A Leap of Faith : From the Academic World to the Real World in Three Easy Steps

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From the Academic World to the Real World
in Three Easy Steps

Jan STEWART

Introduction

If we know how to speak a language, asks the philosopher, why study language? A good question. Conjugations of verbs, declensions of nouns, subjects and predicates, phrases and clauses   all of these seem to be man-made complements to our natural ability to communicate orally. Or are they?

Consider the chicken-and-egg dilemma. Do we devise a grammar in order to better understand our own linguistic behavior, or do we devise a grammar in order to regulate our behavior? This leads us to question whether a grammar should be descriptive or prescriptive in essence.

In this paper I will give an overview of methodologies used during the modern period. Then I will discuss the various stages of language acquisition, giving suggestions pertaining to the types of exercises that may benefit learners at each of the various stages. Next I will state the goals of various language-teaching institutions, giving suggestions as to the type of methodology that would best meet their needs. After that I will examine two commercial e-learning courses intended for adults, demonstrating how static sentences can be adapted to particular, real-life situations and modified in order that they may achieve true communication. I will conclude by calling for a comprehensive change in the language teaching profession, a change which takes into account the needs of individuals, institutions, and society, to replace the current methods-based system.

Overview of Methodology

In the modern period, Ferdinand de Saussure's Audio-Lingual Method (ALM) provided us with a means of teaching foreign languages, following Skinner's stimulus-response-reinforcement (S-R-R) model of psychology. The so-called "behaviorists" believed that the variability of human conduct was due to the complex human nervous system, which responded according to patterns of similar stimuli. They considered language to be the result of numerous cause and effect sequences, developed by stimulus, response and reinforcement. In this schema, the speaker's situation was the most likely stimulus for producing a statement, because the speaker could observe events within his situation and respond to them in predictable ways.

The difficulties encountered in the behaviorist approach led to the development of another school of thought, stemming from the work of Zellig Harris. Harris developed the notion of expansions and transformations to enable sentences to fit different situations. An expansion involves the change of a sentence, for example, "John worked" becomes "The King of England opened Parliament." A transformation is a restatement of an idea, expressed as affirmative, negative, interrogative, passive, imperative, etc. Harris's student, Noam Chomsky, realizing that the behaviorist model was unable to account for certain classes of data, sought to explain the exceptions therein by developing a new theory. In doing so, he hoped to combine in a single principle those characteristics of language which had previously required multiple explanations.

Chomsky's concept of the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) matched performance with competence. Competence referred to "the ability of the idealized speaker-hearer to associate sounds and meanings strictly in accordance with the rules of his language." The system of rules of a language included three major components: the syntactic, phonological, and semantic components. The central idea of Chomsky's grammar was that the syntactic component contained a *transformational* sub-component which repeatedly acted upon a deep structure that determined semantic interpretation to produce a surface structure that determined phonological interpretation. Unlike the behaviorist model, deep structure in the transformational model could not be observed; observation becomes possible only after the transformation has been completed and the surface structure has been realized.

Jerome Bruner later suggested that the LAD must be supported by a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), but is this anything more than the S-...-R of Skinner's S-R-R model? All language learning and acquisition takes place within a social environment, as demonstrated (negatively, via the absence of social contact, which effects an absence of language) by the experience of feral children such as Genie.

In the 1970s Henry Widdowson introduced "communicative" language teaching, which has now become a buzzword. This is often confused with a right-brain approach (see below), but in fact Widdowson's approach followed a logical paradigm, a reaction, perhaps, to the preponderance of rote memorization and drills that the ALM inspired. His basic tenet was that we do not communicate by composing sentences, but rather, we compose sentences in order to communicate (Widdowson, 1972: 15-19).

Widdowson (1978: 8) disparaged techniques for demonstrating grammatical forms by "situational presentation," that is, where the teacher walks to the door and says, "I am walking to the door." This situation is readily evident to all who are watching and does not call for comment. Instead he suggests a statement containing meaningful communication, e.g. (at a party), "I am going to the kitchen to see if the dinner's ready." This would call into question, however, the extent to which meaningful language can be taught in a formal classroom situation. Widdowson suggests (1978: 16) that school curriculum content, part of the students' "real world," might serve as a viable alternative.

