

Some Observations on the Intensive English Program Conducted by the English Center for International Women, at Mills College, Oakland, California

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Foreword

A group of thirty-one students of Nagoya Women's College participated in the intensive English program conducted by the English Center for International Women (ECIW), attached to Mills College, during the period between February 19th and March 10th, 1985. I had a chance to attend Miss Dorothy Isaacson's class as another student of the group.

The following are some of my observations on her teaching, which is characteristic of the ECIW program, and also on teaching and learning a foreign language in general.

At the close of this foreword, I would like to express my hearty thanks to three professors of our college who were kind enough to read this paper carefully and give me valuable suggestions and comments: Richard A. Aylward, Ronald P. Abbott and Anthony P. Hughes.

When we are exposed to an entirely new way of life in a foreign country, everything claims our immediate and equal attention and we are often puzzled as to which are the more important factors or the most important one contributing to form a particular situation which confronts us.

In contrast to this difficulty in which we find ourselves, the native speakers who live there seem to have in common, a frame of reference or a kind of pattern or system in which any event or problem they come across in their daily life can be almost automatically placed in its proper position and be solved immediately in relation to the other positions or the whole. This kind of pattern may be conveniently called a "social" or "cultural" pattern¹⁾, because it is shared by all the members who constitute or have constituted a particular, limited speech community and this can be compared with the common, linguistic pattern which is represented by "pattern practice" in language teaching.

We all know that in order to learn a foreign language we should make use of not only linguistic patterns, but also social or cultural patterns. The true importance of the latter, however, does not become real to a language learner, until he is forced into a quite unfamiliar environment that appears to reject all his favorite ways of observing and analyzing. Let me use two examples from my own experience in order to explore this problem further.

In Dorothy's class the word "across" was introduced in contrast to "on this side of" and

there was considerable classroom practice, including the use of illustration, sentence patterns and conversation between two students. For example, a dialogue such as: “Excuse me, would you tell me the way to the bus stop (library, hospital, bakery, etc.)?” “Certainly. Go straight on till you come to a bank *on this side of* the street. The bus stop is just *across* the street.” The emphasis of the morning class was on the use of either of these two expressions according to the relative positions of different buildings illustrated on the blackboard and a particular building pointed to by the teacher as the place we were going to.

So far so good. In the afternoon we made a field trip to San Francisco and on our way back we took the BART train for the first time. Getting off at Berkeley Station we had to look for the right bus that would take us safely back home, which was one of the objectives of the field trip.

We searched for the bus stop that was to be found *across* the station street. To our confusion, we found three different bus stops across the street and one more on the same side of the station. (When we are upset, something that is definitely to be ignored does come into our consideration as a possibility!) After asking several persons, who answered differently, and checking the directions indicated on the small board posted near each bus stop, we finally managed to find the correct bus stop.

Through this hardship we learned that while in the classroom the focus of teaching was on the use of the word “across” (in relation to “on this side of”), in a real situation where we are always under the pressure of the circumstances, the emphasis must be shifted from that word to the search for the right bus stop.

We learned that the choice or identification of the right bus stop among possible alternatives leads to a recognition that there is a system or network of bus operations which radiates from Berkeley Station, as its base and which runs in a definite number of definite directions. To know which bus goes to the Alameda (where I was staying) is to relate a particular item [bus] to the whole (social) pattern [network of buses] which regulates every occurrence of its component items (arrival and departure of every bus on its own timetable)². It is noticeable that this relationship is socially established (between the bus company and passengers).

To a complete stranger it might well seem as if so many different buses were going in so many different directions and such a person had to learn each and every relationship between a particular bus and its particular direction or route. To the native speakers who live in that community, however, the whole system of bus operations is so familiar that they hardly notice the existence of such a social pattern in their daily lives. All that they may become aware of is the connection between a particular bus and a particular bus stop according to a particular purpose they may have in using the bus, and even this connection is almost always unconsciously made.

We found that when we learn a foreign language, just as in the case of utilizing a bus, we should learn or “overlearn” (learn over and over again) both linguistic and social patterns until we are able to use them almost automatically without being worried about

the analysis of these systems or the relationships which constitute each system³⁾.

When I came across a certain sentence in the *Indians of the San Francisco Bay Area*, p.4 (a textbook edited by ECIW), I could understand it literally, but not satisfactorily. The sentence is as follows :

“They [The Indians] mixed the meal (made of ground acorns) with water and cooked it in baskets by dropping hot stones into the basket.”

My trouble was with the word “baskets”. According to the Japanese way of thinking, a basket is primarily made of bamboo and it is woven so roughly that a lot of open spaces or holes remain among the interwoven bamboo. How can a basket hold water or meal mixed with water? No dictionary helped me solve the question. The Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary tells nothing about any distinctive feature of an American Indian basket. It says only about the word : (a) a container made of interwoven osiers, rushes, splints, or other flexible material (b) any of various lightweight usually wood containers. The answer was found in the Oakland Museum we visited that afternoon. For the first time I saw an Indian basket displayed there and it was so closely interwoven that it had no space left between the interwoven rushes ; it seemed to keep any liquid from leaking through it.

