

Leading through Language Learning and Teaching:

The Case of Gandhi

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Paper presented at the

Interdisciplinary Language Research: Relevance and Application Series

Language Research Centre, University of Calgary

February 26, 2010

Preamble

I start this paper noting openly that I am not an expert in Gandhi's work. Nor am I an expert on his life. This paper, as you will see, is rooted in the curiosity that led me to begin to explore his work. I have become more and more interested in it over time, though I remain woefully ignorant. Errors or omissions about M.K. Gandhi that emerge in this paper are entirely the fault of the author and corrections are welcome.

Introduction

Language invokes my natural curiosity in a way that no other discipline or topic does. When the movie Avatar (Cameron, 2009) was released I went to see it on opening day with a group of friends. After the movie, we were comparing notes about what we liked and what caught our attention the most. One of the things I noticed was the language used by the Na'vi, the fictional alien race in the film. During the film, I thought to myself, "Those aren't just sounds those characters are making. There seems to be a syntax. That's a language!"

After the film we watched all the credits. I looked for a clue as to whether my hunch was correct. Indeed, Paul R. Frommer, Ph.D. was listed in the credits as the “Alien Language Creator”. Frommer holds a Ph.D. in linguistics from the University of Southern California, Los Angeles (International Movie Database, n.d.) and claims that it took him four years to create the language (BBC, 2009, December 11). Some claim that the fictional language is based on that of the Maori, native to New Zealand (New Zealand.com., 2010) and others speculate that it sounds like German or Japanese (BBC, 2009, December 11).

But these are facts that I found out after the movie. The significant point here is that during the movie itself, one of the features of the movie that while the others with whom I saw the movie were most impressed with the special effects, cinematography and other, flashier elements of the movie, one of the first things that caught my attention was the language used by the fictional characters. Whether that’s a result of decades of being a language learner myself, spending much of my career as a language teacher, a natural inquisitiveness about languages, it’s difficult to pinpoint.

There are three discrete skills that came into play in this example. First, I was noticed the language. It jumped out at me, setting itself apart from other elements of the film. Second, I observed it, listening to its rhythm, its sounds and its patterns. Finally, I followed up on my observations by conducting further research, learning more about the phenomenon that first piqued my curiosity. As a result, I learned more about the movie industry and how fictional languages are created by expert languages to add verisimilitude to the equally fictional race of characters, encouraging the viewer to suspend his or her disbelief, entering more deeply into the realm of the story.

Some years ago I had a similar experience, but with a biography, rather than a movie. The process that occurred however was much the same. I will describe the process in some detail as a case. Then I will discuss how this process may be implemented as a learning project for language students.

My two main research interests are language learning and leadership. It seemed natural to seek a way to study both at the same time. Several years ago I started reading biographies of people whom I felt were influential leaders; whose lives had and continue to “make a difference”. I wasn’t sure what that difference was, but I was curious to find out. One of the first biographies I picked up was Gandhi’s *An autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth* (1948).

This paper will discuss the methodology I applied as a learner, followed by how this can be used by teachers for use with their own students. Although the approach is unconventional, it is not unheard of that the researcher uses himself or herself as the primary test subject for an experiment. In this case, I went through the entire learning process myself without recognizing its value and potential until after the exercise was complete. It was only then that I was able to begin the meta-process of examining my own learning process. From there, I was able to extrapolate it to broader contexts. And so I share both my own experiences as a learner and how these experiences may benefit others.

Theoretical and Ideological Framework

This work is studied through a constructivist lens. This theory “describes knowledge not as truths to be transmitted or discovered, but as emergent, developmental, nonobjective, viable constructed explanations by humans engaged in meaning-making in cultural and social

communities of discourse” (Twomey Fosnot, 2005, p. ix). Constructivism is “a theory about knowledge and learning; it describes both what ‘knowing’ is and how one ‘comes to know’” (p. ix).