Pressure in liquids depends on depth. Point A lies deeper below the surface than Point B. Therefore the pressure at Point A is greater than the pressure at Point B (Widdowson, 1978: 135).

In the 1980s Stephen Krashen theorized that adults use subconscious language *acquisition* as well as conscious language *learning* to develop second-language skills. Learning requires explicit rules and error correction. Acquisition, which is similar to the way in which a child learns a first language, requires the speaker to focus upon the meaning which is communicated, not upon the form of the statements. In itself this should have served to jolt the language teaching profession out of its dependence on Chomsky's cognitivism. However, it came to be widely associated with the "communicative" teaching craze. The result was that the affective domain (utilizing the right-brain) assumed pre-eminence, and little or nothing was learned.

Krashen's "i+1" seems very logical, but in reality the concept quickly becomes self-defeating. "i+1" suggests that acquisition takes place when the acquirer understands language that is "a little beyond" his current level of competence (Krashen, 1981: 103). Krashen proposed that the type of input that was best for acquisition was directed toward the individual, relevant to the student's immediate environment, having similar qualities to "caretaker speech." Not to mention the difficulties of actuating such individualized instruction in large classes, at a very early stage in second language learning it becomes impossible to determine individual learners' "i+1" level due to the uncertainties of the amount and the quality of input received outside the classroom. Krashen himself later modified his theory, eventually focusing on "extensive reading" as a means of providing plentiful input. He suggested using materials that "engage the learner" in order to provide relevant, meaningful information.

I purport that the LAD remains open to some extent throughout life, and that it should be divided into natural stages rather than artificial "distinctions." The first stage, Language Acquisition, takes place during Chomsky's LAD period, from about twelve months to twelve years of age. The second stage, the Language Acquisition Modification Period (LAMP) occurs during adolescence, from about age 12 to 21. In adulthood the learner enters the Selective Use and Enhancement or Disuse and Entropy (SUEDE) stage. Finally, Old-Age Regression (OAR) leads the learner to the last days of life, when other lessons must be learned. However this period tends to spark memories which may lead to a renewed interest in language learning.

The Stages of Language Acquisition

1. Language Acquisition Device

Different organisms develop their cognitive characteristics according to genetically programmed schedules that are unique to each species. Cats, for example, if exposed between the ages of three weeks to three months to a room painted with vertical stripes, will be able to avoid the legs of a table successfully, but will fall off the horizontal plane of the same table. However if a cat is exposed during the same period to a room painted with horizontal stripes, it will be able to jump off the table and land on the floor, but it will bump into the legs of the table while walking.

Similarly, human beings have the LAD. We acquire the ability to speak our native language between the

ages of twelve months and twelve years. However, conscious learning also takes place during this period: children begin formal instruction in reading and writing at about 6 years of age. In Japan, children begin "yo-chien" instruction at about three years of age; this may be supplemented by language school instruction.

During this period elementary school children memorize arithmetic times tables, among other things. Children learning a foreign language may benefit from exercises such as memorizing "Times Tables," e.g., *Today I speak, Yesterday I spoke, Tomorrow I will speak*; "Phrase Practice," e.g. *Over the mountain, through the woods to Grandmother's house I go*; "Verb-Object Drills," e.g., *Catch the ball, Walk the dog, Read the book*, etc.

2. Language Acquisition Modification Period

Our command of language is by no means completed during the LAD period. The childhood acquisition stage enables us to communicate spontaneously, but as adults we need to constantly "monitor" speech production (using Krashen's term) to deal with the complexities of the real world.

During the period from age twelve to age twenty-one we take secondary and tertiary academic courses, replete with classifications and grammars. In these courses we consciously modify (mostly in writing) language that was acquired aurally during childhood. In Japan and Korea, cram schools offer test-preparation courses. Because of the intense memorization involved during high school, many people believe that university courses should allow the students a kind of "second-childhood" experience that motivates by means of games and role plays.

