BEYOND MUTE-ENGLISH: EMPOWERING ORAL COMPETENCY

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Abstract

'Beyond Mute-English' is an instructional essay based in practical applications and professional teaching experience. The article presents foundational methods, gleaned through the author's nine years instructing foreign learners of English at universities in America, China, and The Republic of Korea, and aims at resetting complex approaches in second language acquisition by revisiting best practices for developing oral competency. The article outlines six concepts, referred to as 'silver keys,' pertaining to the study of English as a second language, with brief, substantive elaborations of each. The silver keys the article establishes are built around the pedagogical concepts of mimicry, specificity in adaptation, high currency versus low currency language, necessity of mastering the basic skills before progressing, and intrinsic motivation in learning.

Keywords: mimicry, high currency, low currency language, intrinsic motivation.

Introduction

Somewhere, amid the details, rosters, syllabi, drills, games, worksheets, exams, and holidays, the pillars of learning to speak a second language fade into the background.

I have yet to forget the opportunity to be just one of three men standing on the tennis court as Maria Kirilenko prepared for her first match in the 2009 Hansol Korea Open. The great tennis star was not pile-driving serves. She was not smashing backhands. If you did not know who she was, you would have thought she was receiving one of her first lessons once you saw the warm-up exercises her coach had her performing. At the start, he stood directly beside her as she traced the air, seeing an imaginary ball. He nudged her arm to lower the height of her racket. Her next swing, he tapped

her elbow to bring it a notch higher. He then moved a bit further away and to the front of her. Standing just a few meters from Kirilenko and lightly tossing the ball her way, he continued to give her verbal cues. Maria's racket gently returned the tennis ball in measured forehands, in patient backhands. The drills were simple, Maria's racket swings relaxed yet intentional. He took her back to the basics; he was fine tuning her. If stumbling upon the scene, you might have easily mistaken Maria for a beginner.

The first time I taught English as a Second Language, I was almost completely outcoached. I was pursuing a graduate degree in English Pedagogy with expectations of becoming an English teacher working in American schools with American students. I did not imagine that one year into my master's study I would board a plane, fly half way across the earth, and teach English as a second language. In 2006, a chance meeting with a professor from my university's education department changed the course of my career.

I had been arranging a teaching practicum alongside one of our own professors of literature. The education professor I bumped into suggested I complete the practicum overseas and, after spending an hour in his office talking about the opportunities to take my English studies abroad, he offered to make all the arrangements. For the start of my third semester as a student at Northern Michigan University, I boarded a plane bound for Sichuan Normal University in Chengdu, China.

Only a week after landing in China, I was plunged into the waters of teaching English to Chinese university students. From that time to today, I have devoted a major portion of my career to teaching English as a second language, but at that time I had completed no formal course work in second language acquisition or in EFL. At Sichuan, it was halfway into my first semester when a pattern began to present itself. I would finish a class, dismiss the students, and one student would linger behind and ask: What is the best way for me to study English? Though they didn't say it, the students always had speaking ability in mind.

By the first time I received this question, I had been teaching English as a second language about fourteen days. Although I had taken Spanish and German, I could not carry on a conversation in either of the languages. Despite having yet completed my professional training, I tried to give my best answer to these English-hungry students. Sensing they wanted a secret, the answer I gave the most went something like this: *There is no silver bullet to*

learning English. It's hard work.

Since that semester in China, I have had nine years to ponder and dig into that question: What are some of the principal ways to develop English speaking ability? During those years, including twelve semesters of classroom experience teaching Korean, Chinese, Filipino, and Latino students—and fielding that same question nearly every term—my answers have had time to mature. If no single bullet will blast through the doors of foreign language acquisition, then perhaps a few key concepts will help our students get the most out of their efforts.

Silver Key One: For Speaking Practice, Mimic Native Speakers

Pronunciation is not supposed to be a puzzle. At the heart of speaking a language is speaking in a way that is readily understood. There is a great deal of room for expression of myriad accents within the parameters of a given language. The extraordinary ways a language 'comes off the tongue,' peculiar to a local region or an ethnic group, adds color and culture to our communication, but deviating too far off course in one's reproduction of established phonetics is another matter.

There have been a considerable number of times I met a student of English eager to practice speaking with me, but it was necessary to ask them to repeat certain sentences up to five times, even to spell some of the words they were *trying* to say, before I was able to discern clearly what they were saying. Communicating was painful, not only for me, but for the speaker as well.

Students in second language programs repeatedly identify as of primary value in their language development, the need for exposure to the 'natural speech' of native speakers, whether by physical presence or use of media (Harrington and Hertel 2000). Aiming for native-like pronunciation of a target language is a crucial 'yardstick' to ensure that your verbalization of the language will prove less puzzling and more plain (Piller 2002; Kuntz 1997). Phonetic symbols have defined standards for their sound representations. Native-like simply refers to accuracy in voiced representations of these phonetic symbols.

