teacher. Then I think what they need to know is some principles of learning and teaching, like principles of intrinsic motivation. That's an important principle to get people to interact because they're not going to interact if they're not interested in something, if it doesn't have some meaning for them, or if they can't find some self reward in it. Then there is the principle of risk taking. Teachers need to understand that learners have to take risks and they can't sit at the back of the room. Once they take the risk, the teacher needs to understand that it's important to reward even a little extrinsically the risk the person is taking. So if somebody, raises their hands and tries something

out and then it's not right or it's not very clear, the teacher doesn't want to go: "That was a dumb remark! How could you say something so stupid!" Rather say: "That was very good. You made a good try. And I want you to keep trying and here's a way we can fix that sentence up." So you encourage the risk taking. If people know that principle and apply it too, then they'll be able to get the people to interact. Meaningful learning, topics that are relevant and things like that are foundation stones. If they have some principles as foundation stones, then I think they can look at techniques and they can take a teacher's manual to a series or whatever, and they can probably teach from it. [My full answer to this is: take the MA program at Illinois or San Francisco State or something because there's so much involved in teaching.]

Pasaa :

Can you give examples of interactive activities in a reading class?

Prof. Brown :

There are probably two ways of looking at this. One way is that reading is itself interactive. So you understand that the process of getting meaning from the printed page is interactive in that I, the reader, bring my ideas to the page and the author of the writing has ideas in the page that are trying to come through. It's like meeting half way in between. We often think of looking at a page and it's just simply a matter of me trying to figure out what did the student mean by this particular sentence. That's not the only way to look at it. The way to look at it is that you meant something, but I'm also bringing something to it that either can help me interpret it or could block my interpretation. Any time you read is an interactive activity and so students need to understand that they can disagree on the interpretation of something and both be right, especially with literature. An author is not always absolutely conveying one meaning to all people; there may be several meanings and so somebody can get several meanings out of

a printed page, which is still efficient reading. So that's one way. Another way is probably how would you have students interact with a reading class? I only speak about reading not writing here. I'd like to combine reading and writing. Let's say, students are going to read a passage about space exploration. How do you make it interactive? How do you avoid just having students just read the passage and then answer questions? First of all, typically in an interactive class, you may present people with a topic only. (They haven't seen the passage yet.) And they think about the topic "space exploration" before the teacher asks them: "What do you know about space exploration? How far away is Mars?" I mean, there are hundreds of possible questions that the teacher can interact with the students on. There would be pre-reading exercises, pre-setting the stage, or setting the background or setting the schemata. Also, students could actually discuss among themselves specific things. They could do pair work or it could be an exercise where maybe they're looking at vocabulary and they do it in pairs and try to figure out the meaning of some of the technical terms that are going to come up in the reading passage. They can do pair work with some of the ideas that are going to come up and just set the stage with what they know about space exploration or rocket propulsion. There could be group work that would relate to the topic. Maybe they would do a little exercise on where would they travel if they were to travel in space, what would they want to see, and what kind of questions they want to ask aliens - the creatures out there. So all of a sudden you have got a passage on space exploration and appreciating that it was something that's kind of interesting. I mean, wouldn't everyone in your class want to meet an alien and ask him questions and what would those questions be? They might be questions about cures for diseases or how to have a successful economy, or how to take care of environmental problems. I mean they would think of lots of questions they would ask the

aliens out there. And that's an interactive activity. So you are preparing students for the passage by getting them interested, excited, and motivated toward reading the passage. Then they read and the reading might be individual, or it might be reading out loud, or it might be the teacher reading to them, or you could do a combination in which they're listening and looking at the page, so that's interactive. Then lots and lots of follow up activities are possible, especially writing so that you know your discussion and comprehension of the passage (that too could be interactive in pairs or groups) and so forth, and then, a whole written lesson to follow.

Even at the beginning, a little bit of reading and writing is important, but you do more. I think you're better off to do listening and speaking at the beginning level as a basis for the reading and writing. I definitely think that we shouldn't separate reading into just sitting down and reading and answering comprehension questions after each piece.