3. Selective Use and Enhancement or Disuse and Entropy

Adults no longer need credits to graduate from university, so they put language to use according to the demands of their workplace or other lifestyle requirements. If there are no such demands, language falls into disuse and forgetting replaces learning. If they do need to enhance their language skills they may do so by attending a language school or by embarking on a self-study course.

Here a major needs analysis study, carried out by business and industry, would be helpful. (A study of this type has already been done by our local national university.) Why do people need to read, write, speak or listen to English in Japan? A few reasons might be to read or write technical manuals or business letters, deliver sales pitches, interact at conventions, to negotiate contracts for services or purchases, to supervise employees, to read scientific journals, to understand news reports, to take responsibility. These and other specific purposes may serve to motivate students to engage in lifelong learning (ESP).

Older people usually have a different way of speaking than young people. Is this because we speak differently in maturity, or is it merely a result of the (double) generation gap? My guess is that both factors come into play.

It is important for foreign-language speakers to update their pronunciation periodically. All too often I

encounter middle-aged professors who still speak English like graduate students. These people need to take a sabbatical and re-experience spoken native English among their colleagues, who have also aged thirty years. Language that may have been appropriate for people in their mid-twenties is no longer acceptable for people in their forties and fifties.

4. Old Age Regression

In addition to professionals, there is a broad category of "silver" learners who may have studied English once upon a time, but whose careers led them into the "disuse and entropy" category. Now retired, they have time to pursue interests which include language study. Most language schools tend to cater to a younger audience, leaving older learners with no means of improving themselves. Surely this group forms a large part of the target audience of electronic self-study courses "as seen on TV." In the section that follows I will discuss two of those courses and make suggestions about how to put such courses to practical use.

At various times during the first stage of language acquisition (LAD), children experience mass education (preschool, kindergarten, elementary 1-6). They may also attend motivational classes at a private language school. During the adolescent period (LAMP), young learners attend secondary and tertiary mass education courses, supplemented by cram schools and/or conversational language schools. In adulthood, options are limited to conversational courses, continuing education, on-the-job training, or self-study courses. For retirees the options are even further limited, self-study being the only course available.

The Goals of Education

The goals of mass education, according to the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [Japan] are "to foster the qualities and abilities necessary to acquire steadily the rudimentary basics of education, such as reading, writing and arithmetic, and to learn, think and act for oneself as well as develop problem-solving skills... to ensure that children can actively engage in educational activities that offer individual instruction, review instruction, and hands-on, problem-solving learning, and making other improvements..." (http://www.mext.go.jp/English/org/struct/014.htm)

Often the public schools are so busy managing pupils' personal and social adjustment that they have no time left for academics. To fill this gap various cram schools provide after school and evening courses whose explicit goals are to prepare pupils for high school or university entrance exams.

Language schools provide instruction for students of all ages, kindergarten through adult. Their goal is to keep students enrolled as long as possible. They prey on the confusion in mass education over methodology and attempt to fill the gap between intense study for test preparation and "communicative" language use.

Self-study courses aim primarily at an adult audience, offering instruction that is unavailable at language

schools (or instruction to students who do not wish to attend language schools).

Three Easy Steps

Andres Segovia, the legendary classical guitarist, said that playing the guitar is like learning to tie your shoes: you practice over and over again until you can do it without thinking about it. This seems to be what Krashen was aiming at with his right-brain language acquisition model. But no one ever learned to tie his shoes subconsciously, by acquisition, as Krashen would suggest. It is a conscious, step-by-step process, requiring frequent conscious repetition over a long period of time.

Slip-on shoes are very popular these days. Perhaps this explains the phenomenon of e-learning programs that offer "slip-on" language learning, with questionable results. We have all seen the TV ad in which a translation stone drops out of the sky and teaches a jogger "English conversation." A man in the ad praises the program's abilities to teach "communicative" language, but what communicates in sentences like "The sky is blue," "It's a sunny day," or "The ball is rolling"? (See Appendix for a complete list.) The models of language to be learned in these courses often contain static information, not relevant, meaningful communication. The only communication is that of a transfer of wealth from your bank account to theirs. If you are inclined to purchase this course, however, here are some practical tips on how to convert this static information to meaningful communication.