It also builds on the leadership ideologies of Michael Fullan who claims that “confidence and competence breed risk-taking of the kind that will bring us new breakthroughs” (Fullan, 2006, p. 42) and who encourages us as educators to “be driven by tapping into people’s dignity and respect” (p. 48). He further notes that at least in the educational context theory is good, but it must be connected to practice (p. 79).

Learner Methodology

During my first reading of the *An autobiography or the story of my experiments with truth* (1948), I read for content. I was intensely interested in hearing Gandhi’s story in his own words, albeit in a translation. It was precisely this point about the translation that made me think further. Being completely unfamiliar with the details of Gandhi’s life, I returned to the text, curious about his first language. I assumed (incorrectly) that it was Hindi, but wanted to verify. This very desire of being curious and wanting to verify one fact, led to a much larger investigation.

After learning that Gandhi’s first language was Gujarati, my curiosity intensified. I remembered observing during the first reading that in addition to being an activist, he was also an educator and had had significant formal instruction himself. This led to a second reading of the text, with the purpose of examining it through an educator’s lens. This time I paid particular attention to his stories about learning and teaching. It was during this second reading that I noticed that much of his own education, curiosity about the world around him and his desire to improve it were closely tied to language learning. This led to a third reading of the text, which

involved an in-depth analysis of his experiences as a language learner and how these experiences shaped his personal, professional and political life.

I noted every instance I could find of languages, second or language learning and the impact he reported that this had on him. I have reported on these findings elsewhere (Eaton, 2009), and include them again here with the editor's permission.

Learner analysis

As previously mentioned, Gandhi's first language was Gujarati. He began to learn other languages in school, where English and Sanskrit were compulsory (Gandhi, 1948, p. 9).

It was during his time in law school that he became committed to learning other languages as a way to advance his work, noting that limited language skills for him meant that he would not work in his desired profession. He stated:

My weak English was a perpetual worry to me. . . . A friend suggested that, if I really wanted to have the satisfaction of taking a difficult examination, I should pass the London Matriculation. It meant a good deal of labour and much addition to my stock of general knowledge, without any extra expense worth the name. I welcomed the suggestion. But the syllabus frightened me. Latin and a modern language were compulsory! How was I to manage Latin? But the friend entered a strong plea for it: 'Latin is very valuable to lawyers. Knowledge of Latin is very useful in understanding law-books. And one paper in Roman Law is entirely in Latin. Besides a knowledge of Latin means greater command over the English language.' It went home and I decided to learn Latin, no matter how difficult it might be. (Gandhi, 28)

In addition to learning, to varying degrees, Sanskrit, English, French and Latin, he also learned Hindi and Urdu, in order to communicate with others in his country, understand their situation better and work towards bettering their lives. In addition, while he was in jail he endeavoured to learn Tamil and Telugu (p. 176) and used his skills in these languages to communicate and work with illiterate soldiers in South Africa to help them fight for human rights (p. 88). Finally, he added Arabic and Persian to the list of languages he endeavoured to learn (p. 176-177) and did so through informal lessons with friends. That is a total of eleven languages, including his native tongue.

Discussion

Gandhi saw learning languages as a way of communicating better with others and understanding the world more profoundly. Not surprisingly, he believed that everyone should learn more than one language, stating that, “It is now my opinion that in all Indian curricula of higher education there should be a place for Hindi, Samskrit, Persian, Arabic and English, besides of course the vernacular. (Gandhi, 1948, p. 9).”

He not only understood the value of learning languages, he passed it on to his students. As with many who work with second and foreign languages, he was both a student and teacher of language. Moreover, he found learning languages difficult, as do many of our own students. Yet he saw a deep value in it and continued to apply himself, even if, according to him, it was with limited success in some cases.

The analysis I conducted demonstrated to me that for Gandhi, language learning and leadership were intertwined. He saw language learning as a way to communicate with others in

his own country, to connect with others on a deeper level, understanding their human condition from a compassionate point of view. And I use the word compassion here deliberately: “with suffering”, “suffering with” the other. Even while he was in prison, he continued to learn languages to work with others to help them better their situation.