The speakers you follow in your language practice will exert a high degree of influence on your manner of speaking; you will begin to sound like them, to speak like them, not only in accent, but crucially, in correctness or incorrectness of pronunciation. The teacher or persons in audio recordings you repeat after the most serve as your model.

Dialogues with my students regarding their learning history have revealed a definite correlation between exposure to natural speech and correctness of pronunciation. The speaking ability of my students who completed a year at an international school or who, as a child, did a year in America or overseas, stands out. The flowing as opposed to choppy delivery, the varied as opposed to robotic inflection and higher accuracy in pronunciation are all evident. Among my students who only studied English within their home country, many of the exemplary speakers report having been taught by native speakers.

I would not assert there is such a thing as perfect pronunciation; language at its heart is an art not a science. Regardless of how a speaker's pronunciation is assessed, at the end of the day, they either successfully communicated their main thoughts, or they failed to communicate them, or partially communicated them. I laugh remembering a Chinese friend of mine who, as we made our way up the highway said, "I need to stop at the place [here he stumbled]…at the place where the car can eat the gas." He hadn't learned the words gas station or filling station. I also recall the stranger who came up to me and asked repeatedly, 'Wha ah you hum?' It wasn't until the fourth or fifth time I managed to figure out, he was asking, 'Where are you from?'

There are accurate ways of producing the phonetics of English and there are inaccurate ways. Ideally, the university students who enter my class would have had extensive exposure to English being verbalized in a manner at or very near to English's established phonetic standards. Nonetheless, my duty is to meet them where they are the day they arrive. For those students with whom it is necessary for me to strain my senses in order to understand their spoken English, I derive a sense of patience with and empathy towards in light of this: They are using the language in the ways that they modeled using it.

The inherent inflection patterns, the finer points of enunciation, the instinctual rhythm—each world language is a symphony of sounds with a phonetic standard at the heart, and accents being variations on a phonetic theme. There's a lot in spoken language that we do not even account for. The beauty of rehearsing one's listening and speaking with present or recorded native speakers is that the accuracy and the nuance are both preserved and transferred. The closer to the original source of the target language a student can be, the more likely they are to experience transference of native-like pronunciation, inflection, and a host of other characteristics subconscious to its speakers.

Silver Key Two: Move Your Mouth

It is not uncommon for the Korean and Chinese students I have worked with to spend sixty minutes engaged in comprehensive language learning activities and, for the hour, to not once verbally produce the target words and sentences they are studying. They write and re-write terms, complete fill-in-the blanks, multiple choice, and grammar exercises, but when it comes to speaking, it doesn't happen near enough. Their study habits have been referred to as mute-learning (He 2013). The majority of the students I observe study language very quietly, which is okay as long as ability to *speak* the language is of little importance.

How many students, ironically, score very high on written English exams but are found struggling when it comes to holding a conversation? Currently I have students who have been in formal English classes every year for over eight years, but last week during our class, a significant number struggled to form even a couple complete sentences when asked, "What's a movie that influenced your behavior? What did you see in the movie that affected you? What were two ways your life actions changed?"

My most able speakers have something of a secret: They make a habit of verbalizing. In both private and public study, regardless of task designation (grammar, listening, reading), they bring the words from their minds onto their lips. In the classroom setting, they frequently verbalize words and sentences in faint whispers.

I am afraid even a number of my sincerest language students are still wondering why their speaking confidence and pronunciation skill remain undeveloped, why they have so much hesitation when it comes to speaking, even after compounding years of language study. The reason is because the language learning areas of reading, listening, speaking, and writing are distinct, different kinds of learning (He 2013). You can practice writing for ten years and have excellent writing skill, but if you weren't verbalizing the language, speaking can remain a weakness for you. Why? Because, language abilities are special.

Language abilities are specific adaptations, not general ones. You get better at speaking a language by speaking (Kaye 2000). Having the words in your mind and being able to recognize them on a page for an exam is a specific adaptation (reading comprehension), but if you have not rigorously trained yourself at bringing those words from your mind onto your tongue and lips, your exam scores will not be a measure of your capacity to speak the language (He 2013). Your mouth and all its parts have to be literally

exercised to make the right shapes and the movements of air necessary to produce the unique sound constructs. (Tonight try brushing your teeth with your opposite hand. Your fingers, like your mouth, adapt specifically.)

Two additional sub-points related to the key of moving your mouth are as follows:

i) Treat all lessons—grammar, listening, reading comprehension, writing—as potential speaking lessons. Anything on the page in your target language (or in an audio), regardless of the specific skill set it is intended for, can be repeated and practiced verbally.

ii) When able, look at the mouth of the speaker you are imitating. The visual-physical connection is stronger than most language learners realize.

