

Unit 22

Basic Issues Relating to Language Learning

Cast:

- Teacher Zhang Dong
- Students

Scene 22.1. Teacher Zhang Dong with students

Teacher Zhang Dong: All languages have certain things in common. Can you think what these commonalities might be?

Student #1: Well, all languages have limited sound systems.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, very good. Note, however, that in some languages, like our Chinese, the tone system carries as much meaning as consonants and vowels. That will probably not be true for the languages of Islamistan. Still, as we saw in an earlier lesson, intonation, though it does not change the meaning of the word, can change the sense of what is communicated. Can you think of anything else?

Student #2: All languages have their own structure.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Good! You've been paying attention in this course! All languages have a certain structure. The range of those structures, in other words, the basic ways languages hang together is really quite limited, though there is enormous variety in detail.

Student #3: All languages have tremendous creative potential.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Indeed, they do. In fact, all languages are always in a state of flux. They are continually changing. Words and idioms are added and meanings change along with the ongoing changes which occur in every culture. Language changes along with the culture; it reflects social customs and culture. That is one reason why not all concepts can be equally well expressed in different languages, as we saw in the lesson on semantics.

The famous linguist Noam Chomsky pointed out that we can learn more about human nature from fiction than from psychology. Fiction reflects the creative potential of a language and culture...

Student #4: All languages have a unique meanings for their words.

Teacher Zhang Dong: So true... you guys have learned a lot in this course! Words in all languages words have a range of meanings, rather than points of meaning. All languages also have generic words, that is, words that refer to groups of things, words

like “furniture”, “relatives”, “animals”, etc. However, there is seldom a point-to-point correspondence between the word meanings in different languages.

Now let’s think a bit about some other principles of language learning. There is, for instance, a difference between the skills of understand, reading, speaking and listening. Generally understanding comes before speaking, and develops together with reading. Writing comes last—if at all.

Let’s take a look at some of the differences between those skills. What are some of the characteristics of spoken language?

Student #2: Well, speaking occurs in real time and is transitory. If the listener doesn’t understand the speaker immediately, the listener can ask for repetition or clarification from the speaker.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Good observation. There are other things unique about spoken language as well. Can you think of some more?

Student #1: Well, I’ve noticed that in spoken language sentences are often incomplete or ungrammatical. People often speak with hesitations and pauses.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Very good. In fact, speech is often punctuated by fillers such as “er”, “you know”, “d’you see”, etc. (use Chinese equivalents). Different languages have different fillers (use English fillers above). French uses the filler: “üüüü”.

Speech usually contains repetition and redundancy, features which assist the listener by reducing density of the information and which provide time for processing.

Also, as we saw in the semantics lesson, various semantic devices like stress and intonation are available to fill in meaning when you are speaking. Facial expressions and other body language are also used for this purpose. The only way you can try to do that in writing is through punctuation or by highlighting features by underlining or italics

When speaking, the listener rewards you in the form of questions, comments, grunts, nods, smiles and the like.

Now think of some of the characteristics of listening, and its importance in language learning...

Student #4: Well, we learned earlier that children need to listen to a language for a period of time before they can start speaking it.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes. We can learn from children that listening comprehension plays a crucial role in language acquisition.

Student #2: Parents help their children understand by modifying their language when they speak to their children.”

Teacher Zhang Dong: That’s true, although they don’t do it necessarily to help their kids learn the language. Parents modify their language to help their kids understand what they are trying to communicate! In the same way, native speakers modify their language when talking to foreigners.

Student #3: I remember when I took those English courses that I could understand speech which was above my level of competence. In other words, there were times when I could understand what was going on even though I didn’t understand all the words or structures.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Very good. In fact, we only progress in a language when we start to understand input that contains structures “a little beyond” our current level of competence.

Here are a couple more facts with respect to the skill of listening: listening is a rapid activity with relatively little control over the speed and delivery of the message. Also, there is usually some form of background noise that has to be filtered.

