Life Saving Techniques for the Foreign Language Learner Lost at Sea

Thomas J. Kral

United States Information Agency (Philippines)

This article recounts the author's learning/acquisition experience with a new target language. Though an experienced foreign language teacher and a sociolinguist, he found himself going through learning activities with no apparent language acquisition taking place. Out of the frustration which the author felt as a result of this foreign language experience, he identifies concepts which underlie effective language teaching/learning/ acquisition. These include tapping the students' knowledge of the world, the need to confirm their self worth, their need to consider the target language in both the written and spoken mediums across the four skill areas, and the need for meaningful extended language exchange.

When foreign language teachers themselves go back to the classroom to learn a new language, something unsettling happens. They no longer make the final decisions about syllabus design, choice of materials, or application of method. They no longer structure and orchestrate the learning situation. Instead, they are cast into the vulnerable role of language learner.

Though the situation is unsettling, it is rich in potential. To see language learning from the viewpoint of the student is to gain insight into the psychological workings of the language learner and to see, from a new angle, how well or badly, different language teaching methods facilitate acquisition.

Recently I took time off from English teaching to study Tagalog, the national language of the Philippines, in an intensive 250 hour, ten week program. I share my reactions to this experience with you below.
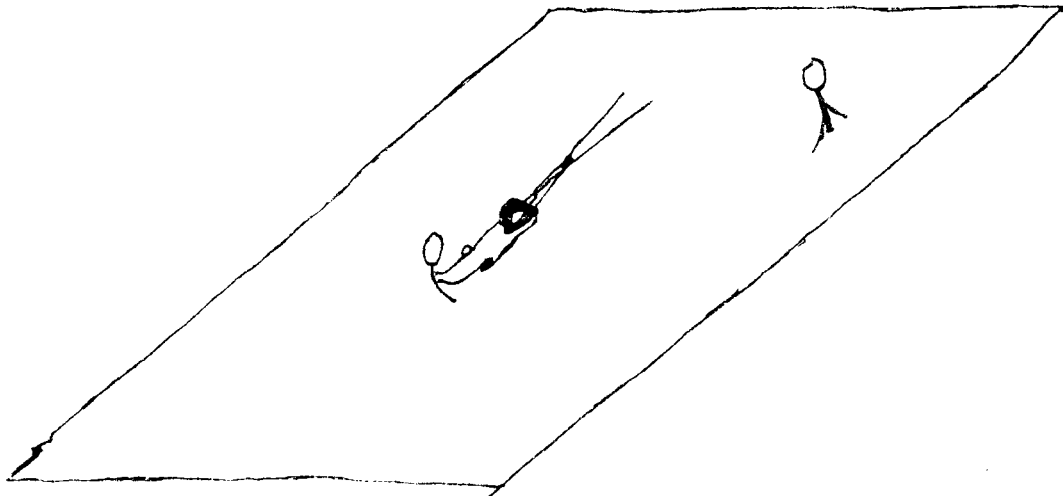
The Experience

I was one of two students in the intensive language program. The other student was/is most compatible. She is a professional ESL teacher and my wife. We had two teachers who evenly divided the day. Though both were native speakers and experienced Tagalog teachers, they could not have been more different.

One teacher moved rapidly to expose us to Tagalog. From the second day onward, minimal English was used in her class; meaning was to be derived from context. Comprehension of the Tagalog message was to be shown using the traditional method of verbal response in the target language, not through physical responses as in James Asher's Total Physical Response approach (Asher, 1969) or through picture or object identification (Postovsky, 1975). This was difficult and not much fun. On the fifth day of the class, after twenty hours of focusing upon the

language of description and the function of asking for and giving factual information, the teacher introduced 50 verbs and three major tenses-present, past and future along with the imperative mood. While my wife dispaired, I marvelled at the teacher's sense of daring and her obvious confidence that we were up to the task. Within days, however, I realized that this teacher had taken us out into the sea of Tagalog without us knowing how to swim; and we thrashed and struggled, crying "Help!"