This text presents a strong case for leaders of any sort, but in particular those with a desire to have a deep and long-lasting effect on the world, to learn other languages in order to become better leaders. It was Gandhi himself who said, “We must be the change we wish to see in the world”. He lived what he believed, changing himself and challenging himself in order to become a stronger leader.

While not everyone who learns another language may go on to have a profound effect on the world to the degree that Gandhi did, any person who learns a new language grows as a human being because they can communicate with others in new ways. This helps to develop a more profound curiosity about the world around us, which leads us to learn more about that world. Learning more about the world and those who live in it leads to deeper understandings of other cultures, other values and other ways of understanding life, love, politics, spirituality and all that is important to humans. Learning other languages opens up new possibilities for personal and professional growth, new opportunities to do meaningful work and ultimately, to value others more deeply because we can communicate with them better and understand them.

The best way to engage our students in language learning is to value them deeply, rather than simply focus on the skills that may be gained as a result of taking classes in them. When we learn a new language we change who we are, and we become better for it. That is the real reason we want our students to learn other languages.

Following this activity with an individual text, I began to examine other biographies of world leaders to see if I could identify any similarities or trends. I examined other biographies and found instances of leaders with an interest in languages or linguistics from a range of disciplines including Nelson Mandela (1995) and others.

Classroom Application - Pedagogical Methodology

In my case, I was deeply interested in leadership as a theme, and curious about Gandhi as a human being and a world leader. I chose a text, a biography, that was meaningful to me personally, and conducted an analysis of how language learning influenced and affected Gandhi and his work.

We can apply the same process as a language learning activity for students, having them conduct their own analysis, in a context which piques their own. Below I outline the steps to conduct such an analysis:

Step 1 - Identify a broad theme of interest. In my case it was leadership. It could be history, politics, psychology, music, theatre, science, medicine or any discipline. It is important that each student identify his or her own theme, led by a sense of curiosity. Students must “own” the project and make it theirs.

Step 2 - Identify a role model, mentor or field expert who has learned a second language. This role model will serve as the case for the student to study.

Step 3 - Conduct a study in which the purpose is to understand how language learning affected the expert's life and work, helping to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and others.

Step 4 - Report back to the class. Each student shares what he or her has learned (preferably in the target language) about his or her chosen expert, the languages learned, the process of learning those languages and how language learning influenced that person. This way, students have a chance to share what they learned with others, engage in discussions about language learning and also learn about subject matter experts in a variety of fields.

Step 5 - Write a reflection. How did the study change the student's understanding of his or her role model, of language learning, and of the student's own (hopefully increased) motivation to continue to be an active and lifelong language learner.

Conclusions

Curiosity has been identified as a strong motivator in learning (Fulcher, 2008; Hendrick, 2007; Shedivy, 2004). As language teachers we need to do more than just teach our students verb conjugations. We need to awaken deep within them an insatiable sense of curiosity about language, culture and the world around us.

My own sense of curiosity about languages reaches to positively geeky depths. My friends laugh at me when we see a blockbuster movie on opening day and what I notice most

about the movie is not the spectacular special effects, but the fictional alien language. That same sense of curiosity is what drove me to read the biography of a powerful world leader a number of times, each time mining it more deeply for information and knowledge about how one leader thought of language learning as an integral skill to change the world. He then became a language teacher himself because he wanted to pass these notions on to the next generation.

As Bennis and Townsend said, “This is the life we learn with” (1995, p. 41). As language teachers, we have all experienced, in some form, the struggles and elations of what it means to learn a language. The experiences are wrapped up in frustrations, moments of shared learning with teachers, trusted mentors and friends. We know what it means to move from insecurity to confidence and from incompetence to fluency. We know how language learning has shaped our lives and what experiences we would have been prevented from having without our languages. It is these experiences, and the potential for them, that we want our students to know and live.

When students can tap into this potential, they move from learning a language to living it. When we, as professionals can help them do it, we move from being teachers to being leaders.

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