There are ways in which you can sharpen your listening skills. You could, for example, listen to a text and then answer questions about that text that your language helper asks you. However, in real life this type of listening is rare. An authentic interaction requires that the listener be an active participant. Therefore you need to utilize listening activities that require the learner to be active, to interrupt, ask for clarification, etc., like the Dumb-Smart Questions.

Remember, there is a difference between “hearing what is said” (speech perception) and understanding what is meant (speech interpretations). Listeners use a wide range of knowledge, including sentence structure, intonation and body language, to interpret spoken language. They use all this information simultaneously to help them understand input.

Now let’s take a few minutes and think about the skill of reading. Can you think of some of the characteristics of reading?

Student #2: Well, a written text is permanent and can be read and re-read as many times as necessary to clarify meaning. You can look up words and grammar structures and learn from them.

Teacher Zhang Dong: Very true. Written work tends to be carefully constructed and linked to form a coherent text.

One important fact about reading you should remember: people who are good readers are usually good listeners and poor readers poor listeners. So developing your reading skills

will greatly help you understand the language better. It introduces, naturally, lots of new vocabulary and grammar structures. So, read, read, read!

Lastly, let's think a moment about writing. What are some of the characteristics of writing?

Student #1: Well, I enjoy writing, but it takes me a long time to write something worthwhile!

Teacher Zhang Dong: Yes, writing is the most difficult of the skills. Few native speakers become good writers, and very, very few people master writing in a second language. Writing a good letter or article is a real skill which only comes with lots of practice.

Another fact about writing: although the writer can try to anticipate his reader's reaction and take account of these in the text, there is, generally, no immediate feedback. You don't know what effect your work will have on the readers.

So, as we have seen, all languages have certain things in common, and the basic skills in language learning require different approaches.

Having said this, the language you learn will be your own, personal, creative production. In other words, there is no specific language in your genes. You will develop your own unique version of your native language by drawing from three sources: 1. native speakers, 2. your mother tongue (that's where your accent comes from) and 3. formal training (how you are schooled to say things properly).

When you are learning your language, you will be developing your own version of it. Good or bad, it's yours. You create it and it will have your style and flair. When you speak your mother tongue, for instance, no one else talks exactly the way you do. People use language creatively by recombining elements (i.e., you do not rely on memorization alone). You take the available data and put it together in a proactive way, so that you end up sounding like the people you are associated with, but with your own unique way of expressing yourself. Your language is creative: you say things people don't expect. It reflects your personality—whether you are flexible or rigid, whether you have flair and style. It reflects your ego, inhibitions, and anxieties. The same is true when you learn another language. You will create your own—hopefully acceptable—version of it. Will your grammar, syntax (sentence structure) and accent be pleasing or off-putting?

Another thing to remember is that language learning is a social and interactive activity. That means that it takes place in association with other people, a community, and that it has to do with dialogue, back and forth communication. When you were born you were placed in just such an environment. That environment can be difficult to reproduce as an adult. However, you must never lose sight of the fact that the main purpose of language is communication, not getting a grade! So, don't learn language just by analyzing it; determine to get lots of interaction. Use it! Put yourself in contexts where

real communication is necessary. Take the initiative. Contact people. As you grope for the right words, the feedback you get will teach you. Ask yourself how many people you are in touch with on a regular basis for the purpose of language learning, and how can you increase that? How many people would you have to say goodbye to if you had to leave right away?

Student #5: Teacher, how much time should we give to, say, working with a language helper, doing personal study, and just being out in the community?

Teacher Zhang Dong: That's a good question. Let's assume that you will spend at least 30 hours a week in language study. That should be very doable. Language study should have 4 different components: 1. your sessions with a language helper, 2. personal reading, 3. time spent in the community, and 4. lifestyle choices. Let's take a look at each, and how much time you might spend them.

First of all, there are your sessions with your language helper or in a language school. That might consist of, say, 1/5 of your program, say 6-8 hours a week. Consider meeting with your language helper for 2 hours, 4 times a week.

Remember you are in charge of your sessions with your language helper. Your language helper should not, for example, give you homework; you bring your grammar questions to the language helper, not the other way around—that would be different if you went to a language school.