1. Denied Expectations.

<div align="center">The sky is blue.   The sky is orange.</div>

As an academic exercise, describing a scene is perfectly acceptable. What better way to test vocabulary than to have a student tell what is happening in a picture? Hence the frequent use of such questions in tests like *Eiken*, where the candidate is shown a picture and asked to describe the activities of several persons in the scene.

As handy an exercise as that may be, it does not overcome the basic obstacle that we have in achieving communication: no one actually talks that way. Instead, when it comes to describing a scene, we usually make some remark when our expectations *have failed*. The present active indicative, "The sky is blue," fails to communicate. It is redundant. It does not merit comment. Our reply, if any, would be, "So what? Everybody knows that."

In order to achieve effective, meaningful communication, one would have to comment on a condition or situation which lies *outside* of our expectations. For example, "The sky is orange" could indicate a coming storm, or the fact that the speakers are now in the eye of a hurricane.

I remember (long, long ago) taking a ferry from Dover to Antwerp. The weather was miserable; it rained the entire time. I dreaded the following day when I would have to brave the elements to continue my adven-

ture. However, the next morning I overheard several Malaysian tourists exclaiming, "It shines!" Their simplistic expression, given the situation, achieved meaningful, relevant communication. "The sky is blue" would not have been accurate, as the blue sky only occasionally peeked through the clouds. Neither was it a sunny day. The reality was, as they had succinctly expressed, that it had stopped raining.

2. Time and Space Relativism.

<center>It's a sunny day.   How's the weather?</center>

On a recent TV variety show, Thane Camus interviewed young people on the streets of Tokyo to determine how well they spoke English. He came up empty-handed. No one was able to respond to simple questions such as "How's the weather?" Perhaps he should have posed his question in a time-and-space framework. Let me give an example.

If you utter a statement such as "I met my friends," it has no gravity to bind it to a particular situation. Of course you met your friends. If you hadn't met them, you would not be friends (unless you were "e-pals," which could make your meeting them in person a dangerous proposition). If you said, "I met my friends at the Hachiko this afternoon, and we had tea," it would convey a much more down-to-earth message. Stating whether it was a sunny day, a cloudy day, or a rainy day would have further colored the conversation, leading to a possible mention of the choice of tea rooms, art galleries, shops, movies, parks, etc.. By itself, however, the statement "I met my friends" has no relevance to anything.

I happened to be browsing in the wine section of an upscale supermarket one day when a man who wanted to "try out his English on me" came over and asked, "How's the weather?" Well, I couldn't see out the window at the moment, and I was a bit put off at his affront, so I walked away. Rather he had asked, "How's the weather in France this year?" By fixing the time and the place, he could have offered some communication that was meaningful in that situation. The weather in France directly affects the quality of the wine. Ironically in 2005 (a year of major flooding in France), wine vendors in Japan boasted of the quality of the Beaujolais, a wine noted for its flavor during dry seasons. Japan had become the dumping ground for an entire harvest of otherwise unsellable French wine.

3. Static to Flux.

<center>The ball is rolling.   Widdowson got the ball rolling.</center>

Why would anyone say, "The ball is rolling"? A sports announcer describing a golf tournament might say something like that during a suspenseful moment, though he would more than likely include a preposition of direction   "toward / away from the hole." Indiana Jones, having set off a booby trap in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, wouldn't have time to comment. His situation would require action, not words. The sentence is grammatical, it exists as one of the millions of possible combinations of words in the English language, but it falls short of the mark of any conceivable act of real communication. It is a static statement with nothing but

pedagogical value. Let's not dismiss it as entirely useless, however. With only minor modifications, we can change this sentence to something meaningful: "Widdowson got the ball rolling."

Here, meaning is conveyed. Widdowson started something and everyone changed their ways of thinking as a result. Idiomatic, yes; static, no.