Silver Key Three: Learn High-Currency Words—Especially *Your* High-Currency Words

We use language, when using it naturally, to say the things we *want* to say, to say the things we *need* to say, and to talk about, mostly, our self—where we come from, what we are doing now, and what our future plans are. There are numerous words in one's own language that, in a given year, one never uses. Words you do not use in your own language are words you will typically not use in another language. Why should precious time and energy be spent committing to mind words rarely used, especially if your goal is conversational skill? First learn the essential words.

There are high-currency vocabularies, words necessary for everyday communication in all languages, and there are *your* high-currency words, the vocabulary needed to talk about yourself and your personal interests. Language acquisition scholar Joe Barcroft emphasizes the value of 'allocating processing resources,' and one way to do this is by discriminating between the 'currency level' of words (Barcroft 2004). Targeting the most frequently used words can enhance the development of your ability to speak in another language by creating a higher degree of efficiency in the learning process. In other words, you save time and you focus your mental energy on what matters.

The second aspect of focusing on high currency language requires studying words around a theme or special subject related to your personal interests and pursuits. For those whose work is closely tied to a particular field, the vocabulary pertinent to the field should be emphasized. If you are

majoring in nursing or exercise science, if you are going to be using your target language in the field of business law, if you are preparing for certification as a flight attendant, most fields will have a set of particular words and phrases used every day in the profession. You will need to be well-versed in them to communicate effectively.

Along with Barcroft, researcher Georgia Andreou stresses the practical value of limiting one's scope in order to target 'those elements that will aid [in] achieving [your unique] learning goals' (2009). When you look at a new list of words, quickly go through it and circle the ones you most frequently use when speaking your own native language. Learn these and move on. Do not worry about the words you skip over. If one becomes necessary, it will make itself known; you can learn it along the way. By slowing down and selecting the words necessary to say what you want to say or what you need to say, you will enhance your progress with a smaller list of terms and by grasping the vocabulary that give you instant traction.

Silver Key Four: Strengthen the Basics

I believe many speakers of a second language, despite having a vastly large vocabulary, struggle to use the language with confidence. This problem often can be traced to weakness in their foundation: failure to master the basics (Krashen 1982). Mastery in the elementary structures is what builds your confidence to go forward.

When starting in a language, the goal must not be to go quickly; the goal must be to *get it right*. Correctness in the phonetics and firm retention of the primary terms and sentence structures will form your strong groundwork, and you accomplish them by going slowly and by painstaking repetition (Harrington and Hertel 2000).

Getting the basics right is analogous to laying the first tiles of a kitchen floor. Even if you have never laid kitchen tiles, or bricks to make a sidewalk, it is easy to see that the first two or three tiles must be laid slowly, intentionally, and as near to perfect as possible, because the position of all the tiles that follow will depend on the placement of the first ones. Any incorrect placement at the start will create incongruence's and errors in what follow. I am still taking my own students, even those in advanced language classes, back to the basics, those first tiles, to fill in gaps and rework their glaring errors.

The beauty of attaining excellence in a small, singular point of language learning is that it sets up a solidly laid, squarely fitted tile that will

reproduce correctness in all the tiles that come after it. Here is an example related to achieving accurate pronunciation of consonants, vowels, and their various combinations.

I recently tested my Korean university students in their pronunciation of the English term 'world,' which contains a sound blend, [*rl*], that does not exist in Korean language. For eight out of ten of my students, 'world' came out as *word* or *ward*. The eight who mispronounced 'world' were also unable to say *whirl*, *Earl*, *hurl*, *pearl*, and *furl*. On the other hand, the two who could say 'world' had no difficultly clearly pronouncing the other five words. Many words in the English language contain the [*rl*] sound blend. If a student fails in this singular point, basic to English phonetics, the effect is plural, causing inaccuracy in a host of English words. If a student gets this single point squarely placed, all the other 'tiles' set after it line up straight. Fixing a foundational point empowers exponentially.

Confidence increases when you sense you have developed a solid foundation. By extensive verbal repetition, a sense of using the language naturally can be developed. The basics of the language, especially the native-like flow of phonetics, the conventional sentence structures, and the highest currency words need to be repeated and repeated, revisited and revisited, patiently and confidently mastered (Greene 1992). If your spirit is lacking or your progress is stifled, inexplicably, you go back to the basics—the beginner's lessons—the surest way to prepare for the big match. In the 2009 Hansol Open, it was Maria Kirilenko, the one warming-up with the drills for a six-year-old that went on to play Serena Williams in the final.