Happily the other teacher was there to institute a rescue. She hauled us ashore using our native language as a life saver, and the renewed element of understanding helped to bring back our confidence. She took us out of the Tagalog sea and put us into a shallow pool. While we ventured forth with dialogs and formulaic language for floaters, we were never far from the securing pool deck where English was spoken. Heavily controlled language activities gave way to open-ended exchanges in the target language. Feelings were tapped as the teacher elicited single word or phrasal responses as we talked in Tagalog about ourselves and our values.

While 250 hours of instruction was not enough to make marathon swimmers out of us, my wife and I did venture again into the Tagalog sea; and we kept afloat. Granted there were waves, but we swam and we felt good--about ourselves, the language experience, and the teacher.

What this teacher had done was to take us through some of the stages of learning which Charles Curren discussed in connection with Counselling-Learning (Curren, 1976 : 136-137). At the stage which Curren labels "birth", the teacher provided complete support through formulaic language and structured dialogs as we attempted to use new Tagalog words in short phrases and sentences. With "childhood", as we ventured forth, constructing longer, original sentences in Tagalog, she provided structured activities but allowed us to experiment in expressing our own thoughts. As a mother takes care to prevent a young child from exploring areas where he might get hurt, our teacher controlled the situation surrounding communication activities so that our errors would not hurt our motivation.

We did not reach Curren's stage of "adolescence" in language acquisition--where the learner has considerable knowledge of the target language but not full control over it. Had we done so, our superior teacher would most probably have given us the necessary feedback through her active listening and understanding for us to grow in independence both in using Tagalog and in monitoring our own performance. With further study, we could have moved to the stage of "maturity" in which independent communication is possible.

Our Needs as Language Learners

The Tagalog experience put into clearer perspective the personal needs we shared as language learners. The divergent teaching styles of our two teachers and our personal response to them (we eventually dropped the first teacher and studied exclusively under the second) emphasized how important it is to meet those needs if language learning is to be a successful classroom experience. I do not think these needs were uniquely our own.

Above all, what we needed was our teachers' acknowledgment of our personal competence. As adults fully capable of clear expression in our native language, we needed their recognition of our personal worth as we struggled with the new language.

We also needed security—knowledge that we would not be asked to do something in the target language that we could not do. We needed the confidence to know that sufficient support would be given psychologically, structurally, or with vocabulary and paralinguistic aids when we moved into new areas of communication.

More surprisingly, we needed to experience the language in its totality. To simply converse in the language was intellectually unsatisfying and occasionally frustrating. Spoken errors and faulty listening comprehension raised self doubts about our personal competence. But we found we could understand those same (spoken) sentences when they were put into writing and sufficient time was given to us to decode the text. Enacting a dialog could be ego damaging because we could not produce the stream of sounds correctly, whereas we could feel success if asked to complete a partial dialog in writing. We needed to deal with the target language across the four skill areas.

Most powerfully, we needed to feel successful even though our knowledge of Tagalog was fragmentary and our performance error-ridden. We felt success when we could repeat a language activity which had earlier been impossible ; and we felt success when our teacher understood original observations we made in Tagalog (though the words and grammatical structures were ill chosen or wrongly formed—as we would realize later).

If we consider these needs from the perspective of the foreign language teacher, we can construct a set of teacher guidelines that might enhance the language learning experience for some students, or even salvage it for a great many others. The eight points which I have listed below are basically common sense factors. But in the drama of teaching a foreign language to students who are sinking, not swimming, in the foreign language sea, common sense may disipate and panic set in. Before that point is reached, teachers may wish to map out their teaching approach, using these guidelines as an aid.

In the discussion that follows, I have considered the "why" behind each guideline. What I have left for the teacher to do is to consider the "how".

Guidelines for the Foreign Language Teacher

1. Draw upon the students' background and intelligence.

In doing this, a teacher minimizes students' weaknesses by putting positive focus upon their strengths. Students come into the foreign language classroom with a knowledge of the world. That world may be only as large as a village, but it may reflect the whole range of human behavior. Teachers should draw upon this as they look at ideas in the new language.

