Back to Basics

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Introduction

A person need not be a construction engineer to know that a building depends on its foundation. A one-story bamboo hut need not have much of one, but then such a building does not last long in a rapidly-flowing flood or in a strong wind storm. It is also obvious that the bigger and taller a building is, the stronger its foundation must be. Perhaps not so obvious is the fact that learning a foreign language is exactly the same: the more that a person wants to do in a foreign language, the stronger his foundation in that language must be.

The fundamentals of language learning

If a person wants to learn and be able to use the four major skills in a foreign language well, there are three elements in the foundation of foreign language learning that he must master: the sound-symbol systems and their relationships, a basic vocabulary, and the basic sentence structures and the combinations and changes that they frequently undergo. If a learner does not have this foundation, no teaching method or approach-no matter what the name or degree of fashionableness-will enable him to go very far; his one-story bamboo hut of English will be blown away with his first real (i.e., non-classroom) contact with English.

The verb *"master"* is important. A great disservice was done to foreign language teaching when someone many years ago decided that the results of a good foreign language test would result in a standard (bell-shaped) curve.

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An exam that produces a bell-shaped curve has few students getting A or F and the majority getting C and C^+ But such a result does not indicate clearly which students *"know"* and which *"do not know"*. (By *"know"* I mean *"be able to use up to the point taught"*). The ideal results of a good foreign language test should result in two smaller bell-shaped curves, one with the apex at B^+ and the other with the apex at D-with no scores at the C or C^+ level. The ideal foreign language test would thus clearly indicate which students have learned and which have not. (Of course, if administrators and teachers are primarily interested in having as few students as possible fail, then this paper will have been a waste of time for the writer and for anyone who reads any further.)

The sound-symbol systems and their relationships

Both the audio-lingual method and the communicative approach emphasize spoken language. The Modern Languge Association's **Modern Spanish** (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., Third Edition, 1973) is a good example of materials prepared for the audio-lingual method. On page 5 (the second page of *"Useful Phrases"*) the students are asked to repeat:

Con permiso.	(Excuse me.)
Como no.	(Certainly.)

These phrases include an unaspirated **p**, an unaspirated **k** (represented by the letter **C**), and a flap **r**-all of which are problem sounds for (American) English speakers. The unaspirated stops are explained on page 12 and practiced as sounds on pages 106 and 107. The flap **r** is explained on page 14 and practiced on page 63. In the pages between the explanation and the specific practice, the students are **forced** by the materials to produce these sounds-in one way or another-hundreds, perhaps thousands, of times. Few of the textbooks that exemplify the communicative approach-the latest fashion in English teaching in Thailand-have anything that even resembles the teaching of the sound system of English. The textbooks that are fashionable now for required English courses are good examples of requiring students to speak English without in any way giving them the opportunity to learn to produce the sounds of English. In one textbook, for example, the students are forced to produce questions in Unit 1. However, question intonation is not *"taught"* until Unit 4 and the form of **do** that is used (which may be represented by **da** as in **daya** *"do you"*) is not presented until Unit 6. "Taught" is in quotation marks because the students merely listen to only 6 to 12 words and 2 to 4 sentences and then repeat those or similar words and sentences. With textbooks like these, accuracy in pronunciation is out of the question: in order to achieve it, the student would have to unlearn a great deal of mispronunciation before he is even given a chance to acquire a correct pronunciation.

Aside from the mastery of the sound system that is needed for everyday communication, a learner must have a mastery of the sound-symbol relationships in order to enjoy English poetry. The words meter, rhyme, alli-

teration, assonance, consonance, etc., are carefully taught, exemplified, and memorized by the students in a typical English literature course here in Thailand. But how many students can read a poem that has not been *"taught"* to them and enjoy the music that is involved? How many can read (without previous *"teaching"*)

> The fair breeze blew, the white foam flew,
> The furrow follows free;
> We were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.
>
> The Ancient Mariner
> S.T. Coleridge

and enjoy the internal rhyme of **blew, flew** and **first, burst;** the external rhyme of **free, sea;** and the alliteration of **fair, foam, flew,** etc., and **silent, sea ?** How many English majors-on their own-can appreciate the adagio rhythm of the first two lines contrasted with the andante rhythm of the last two lines?