This example indicates that the real meaning of a word or the real object to which it refers can become definite only in a particular cultural context or pattern in which it is used or has been used. The word “basket” is just one of these items that show a cultural difference between the American Indian and the Japanese way of life. In passing, a brief mention should be made of a comparison between social patterns and cultural patterns which we have discussed so far. The former concerns a particular situation which involves both a speaker and listener (which, in de Saussure’s terms, belongs to *synchrony*) while the latter refers to a particular pattern of a people’s life style, present and past (which is mostly related to *diachrony*)⁴⁾.

ECIW seems to emphasize what this paper has called social patterns and cultural patterns as well as (or more than) linguistic patterns. It divides the course into two parts : a morning session in the classroom and an afternoon field trip outside the classroom. In the afternoon the students can relearn in close contact with the real, complicated situation what they learned through verbal practice in the morning. Sometimes field trips give a chance not only to review the morning lesson, but also to learn or acquire personally or heuristically the very way English as a living language is actually being used in a speech community⁵⁾. This inherent advantage cannot be enjoyed by any other successful teaching method invented and practiced in a foreign country where English is not spoken as the mother tongue.

Next, we would like to return to Dorothy’s classroom and see how English is taught there. One morning she found no student could understand the word “improvise” in the following sentences :

“A leader of the Negro workers would sing a theme and a chorus would answer him. These answers were usually comments on the leader’s theme. The answers to the theme were always *improvised*.” (*History of Jazz*, p.22. Another textbook edited by ECIW.)

Then she asked a series of the questions like these :

Is to repeat something to *improvise*?

Is to memorize the music to *improvise*?

Is to copy something to *improvise*? Is it new?

Is to make a pot out of clay to *improvise*?

Does an actor sometimes *improvise* when he forgets his words?

Being forced by a succession of these questions to think only in English, the students seemed to associate this unknown word with such words or phrases as *repeat*, *music*, *make a pot*, *something new*, *actor* and so on. Some students tried to deduce some common point from the context of these associations and get the true meaning of this word: *make something new*, *create (instantly)*. As the students gradually grew used to her way of presenting or explaining new teaching material, their understanding of English improved suddenly and remarkably. They had learned to *identify* what they heard through their ears in a certain context with the exact meaning that Dorothy intended to communicate.

Throughout this article we have emphasized the importance of identification in learning a foreign language⁶⁾. We have observed its importance in relation to three different frames of context or situation: in relation to (1) social pattern, (2) cultural context and (3) linguistic context. The last concerns a relation between a word (sound or form) and its meaning, but the first two add another, a non-speech relation, between the meaning of a word and the object it refers to, that is “referent”⁷⁾.

To most Japanese students (including the students I am teaching here) the study of English means translating or transposing English words and sentences into Japanese equivalents and vice versa. In the process of translation, a student tries to manipulate each word in a sentence in different possible word orders until the sentence becomes the most meaningful to him in terms of his mother tongue and its grammar. If his translation is rejected by the teacher, he is ready to choose the next best from his stock of alternative translations.

One of lessons the students of Nagoya Women’s College learned from the ECIW intensive course at Mills College (and also from their home stay in Berkeley and from their overseas trip itself) is that linguistically speaking, any word or sentence has *the* meaning, not meanings. They learned by their own experience that in learning English as a foreign language, they cannot be content with a series of alternative translations or meanings obtained from an original word or sentence and that instead, they should always try hard to identify any word or sentence they come across with the true meaning or referent that is only appropriate to it in a particular situation or context.

Notes

- 1) Fries, C. C. : *Teaching and learning English as a foreign language*, 57~61, University of Michigan Press (1945)

What is called “contextual orientation” in Fries’ book is analyzed into two parts in this article: social patterns and cultural patterns. Fries considers both vivid imaginative realization and contextual orientation as complementary and essential to a real description and understanding of a language.

- 2) Fries, C. C. : *The structure of English*, 60~61, 72~73, Harcourt & Brace (1952)

In this book Fries compares to a baseball game functional interrelationship between items and the whole structure they constitute.

- 3) Fries (1945) and Corder, S. P. : *Error analysis and interlanguage*, Oxford University Press (1981)

These books may be considered as representative of the two contrastive views of teaching a foreign language; one being based on empiricism while the other, on rationalism.

- 4) Saussure, F. de : *Cours de linguistique générale*, 141~192, 193~250, Payot (1916, 1948)

- 5) As an example of acquiring an English expression quite new to a foreigner, I can cite the following event. At a bus stop I said to the driver, “Does *this bus* go to Solano?” He answered “Yes.” After a while, an American came and asked the same question but in a different way of expression. He said, “Do *you* go to Solano?” The expression was too natural and too simple for a foreigner to dream of.

- 6) Bloomfield, L. : *Language*, 140, Allen & Unwin (1933, 1979)

Palmer, H. E. : *The scientific study and teaching of languages*, 49, Oxford University Press (1917, 1968)

- 7) Ogden, C. K. and I. A. Richards : *The meaning of meaning*, 10~12, Harcourt & Brace (1923, 1952¹⁰)