In beginning level reading or listening activities, students can draw from their own knowledge of the world to predict possible outcomes. When attention is focused upon probable meaning and not form, students can make intelligent guesses about the topic and the development of ideas contained in the text or recorded on an audio cassette. They can also draw upon this knowledge in planning an improvisation or role play activity.

2. Create a secure learning environment.

Students are no different from anyone in requiring a secure environment for performing their best. If an environment is intimidating, whether it is one's home, one's church, one's place of work, one's pub or coffee house, the individual will withdraw—in body, in mind, or in spirit. If the language classroom is not secure—if the students feel they might be embarrassed in some way or that the class may go into a new and unpredictable direction—students may tune out. Teachers, who create a trusting relationship with each student and between each student make learner drop-out or attention tune-out less likely. The humanistic activities of Gertrude Moskowitz and the Counselling/Learning approach of Curren provide an excellent means for creating a classroom environment where students feel secure.

3. Be selective in presenting new language materials.

A learner's feeling of security can be enhanced if a language program has a proper syllabus design. Most new students cannot simply plunge into a foreign language. Teachers should be selective in their presentation and sequencing of language acts and features to give students a sample of language which they can control. Selectivity can be on the basis of structure, function, theme or register, or a combination of these features ; but the language sample to which the student is exposed should be restrictive enough to allow for comprehension and whatever degree of productive language use the course designer has set as a behavioral goal for the students. Too broad a range of structures, vocabulary, functions, or themes may overwhelm students and convey the message that they are not competent.

4. Allow time for reflection.

Reflection time gives students a chance to think. The pace has slackened, the teacher is putting no pressure upon students for rapid response. During this reflection time, students can consider the foreign language from whatever perspective they wish.

The importance of this time for reflection was emphasized to me when, during a reading session in my Tagalog class, my teacher gave me a newspaper article to read for understanding. Some vocabulary help was given at the bottom of the xeroxed page ; but after one reading, I felt I didn't understand a thing. I looked at my teacher, but she made no response. She simply looked serene. Not wanting to interrupt serenity, I returned to the news clipping and found I could understand some chunks of the selection. I recognized that some words had in their roots, words which I knew; and portions of the article became clear to me. I looked up again but my teacher was still serene ; and I returned for a wrap up consideration of the text. My teacher then asked me (in Tagalog) what the article was about, and I summarized it (in Tagalog) for her. Reflection time gave me the chance to succeed—not just to feel successful, but to be successful. Teachers too mindful of the clock or the pressures of a cluttered syllabus may rush students from one failed language activity to another, never realizing that quiet time may be all that a student needs in order to understand a language activity. This quiet time can be far more effective than teacher talk.

5. Allow for repetition of activities.

Some activities can be extremely difficult for students. Teachers guide them through the activity—be it reading or listening comprehension, a role play, or a drill—but the students have had a hard time. They have not enjoyed themselves. Then they move to another activity where different problems arise. In their rush to cover material, teachers may again be hurrying their students from one frustration to another; they are not giving the students a chance to master any single communication activity.

Repetition like reflection gives students the chance to feel success and to realize their personal competence. If an activity is going to be repeated, it should come at a long enough interval afterwards so that the unpleasant associations are in the background ; but it should not be repeated so much later that the learners can not apply what they remember from that earlier, difficult time.

I have found as a language learner and as a language teacher that new ideas or interpretations arise during a repetition of an activity. And if repetition of activities is built into the lesson plans, teachers do not have to exploit every relevant point in that activity upon its first presentation. Let the students deal with a limited aspect of the activity and then let it be fully exploited the second or third time that it is dealt with in class.

6. Recycle information in new formats.

As a Tagalog learner, I found it difficult to remember vocabulary items even though one teacher used them repeatedly in speech and forced me to use them in translations. However, I learned these words effortlessly when I saw them in context with new ideas or situations in a reading passage which the other teacher brought into class. The words not only became a part of my receptive vocabulary, but also were retained in my long term memory so I could use them in speech.