Secondly, there is your personal study time. That could take up, say, 2/5 of your program, or some 12 hours. This time should consist of lots of reading. Choose appropriate reading materials at the right level of difficulty. Reading stuff that is too difficult or which contains too many words you don't know is discouraging. Choose topics with which you are familiar and which are of interest to you. Read the article or book more than once. First try to get the gist of it, the big picture. Highlight stuff you don't understand, like new words and idioms, as well as grammar structures. Then go through it a second time, focusing on the things which you marked on your first reading.

There are lots of reading resources available in most languages. Start with the simplest of children's books. Look for story books that have more pictures than text, where the picture goes a long way to telling the story. From there you can move on to simple folk tales, then to bilingual readers, the Bible, translated books. Newspapers and magazines are often difficult if you don't have the backgrounds to the stories. When you do pick up a newspaper, start with headlines, then move to the captions underneath the pictures. You might try to respond to your reading by explaining what you've read to someone else—you might make it the basis for a conversation in the community—or by summarizing what you've read on a tape, or in writing.

As we noted before, writing is the most difficult of the language tasks. Ask yourself, (to determine the importance of writing in your language learning program): What are the different forms of writing that locals do? (e.g., form-filling, lists, letters, poetry, novels,

etc.?) What types of writing do you imagine you will have to do in the local language? How important is writing to your chosen profession?

You can develop your writing skills by keeping journal entries. Start by making 2 entries per week during personal study time. Begin with a couple of sentences, then work toward paragraph length. Show your journal to your language helper and let him/her correct any spelling, vocab, and grammar mistakes. Rewrite those sentences.

Do dictation at least once a week with your language helper. Use childrens' books you may have read. If your language has a different writing system, you need to develop your penmanship. Is you writing legible? Does it have respectability? Does it show an educated, conscientious, practiced status?

Learn how to write personal letters and cards. You might ever write and mail some letters or cards to local friends. Learn the proper letter-writing style from books or your helper. Make several drafts.

Try making a shopping list. Learn how to make a bureaucratic business request. In other words, imagine a situation where you have to petition a bureaucratic office for some service like a phone installation, a rescheduling of exams, customs clearance, or a residence permit. Imagine a problem, and write a letter to the relevant authority requesting that they take action on your behalf.

Learn how to fill in common official forms, like medical forms, visa applications, customs and residence forms, school enrollment forms, etc. Practice writing your personal information: address, gender, dates, country, cities, purpose.

Learn to write reports. You can start writing about a childhood experience, experiences you've had in the country, etc. Have you language helper correct it, then rewrite it. Make a collection of these writing items and place them in a portfolio.

Thirdly, you should include a certain amount of community time in your program, say another 2/5 of your time, or 12 hours out of 30. This might include time spent doing dumb-smart questions with people, or even taking a course in a subject that interests you. Make sure you carry your notebook with you, and share your experiences with your language helper.

Lastly, your language learning should involve certain life style choices. In other words, make choices which cause you to surround yourself with time in the language. That might include time spent watching TV, listening to the radio, listening to CDs, going to a movie, reading comic books for fun, spending time with national friends, etc.

Does that answer your question?

Student #5: It sure does, teacher!

Scene 22:2 Things learned in this lesson

- All languages, like all cultures, are in a state of flux. Words and idioms are added and meanings change along with the culture.
- Words in all languages have a range of meanings.
- Generally understanding comes before speaking, and develops together with reading. Writing comes last.
- In spoken language sentences are often incomplete, ungrammatical and filled with fillers, repetition and redundancy.
- Stress, intonation and body language all add to meaning when you are speaking
- There can be a big difference between understanding what is said and what is meant.
- Native speakers tend to modify their language when speaking to foreigners
- You can usually understand more than you can say.
- You only progress when the language you are exposed to is a little beyond your current level of competence.
- Listening is a rapid activity over which you have little control. There is also usually background noise to contend with.
- People who are good readers are usually good listeners, and poor readers tend to be poor listeners.
- You will develop your own, unique version of your target language. Try to make it a pleasant version.
- Make choices which cause you to surround yourself with time in the language