

CHANGING THE PRIORITIES IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN ASIA: A MONOLOGUE FOR TEACHERS AND STUDENTS

By

Z. N. PATIL

Professor, Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India.

ABSTRACT

Language teaching methodology has been changing over a period of time. The teacher-centered approach is gradually giving way to learner-centered approach. Until a decade ago, the role of the teacher was that of a constant donor of knowledge and corrector of learner errors. But, the paradigms are shifting and teacher roles are altering. The teacher is now seen as a friend, philosopher and guide of the learner, a facilitator, consultant and co-learner. Simultaneously, the objectives of teaching English as a second and foreign language are constantly being shuffled and reshuffled. There was a time when the goal of English language teaching was to develop linguistic and literary competence in the learner. Accuracy was prioritized over fluency and appropriateness. Recently, we are talking about reordering our priorities. The present paper attempts to explain how it is imperative to place appropriateness before accuracy and narrates the author's personalized views on this issue.

Keywords: ESL/EFL, Priorities, Appropriateness, Fluency, Correctness

INTRODUCTION

When I was a school and college student, my teachers used to check my grammar and spelling errors indefatigably. They would constantly bring home the point that accuracy was of top importance. Accordingly, I labored hard to perfect my spelling and grammar. Happily, my hard work paid dividends. Finally, I could spell words correctly, use punctuation adeptly, and produce sentences accurately. My teachers rewarded me with excellent grades and certificates, which I have preserved with great pride till date. Obviously, I am indebted to my teachers for my lexical, phonological and grammatical competence. However, later I realized that grammaticality alone was not sufficient. The moment I started using English in real life situations, I found my grammatical competence embarrassingly inadequate to communicate effectively and efficiently. To my dismay, my bookish English occasionally made me a butt of ridicule. On completing my Masters in English I was recruited as a lecturer in English in a college and began to deliver my wares. Gradually, I started sorting out my objectives of teaching English to my students. Subsequently, I laid down the agenda for myself: confidence building, fluency, appropriateness, and

accuracy. As I gained more teaching experience, my adherence to this sequence strengthened. Thereafter, this intuitive claim got converted into a firm conviction when I started teaching in Vietnam. Since then I have made it my mission to enable my students to use English confidently, appropriately and accurately. The order is, of course, significant. Now let me take up these priorities one at a time.

Discussion

The first occupant on the agenda is confidence building. Let me start with my claim that most students in some Asian countries (especially in Japan) are diffident when it comes to using English. Understandably, the biggest challenge for a foreign teacher of English in such countries is to help students overcome shyness. As we know, in Asian countries English is either a foreign language or a second language. To use the well-known three-circle metaphor (Kachru 1992), we do not belong to the inner circle; some of us are in the outer circle and some in the expanding circle. Most of us do not get opportunities to hear and speak English. Consequently, we are primarily visual learners, not auditory learners, unlike people who fall within the inner circle. Incidentally, I will be drawing my examples from Vietnam

and Japan for two reasons. First, I have taught English to pre-service diplomats and sea- port officers in Vietnam for three years, and to pre-university and university students in Japan for the same length of period. Secondly, unlike in India, in these countries English is a foreign language and exposure to English is very minimal. Families do not speak English at home. Employees do not use English in the office, at the station, at the post office, and even at the airport, etc. The only place where English has some privilege is the English classroom. And even here teachers and students use Vietnamese and Japanese quite extensively. This, by the way, is not to deny the facilitating impact of the use of Vietnamese and Japanese in an English class. In fact, I personally acknowledge the utility of bilingual technique in my Japanese classes. Nevertheless, there is a difference between the use of the native language as a facilitating instrument and as an eclipsing substitute. If the teacher uses Japanese extensively, then he/she loses a potential opportunity to help students overcome inhibitions about English. The few occasions when learners have a chance to listen to some English are missed. Learners remain as shy at the exit level as they were at the entry level. Another reason why Japanese students, for example, do not try to speak in English is their constant fear of instant teacher correction. As teachers we need to understand and remember the importance of indirect and positive feedback. Clearly, such feedback has encouraging effect on the learners and instills confidence in them. In short, the first priority in such a situation is to make the learner feel comfortable with the language and eradicate the fear of making mistakes. Once the learner is at ease with the teacher and the language, half the battle is won.