Similarly listening and writing activities clarified new structures and functions which had remained problematic when only oral practice was being given to these forms. Exploiting language within a new skill area gives a broader focus to the trouble spots and helps to clarify meaning and use.

While teachers and students may have a particular interest in one language skill——speaking, reading, listening, or writing——teachers can enhance their students understanding by expanding the linguistic environment, exploiting language in both its spoken and written mediums.

7. Promote meaningful language exchange through self expression.

The language classes I enjoyed most were those in which I could express my own ideas or my own interpretation of someone else's material. It mattered little whether I was reacting cognitively to an article or a story I had read or performing a dialog with stress and intonation patterns carrying the meaning I wished to express. If I could put some part of myself into the foreign language material, that material came alive. At the elementary level students can be asked to give dramatic interpretations of dialogs, manipulating pitch, loudness of voice, or using gestures. This kind of activity can be highly motivating and the language which the student uses in these activities, seems to be more effectively retained. The humanistic activities of Moskowitz can also be utilized in promoting self expression and the sharing of emotion and attitudes by one language learner with the community of learners.

8. Identify language errors at an appropriate time.

To draw for one last time from my Tagalog experience : my wife attempted an original Tagalog statement on day two of the class. She employed the vocabulary and structures we had studied the previous day. The teacher heard the response and, with a frown, asked what she was trying to say. The teacher gave the correct form to my wife and demoralized her for the rest of the period. The teacher had chosen the worse possible time to correct the error. While her student was trying to communicate original ideas in the target language, the teacher was unconsciously conveying the idea "Speak the language correctly or don't speak it at all." My wife chose the second alternative.

There was never a time during the ten week Tagalog class when either my wife or I appreciated error correction when we were involved in creative conversation. Those corrections interrupted our thought processes and inhibited further conversation. When corrections were made after a communication act had been completed, there was more likelihood that we would cognitively take note of the error--though still continue to make it in subsequent free conversations. Cognitive grasp of language errors was also possible when corrections were made during short oral drills and sentence translation (native to target language).

We also welcomed written activities that were later corrected for form and content ; but when we wrote a paragraph or an essay, we preferred teacher comments which focused upon our ideas, relegating the mistakes of form or mechanics to the background. When errors obscure communication, they should be corrected. If meaning gets across though the form is incorrect, the basic goal of communication has been achieved and intervention by the teacher is unnecessary.

Conclusion

Each of these guidelines, in some form, allows for the competence of the learner to be affirmed by the teacher. Foreign language learners are daring, self-effacing individuals. Communicatively competent in their native language, they risk their personal self-esteem in trying to communicate ideas within a new system. It is the teacher's ultimate responsibility to see that the students proceed with confidence toward achieving their language goals.

The Author

Thomas J. Kral is the East Asia Regional English Teaching Officer for the United States Information Agency. He holds a Ph.D. in English Education from the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign. His teaching experience includes Thailand, Turkey, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Romania, Philippines, and Australia in addition to the United States. In his current role he conducts teacher training workshops for secondary and university level teachers of English in countries throughout East Asia.

References

Asher, J.J. (1969). The total physical response approach to second language teaching. *The Modern Language Journal, 53*, 3-17.

Curren, C.A. (1976). *Counselling-learning in second languages.* Apple River, Illinois : Apple River Press.

Krashen, S. D., & Terrell, T.D. (1983). *The natural approach : language acquisition in the classroom.* San Francisco, California : The Alemany Press.

Moskowitz, G. (1978). *Caring and sharing in the foreign language classroom : a source-book on humanistic techniques.* Rowley, Massachusetts : Newbury House.

Postovsky, V. (1975). The priority of aural comprehension in the language acquisition process. In H. Winitz, Harris (Ed.), *The comprehensive approach to foreign language instruction.* (1981). Rowley, Massachusetts : Newbury House.