Silver Key Five: There Are No Silver Bullets

The saying holds up: You get out what you put in! When it comes to learning a second language, what really moves you forward is effort. Still, I meet many students only looking for a short-cut. Will some teachers have greater success than others at engaging you. Certainly. Are some textbooks more practical than others? Yes. Nonetheless, fluency in a second language often represents many years of 'unremitting hard work' (Sachs 3). Regarding your specific approaches, you have to listen to your instincts. By trial and error you can begin to identify what works well for you and what does not (Kuntz 1997), but whatever works, an honest amount of discipline will be necessary.

You must also exercise perseverance. The human mind, like the human body, has levels of fitness. The body, no matter how good of shape you are

in today, how efficient your heart, how resilient your lungs, cannot make your fitness permanent so that it will be with you a year from today. Your fitness must be exercised, earned, and maintained—or it diminishes, the same way as an unused second-language.

Silver Key Six: Choose a Language You Like

At the start of writing this article, I had not imagined that I would assert as the most essential key of all this: Choose a language you have a natural desire to learn. I know for vast numbers of language students, there is great pressure to learn a language they do not necessarily enjoy learning. This expectation is similar to having to take a swimming class, when swimming is not something you particularly enjoy, and there are many others kinds of physical activities to choose from. Climbing into the pool, into the water, for hours and weeks on end could prove a more negative than positive experience.

On more than one occasion my students have described English as a 'necessary evil.' I do not blame any of them for expressing their true feelings on the subject. Studying a language because you *have to* is anything but ideal, and the chances are you will be less inclined to use it. Of course, there are many circumstances which necessitate learning a second language, regardless of personal preferences, and when your goals depend upon it, motivation may rapidly escalate, but the power of intrinsic motivation in language acquisition is undervalued (Harrington and Hertel 2000).

Here a personal example is applicable. During high school and college I took comprehensive courses in Spanish and German. Completing these classes was a requirement. Did I use the German and Spanish I learned? Not outside of the class, except for one short week in Berlin. Later I took an introductory course in Korean, which I was taking in anticipation of going to Korea to work, but I found myself attending out of a sense of obligation. Once I arrived in Korea, I began to make friends with a number of international students from China. We lived in the same apartment building, and, as we developed a friendship, I began to grow interested in Chinese. I bought a book, began to study, and found myself, unlike with Spanish, German, or Korean, naturally interested in the language. Next, I found myself looking forward to cracking open the book and learning a few more words. I began to make small conversation, for fun, with my Chinese acquaintances, and later, though living in Korea, I began taking courses in Chinese. In a matter of six months, my fluency in Mandarin was reaching well beyond the points I had reached in Spanish and German, despite my

having studied both of the languages formally and for a longer period. The key difference was, with Chinese, I was naturally interested.

One More Key: Applying Yourself Is the Difference

A high school basketball coach, I had the pleasure of teaching with in Colorado, used to say to his players, 'Gentlemen, don't make me coach effort. I will not coach effort.' To illustrate the coach's principle, just this past summer an acquaintance of mine, a Korean man, asked me if I would tutor him in English conversation. I asked him, before we met, to bring either a textbook he would like help going through or some Korean sentences he would like to be able to say in English.

Our meeting day arrived. We met at a local café. I had with me a Korean-English dictionary and about ten sentences in English I wanted him to help me practice saying in Korean. He, on the contrary, had brought nothing. He sat, I could not help but notice, sunken in his chair, and when it came time to begin, looked at me, still slouching, chuckled, and said, 'Teach me English.' I asked him what he had brought. He replied, 'Nothing,' and repeated himself, 'Teach me English.' It was as if he wanted me to wave a magic wand back and forth over him and, *walla*—he would be fluent. In contrast, anytime I had met with my Chinese friends who were helping me one-on-one, I showed up with a textbook, a dictionary, and a notebook containing my grammar questions, stubborn pronunciation terms, or sentences I had written in Chinese and I wanted to have checked.

The following statement, given by a student in a study on learners' conceptions of foreign language acquisition, expressly encapsulates the final silver key. The student writes, 'Learning a foreign language requires much interest, joy and intrinsic motivation. To succeed in a foreign language is not so much the teacher's doing…but the student's. His development is mostly dependent on his efforts' (Harrington and Hertel 2000).

Returning to the swimming analogy, imagine your work place is located in the same area as a swimming pool. Every day you see the pool, you walk by it, maybe even dip in your hand to test the temperature, and all day long from your office window you are able to see the many people swimming. It does not matter if you work in the place five days or five years;

your proximity to the pool will do little to nothing for your swimming skill until you decide to enter the water. What is more, even entering the water will accomplish almost nothing for you if, once in it, you merely stand around, or just go about floating on your back. It is only by entering the water *and* beginning to go through the strokes that you become a competent swimmer. It will never be enough to merely be near to the water.

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