By the way, I would like to share an interesting observation about Vietnamese learners with you. Most Vietnamese students learn a lot of English in karaoke centers. When they sing karaoke, their enunciation of English words is amazingly accurate. They can approximate American or British pronunciation incredibly perfectly. A karaoke is one place where they get rid of their nervousness. There is no teacher to correct pronunciation and grammar. They feel absolutely comfortable with their peers and try to emulate their favorite singers with unbelievably close approximation to the original articulation, rhythm, pitch and pace.

I have always believed that learning how to speak English is similar to learning how to swim or how to ride a bicycle. I remember the day I first jumped into water to swim. I was scared of water and thought that I was going to drown; but gradually, I picked up confidence and began to move my arms and legs and was amazed at my progress in swimming. Speaking English is very similar to this. Every big thing has a small beginning. Let our learners make a small beginning. Let them make mistakes. We need to break the ice, set the ball rolling. Only then can our students develop their English speaking skills. Let the learner take the initiative. This will not happen if the teacher explains rules of grammar and sentence structures in a mechanical, mindless manner. This will not happen as long as we teach English through Vietnamese and Japanese, depriving our learners of invaluable opportunities of language practice in meaningful, relevant, realistic situations. This will not happen unless they themselves use the language in simulated situations. Can we become champion swimmers just by reading a dozen books on swimming? We want our learners to become expert swimmers, but we do not let them jump into the water. Instead, we spend hours after hours standing by the side of the swimming pool and explaining to them how to swim! How can our learners become confident Olympic swimmers if we do not let them walk into the pool? How can they become champion cyclists if we do not allow them to pick up the bicycle, ride it, fall and rise and fall and rise and then pedal it away? Our job as teachers is just to support them when they first ride a bicycle, just to give the bicycle a push and leave it. Confidence results from falling off and getting up, not from continuous support from the teacher and parasitic dependence on the part of the learner.

Teachers can instill, maintain, and increase self-confidence in the learners in various ways. Dornyei (2001) lists five strategies to help our learners in this respect:

Teachers can foster the view that competence is not a static condition but an ongoing process. Thus learners come to think that growth is gradual but sure.

They can provide regular experiences of success in the classroom.

They give opportunities to the learners to contribute

meaningfully. When students feel that they can contribute, they will feel more interested.

They praise the learners for their contribution and their progress. An occasional word of encouragement, a pat on their back will elevate their spirits and level of motivation.

They can make the classroom climate less stressful. Learning gains momentum when the classroom situation is relaxed, friendly and homely.

Now let me say a few words about appropriateness. Japanese is widely known as one of the most difficult languages to gain pragmatic competence in. Many learners complain that though they have vast amounts of vocabulary and grammar, they cannot communicate effectively with native speakers. Let us assume that your pronunciation is amazingly close to native accent and your grammar without blemishes. Are these two competencies enough to ensure effective communication? Impeccable enunciation and grammatically sound sentences are, no doubt, important. However, phonological and grammatical competence alone cannot guarantee effective communication. In order to effectively communicate in various social and interpersonal situations we need more than mere clear accent and accurate grammar. Rules of grammar are necessary, but rules of use are essential. Let me cite some examples to substantiate the point.

Unfortunately, a certain gentleman's friend lost his mother. On hearing the sad news, he rushed to the bereaved friend to offer his condolences. The following conversation is a transcript of what transpired between them:

Mr. A: I'm greatly shocked by the news. I couldn't believe my ears.

Mr. B: I'm deeply touched and overwhelmed by the spontaneous overflow of your sympathy. Let me reiterate, I left no stone unturned, but as luck would have it, the hand that rocked my cradle kicked the bucket one score days ago. It was a nocturnal demise.

What do you think of Mr. B's language? Would you describe it as living English or bookish English? I do not think you would expect this kind of English in a friendly conversation, would

you? Let us examine Mr. B's English. As you can see, its grammar is perfect and it is evidence of the idiomatic/lexical competence of the speaker. However, it is language without life in it. Let us break down the utterances and talk about its highlights:

overwhelmed by the spontaneous overflow of your sympathy

iterate

left no stone unturned

as luck would have it

the hand that rocked my cradle

kicked the bucket

one score days ago

nocturnal demise

In normal circumstances, people would use the following expressions:

thanks for your feelings

tell

did my best

unfortunately

my mother

passed away

three weeks ago

passed away at night/died in sleep

Mr. B's English is too ornate to express a sense of loss of a dear one. He could have said:

"I did my best/ tried hard, but unfortunately I lost my mother three weeks ago. She passed way in sleep."