Besides the translation stone method, a competing TV commercial advertises a "rapid" e-learning program. At first blush, this seems to be a better approach. The ad gives an overview of the left-brain / right-brain difference, theorizing that the accompanying images (as well as music by Vivaldi and Pachelbel) will help customers learn more rapidly. Satisfied users tell us that you can think in Japanese and convert this to English. It's all in your head. If you can see the images, you can speak English.

A golf pro in the ad claims that somehow this program helps you in international golf tournaments. (Who speaks English on a golf course, anyway? The atmosphere at golf tournaments is hushed.) It would have been more meaningful to enlist the endorsement of a major league baseball catcher (for example, the catcher for the Seattle Mariners), who frequently has to conduct catcher-pitcher conversations at the mound, e. g., *You just walked in a run*. *Oh, sorry. Try to get it over the plate for a change*.

As in the translation stone commercial, in the rapid learning ad we see a meaningless, irrelevant example of a "native speaker" pronouncing the word "water" (perhaps relevant on golf courses). Rather the ad had promised customers that they would be able to distinguish between "water" and "hotter," or better yet, between "sand" and "sando," or between "four balls" and "foul ball." Simply hearing the word "water" in a contextual vacuum does not communicate.

Conclusion

It is a strategy of the language teaching industry to keep learners forever at the beginning level, with constant hopes of one day communicating. Students are led to believe that if they "acquire" enough language, they will one day step over that threshold, as if some form of enlightenment will visit them. They come back to the language school month after month, year after year, but nothing ever happens. They buy the DVDs. The industry prospers. For these commercial endeavors, the "communicative" method, utilizing right-brain psychology (acquisition), is probably best. It ensures long-term, perpetual enrollment.

Secondary schools, on the other hand, have a limited time frame in which to teach a seemingly impossible corpus. Frustrated by the fact that students aren't learning anything by the "acquisition" method, the schools will soon go back to a system of rote memorization. This will enable students to pass tests, but unless they are shown how to convert their memorized language into real-life language, they still won't be able to communicate. The chicken-or-egg dilemma persists. The ALM seems appropriate for these institutions.

"Four balls," in Japanese English, is *a walk*, or *to walk*, in standard English. "To walk in a run" occurs when the bases are loaded, the pitcher walks the batter, and the runner at third base scores a run.

(Secondary students don't need materials that "engage" them   they need to "go steady" before getting engaged.)

Back to our original philosophical question, if we speak a language, why do we study language? We study language in order to better speak that language. We compose sentences in order to communicate more effectively. "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (I Cor. 13.11). The language that we speak as adults, though rooted in the language we learned as children, is not exactly the same. It is refined, sophisticated. Sophisticated means taught, learned, studied. By studying language, we build upon the foundation of childhood language. This enables us to communicate as adults.

Up until now there has been no effort made to tailor teaching methods to the age of the language learner as well as to the goals of the teaching institution. Instead we have seen a series of headlong rushes by the entire profession from one extreme in methodology to the other. When one teaching method favors the goals of any particular institution, it would make sense for that institution to stick with that method, regardless of a shift in popularity toward the opposite extreme. Likewise, individuals have different needs as they move through the various stages of language learning ability. It would make more sense for them to seek institutions whose methods meet their needs. However, the beneficiaries of these various methodologies cannot be expected to make informed decisions by themselves. They are more or less at the mercy of the language teaching profession. Some members of the profession may lack scruples where money and other factors figure into the equation. It is time for an overall, top-down language planning program that takes into account the age of individuals as well as the goals of institutions in order to provide efficient education that will meet the needs of society.

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Appendix

Rosetta World Ad (complete):

The boy is giving his girlfriend flowers.

The family is having a picnic.

The man is reading a book.

They are playing with a beach ball.

The girl is eating.	Do you have a dog?
It's a sunny day!	Beautiful bridge!
That is a big tree!	The sky is blue.
They are speaking.	We are walking.
The dog is running.	The grass is green.
The ball is rolling.	It's a new world.

Speed Learning sample conversation:

    A: Where is the subway station?

    B: Take a right out the front door. It's only two blocks over.

    A: Okay.