Pasaa :

Some students don't want to speak if they don't have a good command of the language or if they think they'll make mistakes. How would you solve this problem?

Prof. Brown:

I think that's part of the fluency-accuracy dilemma. If you're going to try in your class to encourage people to make attempts at language, encourage them to understand that children, when they're learning native languages, don't come out with perfectly grammatical sentences from the beginning. They're little telegraphic utterances and things like that, which we pass off and you probably, in your country, pass off as baby talk or child talk, and it's O.K. for a child but never for an adult. Most adults who are learning a language actually start out making mistakes and then they just learn to listen for them and not be embarrassed by them. It's a difficult thing to get across to

people, probably because they have been brought up since they were very young children to believe that everything is to be error-free, never make a mistake, never fail, never never never fail. So, if you fail or if you make a mistake, it's the most terrible thing in the world. I don't think that works for language, so somehow the message has to be got across to them and I think teachers can encourage the communication. It's O.K. to try things out because they'll never find out whether it works or not otherwise. Most people don't learn languages fluently by learning the grammar rules first. Look around you. People aren't very fluent and it blocks people into thinking only about accuracy instead of about the meaning that they're trying to get across.

Pasaa :

What is your opinion about varieties of English e.g. American English, Australian English, Indian English? Is there a model to be followed for students who learn English as a foreign language?

Prof. Brown:

The whole issue is one that's quite stormy and a bit controversial right now because there is such an incredible variety - there are numbers of varieties of English. I think it's important to teach English that's somewhat free from a particular culture and not: "This is the way we do it in America," or whatever, but: "Here's some language you can use in Australia or Japan or the Philippines or India or whatever country you're in." The culture connection doesn't always have to be there and it's very healthy to see the acceptability of the varieties of English up to the point of mutual intelligibility. Yet, I was just talking with someone from Singapore about Singaporean English or what they call Singlish and I can't really understand Singlish. I don't know whether you've heard much of it here, but I can't understand. Now I can understand pretty much most standard Indian-English, Philippines-English, or Thai-English, but Singlish is really strange. Now,

there's a problem there and I think it's a problem that no linguist can fix. We can't have an international board of a tribunal or something and say: "O.K. Now we're going to fix this problem." But eventually the problem will fix itself. It's just going to take some time. It's going to take some generations. Eventually, the Singlish speaking people in Singapore will realize that nobody can understand them and then if the purpose of international English is to understand each other, then they sure better be able to articulate the language phonologically and in a syntax that everybody is going to understand and not with all these weird, funny quirks in the language. I think it's a very interesting issue - the varieties of English and international English. As far as the model, you asked if there's a model for the students to follow. Probably whatever the teacher speaks is going to be the model but if the teacher feels somewhat inadequate, like a Thai teacher here feels that her pronunciation isn't that great or her grammar isn't too good, then she could use native speaker tapes or models. However, I don't think there's anything wrong with a Thai teacher with a typical Thai pronunciation teaching English as long as when that person comes out of the class, that English is understandable by an American or a Brit or an Australian or a Filipino. There's not one model yet, but maybe in 50 years, there'll be some acceptable -- a small number of acceptable models -- perhaps a South East Asian model and a North American model and a U.K. model, maybe a Middle Eastern or something. So we'll be able to understand each other around the world. That's the point, ultimately the point of all this. Time will tell but I think time will force the issue in a kind of bizarre way. It will force out non-mutually intelligible varieties because they will simply isolate themselves. I mean, if the Singaporeans want to isolate themselves, that's their business, but I don't think that's necessarily what they want to do. We could of course become bi-dialectal so that you'd have the Singapore dialect and the international

dialect and that's fine. What we're talking about is the mutually intelligible varieties.

Pasaa :

What direction is language learning/teaching headed?