I remember another example, an anecdote. One day a snuff (powdered tobacco taken into the nose by sniffing) addict was traveling by bus. After some time he got fidgety because he had left his snuff box at home. Luckily for him there was another snuff addict on the bus. He went over to the gentleman and said:

"Excuse me, sir. Would you mind if I inserted my digital extremities into your concavity and take a pinch of pulverized tobacco, which, on entering my nasal cavity, will cause a tickling sensation and a blissful titillation in my olfactory organ."

What a circuitous and roundabout way of making a simple request! I am sure you find this English funny and frozen. Now, let us gloss the highlights:

digital extremities= finger tips

pulverized tobacco= snuff; tobacco that is powdered into snuff

nasal cavity= nose

a tickling sensation and a blissful titillation= a sneeze and a feeling of relaxation that follows it

olfactory organ= nose

The speaker could have said:

“May I have a pinch of snuff, please?”

An extensive vocabulary can be a powerful writing and speaking tool; it can also be misused, made to make others feel powerless. Never use a five-dollar word where a fifty-cent word will do the job just as well or even better. Do we really need utilize when a three-letter word, use, will nicely suffice. In everyday situations do we really need risible when laughable is at hand? Bovine spongiform encephalopathy is a perfect expression, but is it worth sending our listeners/readers to a specialized, technical dictionary when we can express the idea through mad cow disease? It's an important question. On the other hand, we should not cheat our readers out of some important nuance of meaning that we have discovered in a word that is new to us. At some time we have to assume that our readers also have dictionaries. It's sometimes a tough line to draw—between being a pedantic, pretentious boor (Oh, there are three dandies!) and being a writer who can take full and efficient advantage of the multifarious (another one!) resources of the English language. As someone has said, the finest language is mostly made up of simple and unimposing words. There is no need to use a big word when a diminutive one will suffice.

The above illustrations throw light on the fundamental differences between living English and bookish English. The latter does not consider the factors that influence the choice of words and sentence types. On the other hand, living and appropriate English does. It is sensitive to the nature of occasion, speaker-hearer relationship, and topic. An informal, friendly interaction requires simple, easily

decipherable English. Intimate relationship between speaker and hearer demands short sentences and simple words. An everyday topic needs non-technical, monosyllabic vocabulary. In other words, the degree of formality of English depends on the extent of formality of topic, occasion and speaker-hearer relationship. Any mismatch might lead to either humor or bitter feelings. Thus when we speak we are all the time making choices at lexical, grammatical, and pragmatic levels. As teachers of English we need to sensitize our learners to the norms of appropriateness and acceptability of vocabulary, grammar, style and tone in various situations. Young learners learning a language not only need to understand the grammar of the language but they also must learn language socialization. Learning how to speak, how to use different styles of communication in different contexts (casual, formal, etc.) is as important, or perhaps more important, than learning the rules of grammar and spellings of words.

Finally, let us talk about accuracy. We can divide this criterion into three broad categories: pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. As I mentioned earlier, I will draw examples from my experience of teaching English to Vietnamese, Japanese and Arab students.

Evidently, one major problem area for these students is accent. For example, most Vietnamese and Japanese learners do not articulate words clearly. Vietnamese learners tend to drop word-final sounds. For instance, they will pronounce the italicized words in the following sentence almost identically, as if they were homophones:

“Mr. Nguyen, why (/wai/) doesn't your wife (/wai/) try white (/wai/) wine (/wai/)?”

Whereas omission is a major problem with Vietnamese learners, substitution is a big problem with Japanese learners. For instance, there is a strong tendency among Japanese learners to replace /r/ with /l/ and /v/ with /b/. As a result, it is very difficult to distinguish between “This is a grass house.” and “This is a glass house.” An Arab learner's problems are substitution and insertion of extra sounds. So, pill is articulated as bill and text is pronounced as tekist. The pronunciation problems of the three groups of learners can be summarily illustrated with the help of the following single

example:

"I'm going to dine with six friends. We'll have a pot of fried rice each."

An Arab learner will most probably say:

"I'm going to dine with sikis friends. We'll have a boat of rice each."

A Vietnamese learner will tend to say:

"I'm going to die with sick friends. We'll have a pot of rice each."

A Japanese learner will likely say:

"I'm going to dine with six hriends. We'll have a pot of flied lice each."