Hearing the music of a lot of English poetry comes from a solid foundation in the sound-symbol systems and relationships of English, not from tens or hundreds of hours of lectures about English poetry.

Vocabulary

Although it might be possible to establish a list of fundamental words that a student must know, it is probably more important that the student learn how to learn words while laying his foundation in the foreign language.

The most important factor in learning how to learn vocabulary is that translation must be completely avoided. The use of translation to teach vocabulary leads students to believe, not only think, that a word in his own language-with its area of meaning and all its connotations-is exactly equivalent to a word in the language he is learning. With the exception, perhaps, of technical terms, nothing could be farther from the truth.

The words **table, chair,** and **desk** provide a good example of how the areas of meaning of words in English and Thai differ. In an (American) English classroom, there are only **desks** (one for the teacher and others for the students), while in a Thai classroom there are **chairs** for the students and a **table** for the teacher. The word **hand** is often taught through translation to mean *"the part of the body that is at the end of an arm."* After a student has *"learned"* this word *"hand,"* he might have difficulty in understanding the sentences

> Please give me a hand with this box.
>
> Please hand me that pencil.

More important, perhaps, for people learning English is the concept of connotation. The words **kill** and **massacre** have the denotation *"to put to death,"* but differ in connotation. Many years ago, I read on the front page of a local English-language newspaper that

"100 Blacks Killed"

"Five Whites Massacred"

Since, according to the news items, the 105 people died in more or less the same way, I could only conclude that the headline writer felt that for some reason the death of 5 Whites was in some way much worse than the death of 100 Blacks.

On the back page of that newspaper-the sports section-there might have been the headline

"Devils Massacre Angels"

The English learner who had understood the words **kill** and **massacre** on the front page might be shocked that no Devil was arrested or even reprimanded. He might be even more shocked to find out that many people in fact considered the Devils to be people of very high standing. The shock would result from the fact that the learner-already quite advanced in the use of English-had not yet learned that the connotation of a word may be applied even when there is no suggestion whatsoever that the denotation of the word is applicable. The headline above indicates that the only part of the Angels that suffered damage was their egos.

That step is necessary in the learning of how to learn vocabulary if the student wants to go on to

The rosy-fingered dawn...

and

The fog crept in on cat's paws...

If the student can see this *"dawn"* and that *"fog"* without half-an-hour's explanation (most likely in Thai) by a literature teacher, then he has a foundation in vocabulary learning that will support a skyscraper.

Structure

When I was a child, I heard Johnny Weismuller tell Maureen O'Sullivan

Me tarzan, you Jane.

If he had been the hero of some 19th-century romantic novel, he might have said something like

> I firmly believe that I have been given the name Tarzan, and I equally firmly confer upon you the appellation Jane.

(Or perhaps he might have said: *"I equally firmly believe that you have the appellation Jane."* I have not seen the movie for a long time, so I do not remember the situation or context: that is, the function of the exponent that includes the notions **you** and **Jane.**) Between these two extremes, there is a level that university graduates should attain: that is, they should understand and use effortlessly not only the basic sentence patterns of English but also the frequently-occurring ways of combining and changing those patterns.

I once saw a videotaped program in which the song *"My Darling Clementine"* was used to *"teach"* English (the fashion then was *"English through songs"*). The commentator explained words such as **cavern, canyon, excavating,** etc. and paraphrased the meaning of the song. But at no time was there any mention that the first stanza consisted of 6 or 7 basic sentences or ideas, including the following:

> A miner and his daughter lived in a cavern.
> The miner was a forty-niner.
> The daughter was Clementine.
> The cavern was in a canyon.
> The miner (and his daughter) was (were) excavating for a mine.

These basic sentences (or ideas) are combined by frequently-used and easy- to-learn means that result in the sentence

> A miner, who was a forty-niner, and his daughter, who was Clementine, lived in a cavern that was in a canyon, and he was (they were) excavating for a mine.

This sentence is then reduced by again frequently-used and easy - to-learn means to the sentence

> A miner, (a) forty- niner, and his daughter Clementine lived in a cavern in a canyon, excavating for a mine.