Prof. Brown :

Well for one thing, it is becoming commercial and I think that's a natural outgrowth of international language communication. I mean everybody is striving for being able to communicate across national boundaries, so it is natural for it to be an international mercenary thing. We're not in methods history anymore. I think for the first century of language teaching, we were looking at methods and how the methods differ and you'd go from one method to another. Now we're in a much more unified teaching approach, so I think where it's headed is more toward developing communicable language teaching and developing more of a better way to pinpoint all the different contexts for teaching. I mean a lot of the methods of the past were just blank hit or miss. Here's a method we hope applies to millions of people. Now we're saying what do those millions of people want to do with English and who are the learners and where are they headed? So you've got a much more specialized field. I mean where, let's say, psychology was a hundred years ago and where it is now may be similar to where language teaching was a hundred years ago. I mean in psychology, there were a lot of guesses made about what schizophrenia is, what paranoia is, what the treatment should be and, so-on and so forth. Now we're getting much more scientific about it. Similarly in language teaching, we're able to specify age-levels, i.e. elementary school, secondary, adult. We're able to specify different needs in different countries and then within each country, you specify things like occupational purposes, so you have English for computers, for business, for agriculture, for medicine and so forth. We're able to specify the particular purposes to which people want the language within those;

for listening, speaking, reading, or writing. Also is it for communicating with other people in certain contexts? So we're starting to outline specific programmes. The reason for the mushrooming of text books is that instead of there being one text book for all people in all seasons, there are dozens of text books for all of the different people, all of the different classes, all of the contexts and all of the different purposes toward which learners are pointed in learning a second language. So where it's headed is much more a complex field in which complexities are more specific and we're more willing to design tasks that are appropriate for a particular context.

Pasaa :

What is your "pathway to success" in learning a foreign language?

Prof. Brown :

My own experience has been varied. I've learned languages as a child, I learned them as a teenager and as an adult, so it kind of varies. There may be something that cuts across all those experiences, but among other things, I suppose, and to make it relevant to other people I would say, "practice, practice, practice." Whatever you can do to keep practising in getting the language, so tapes are really good for self-learning. I think going out making the opportunities to speak are good. I think a lot of listening comprehension is excellent. The more listening comprehension that people do, the better. When I went to Yugoslavia in 1987 I tried to learn Croatian so that I could get along there. I went through tapes, flash-cards and I played the tapes in my car and listened to them. I had little scenarios where I had a little conversation. When I got to Yugoslavia, in fact the very first minute I was in the airport, some little old woman came up to me and asked me a question. I don't know why she picked me - I guess she thought I looked Yugoslavian because she asked me a question about which line she should go into for her passport and I knew what she was asking. (Well, but the context helped.) I could tell what she wanted

just from the few words that I had learned and I actually responded to her. Anyway, practice, tapes, flashcards, listening to other people a lot, listening to movies with subtitles, T.V. programs, trying to do some affective things, trying to talk yourself into feeling good about yourself, telling yourself "I can do it, I can do it," those are a few things.

Everybody has a different formula but for the most part it's risk taking, confidence, putting forth the effort and spending time actually focussing. We can't do it effortlessly. There's got to be some effort and focus.

Pasaa :

Anything you want to add?

Prof. Brown :

I would really like teachers in Thailand to be willing to take the risks themselves. We talk a lot about students having to take risks and then we might forget that for those of us who

are not native speakers, it is a real risk for a teacher to go up in front of a class and teach English. It's a very scary experience to stand up in front of those students and know that maybe each student knows a word that I don't know and they might ask questions that I don't know and my English isn't so good. The one thing I'd like teachers here to understand is that it's alright for them to try to take these risks and try to be communicative and open in the classroom and not just play it safe, but to do things that are somewhat risky and build in their students a sense of accepting the fact that they may make a mistake or two and that it's O.K. for them to make a mistake or two. The teacher doesn't have to be perfect. It's a really hard concept, especially in a society where teachers are supposed to be perfect.

So, teachers: take risks too and be willing to try these things out. That's probably about it.