Another area is vocabulary. One case in point is the use of come and go in Vietnamese variety of English. In standard variety of English, go means moving to a place that is far from the speaker and the listener and come means moving to a place that is nearer to the hearer. For example, a student may say to his teacher: "May I come in, Sir?" and "Sir, may I go home now?" In the first case, the student is moving nearer to the teacher; in the second case, the student wants to move away from the teacher. This is the normal use in English. But, in Vietnamese variety of English, the use is reversed. The student usually says to the teacher who is in school with him: "Excuse me, Sir, I cannot go to school tomorrow. May I come back home now?" (Patil 2002, pp. 14-16). Japanese speakers of English also tend to use these two verbs with reverse meanings

Let us look at one more example. Like the words come and go Vietnamese students use the words bring and take in a reverse way. In British English when I bring something I carry it from another place to the place where the hearer is. Similarly, when I take something, I take it from where the hearer and I are to another place. But Vietnamese students use the two words in an exactly opposite way. As a teacher I often heard my students say: "Excuse me, teacher, I don't have this book at home. Can I bring it for a week, please?" and "I'm sorry, teacher, I forgot to take the book that I brought from you last week I'll take it tomorrow." Now, the important point here is: how do these readers interpret come and go and bring and take when they encounter them in a reading passage? Do they interpret them the

English way or the Vietnamese way? My experience is that elementary and intermediate level Vietnamese learners of English interpret these words the Vietnamese way. They need to be told time and again that the usual meanings of come and go and bring and take are different.

Let us move on to grammar now. Here, mother tongue interference seems to be a major stumbling block. For example, Arabic does not have copula verb and so many Arab learners of English produce utterances such as "I student of Sultan Qaboos university Language Center." Vietnamese does not have relative pronouns; as a result, we hear sentences such as "There are many children dont go to school." Japanese word order is subject + object + verb, and nouns do not have plural forms; consequently, we hear utterances like "I vegetable bought."

However, I think these grammar mistakes do not bother me so much as the pronunciation errors do. From the communication point of view it does not matter much whether the foreign language learner says, "I TV watch." or "I watch TV"; "I have two book" or "I have two books." "This is a girl beautiful." or "This is a beautiful girl." Communication is not affected in any serious way. But, there is certainly a communication problem when a Vietnamese learner wants to say he is going to dine, but says he is going to die; a Japanese learner wants to say he has got just two books, but says he has got just two bucks, and an Arab learner wants to say he bought a pear but says he bought a bear.

Conclusion

Let me now summarize my views on how I have prioritized the priorities of teaching English as a second/foreign language. My general aim has always been to enable my learners to speak, read and write English fluently. To achieve this goal, I have to take them up a staircase, a ladder. To make the climbing easy and comfortable I have to create opportunities for them to use English in meaningful, realistic, relevant situations. Games, role play activities, information gap tasks, brain storming exercises, riddles, puzzles, cartoons, anecdotes, jokes, songs, and other low-cost and easily available teaching materials come handy. Learners enjoy toying with the language, experimenting with it and gradually but surely feel confident and comfortable with the language. Once they have got rid of their fear

complex, they try to use English creatively. Since they are not scared of making mistakes, they try to use as much language as they can and in due course of time pick up more vocabulary and structures. Occasionally, I administer certain activities the focus of which is to sensitize them to situational, social and interpersonal appropriateness and acceptability. I do not mind using examples from their native language. For example, how would they say "good morning" in Japanese to their classmates and to the principal of their school? Would they say, "Ohayo Gozaimasu" to their classmates and "Ohayo" to the principal? Would they say "Domo" to their teachers and "Domo Arigato Gozaimasu" to their schoolmates on the occasion of graduation ceremony? 'Ohayo' (informal) and 'Ohayo Gozaimasu' (formal) mean 'Good morning';

'Demo' (informal) and 'Demo Arigatou Gozaimasu' (formal) mean 'Thank you'. I think we should inculcate in our learners this sense of linguistic, paralinguistic and social appropriateness before we burden with doses of grammar. To sum up, we need to set our priorities right: confidence, appropriateness, and correctness all contributing to general fluency.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Z. Patil is a Professor of English in the Centre for Training and Development, School of English Language Education of the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, India. He has a Masters, M.Phil and Ph.D. in English Besides teaching English from Pune University, a Postgraduate Certificate in the Teaching of English from the Central Institute of English and Foreign Languages, Hyderabad, and a Diploma and Masters in TESOL from Edinburgh. He taught English to pre-service diplomats and in-service Seaport officers in Vietnam from 1999 to 2002 and served as an English Language Advisor in Japan from April 2003 to March 2006. He has authored several books and articles on English language and literature. He is associated with the Online Asian EFL Journal (Associate Editor), Asian Business Journal (Senior Editor), The Linguistics Journal (Senior Associate Editor), TESOL Law Journal (Region Advisor) and The Journal of Research Practice (Reviewer)."