Finally, the complete subject and all the post- verb modifiers are interchanged to produce the stanza

> In a cavern in a canyon,
> Excavating for a mine,
> Lived a miner, (a) forty-niner,
> And his daughter Clementine.

Many of the concepts that are vital to the structure of English-definiteness/indefiniteness in articles, singularity/plurality in nouns, past/non-past tense in verb forms, and the multitude of aspect meanings in verb constructions-are either completely absent in or quite different from Thai. To think that students can absorb these concepts from a short series of communicative sentences is to believe that the moon really is made of green (or is it blue ?) cheese.

Conclusions and recommendations

I have heard administrators in several different private universities say that they wanted their graduates to be *"good in English."* I have met only one that in any way tried to make it possible for the graduates to be *"good in English"* (but several of the English instructors saw to it that no such goal was achievable). Even if the administrators were not only willing to make it possible but also even insisted that it be possible, I doubt that the majority of the faculty members would be interested-that is, more than orally interested-in producing graduates who are *"good in English."* The development of an English program that would produce students *"good in English"* would involve time but would not involve a great deal of expense or any facility that is not already available in many universities.

First, the idea of *"be good in English"* must be defined with the aid of interested administrators in as much detail as possilble in terms of objective goals that can be achieved in the classroom.

Second, the English entrance exam should be a good placement exam that divides students into three general groups: *"fair"* (i.e., those who use English at an acceptable first-year university level-as decided by the faculty), *"good"* (i.e., those who have a greater than minimum level of achievement for first-year university students), and *"poor"* (i.e, those that do not achieve the minimum acceptability).

Third, the curriculum should include at least six fundamental English courses, four of which would be required of all students: *"poor"* students would take English 1-4, *"fair"* students would take English 2-5, and *"good"* students would take English 3-6.

Fourth, clear, specific, detailed performance objectives should be set for each of the six fundamental courses. The objectives set for English 4 should be equivalent to *"good in English."*

Fifth, good mid-term and final exams should be developed to distinguish between students

that *"know"* and students that *"do not know."*

Sixth, the basis for passing from one course to another should be *"exam-pass"* not *"enrol-pass"* (in fact, it might be possible to have only two grades in the ideal program: P for those who pass a well-written exam and F for those who do not).

These six steps involve a great deal of thinking on the part of administrators and English instructors. They involve very little, perhaps no, expense.

The advantages of this proposal should be self-evident: (1) Students begin at a level they can cope with; (2) They continue through a series of integrated courses with their peers; (3) They perform or do not perform at any level, in accordance with their interest in performing.

The objections to this proposal are predictable:

1. Scheduling will be difficult. There is certainly no difficulty, at present, in assigning students 1-80 to Section 1, students 81-160 to Section 2, etc.

2. There are not enough classrooms. At present, there are enough classrooms for students 1-80 and students 81-160 so there are obviously enough classrooms so that students 1, 4, 5, 9, and 14 can be assigned to English 1 while students 3, 8, 17, and 32 can be assigned to English 2

3. There aren't enough teachers. In fact, if there are enough teachers for 160 students, then there are still enough teachers no matter how the students are divided into sections, groups, or courses

A much more important stumbling-block is the thinking that would be required for a program in which a student builds on what he knows. First, the objectives of each course would have to be clearly stated. It would no longer be possible to say simply *"We'll teach lessons 1 to 8 in the first semester and lessons 9 to 15 in the second."* Second, it would involve writing tests that really indicate the amount of a student's learning and not be simply a haphazard 10 or 20 items that have something (faintly) to do with the textbook, or that come directly from the textbook. Third, it would require choosing or developing teaching materials that would make it likely for students to achieve the goals desired, rather than simply purchasing a textbook that is currently fashionable.

At a seminar that I attended a year or two ago, the keynote speaker said something like *"intrinsically motivated students will internalize the code efficiently and effectively"* (the fashionable topic at the time was *"motivation"*). I have said the same thing for more than twenty years, but I will never be a keynote speaker because no one has any difficulty understanding what I say: Interested students will learn well.

The same may be said of administrators and teachers: Really interested administrators and teachers will produce students who are *"good in English,"* no matter what the apparent problems or difficulties are. Every university I have taught at has the capable personnel and competent leadership to achieve this goal. What I have found to be lacking is the sincere desire to achieve it. □ ■