

Milestones of a Life of Teaching Language Learning and Teaching: Some Personal Reflections

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My interest in foreign languages – and by extension language learning and teaching – goes back to my childhood. One of my earliest primary school memories is from first grade when three student teachers from a nearby college came to observe our class. I eagerly walked up to one of them and told her that I knew what “wee wee”¹ meant. She said I shouldn’t use that word. Rather surprised and hurt at being misunderstood, I protested, “No, it means ‘yes, yes’ in French” (oui, oui).

Also, the New York neighborhood where I grew up was multiethnic and multilingual. Within a two-minute walk of my home, you could hear Norwegian, German, Yiddish mixed with Hebrew, Italian (actually it was Sicilian although I didn’t know the difference at the time – gabish?), Spanish, Arabic and Chinese as well as African-American Creole English.

¹ “wee wee” is English child’s language meaning to urinate (in Japanese it’s “shi shi”).

When I was in fourth grade, I found out that my shop teacher spoke Russian. In point of fact, he was Ukrainian but I didn't know what the difference was and he agreed to teach me Russian anyway. I approached the task by first making a word list, which I gave him. I then proceeded to learn the Cyrillic alphabet and started transcribing the words in cursive Russian script. I also made a small list of useful greetings and expressions, which I memorized and practiced with people whenever I had the chance, whether they were Russian speaking or not. So this was my first actual attempt at learning a foreign language all on my own. What I did was to go from making my own word lists to learning the writing system to memorizing a few useful expressions, and then writing them all down.

By junior high school I was creating my own alphabets and languages in much the same way. One such creation was *Kaboona* – an imagined language of aliens from Saturn that I fantasized had secretly colonized Easter Island and built the giant long-eared stone statues, known as Moai. After designing an esoteric looking alphabet (I didn't know much about syllabaries or most other writing systems back then), I made up some words, which I then “translated” into English. All of this made for a fun early teenage fantasy while at the same time further reinforcing my interest in foreign languages and language learning.

My first real experience with classroom-based foreign language learning came in high school when I took – and failed – first-year German two years in a row. It was largely due to the grammar translation method widely employed at the time. I didn't know what the teacher was talking about when she used terms like "pluperfect." The only thing I was good at was dictation. The German spelling system is fairly regular and relatively easy to master. So even if I didn't know what the words being dictated to me meant, I was generally able to spell them correctly. This, of course, suggests that I had a good "ear" for language (although maybe not an analytical brain for Latin Grammar translation imposed on a Germanic language). But the "ear"-for-language thing is also important because of subsequent research, which suggests a hierarchy of language learning from listening comprehension to speaking to reading to writing. In other words, the best approach is to start with listening activities, and then move to speaking, reading and writing.

My first experience in a foreign culture came in my late teens when I visited Mexico. Although I wasn't there long enough to really learn very much Spanish, I did acquire what could be called a rudimentary knowledge of some bits and pieces of the language as I encountered it. Maybe the

first word I learned in Mexico was "*¿Mande?*" which actually means to command or give orders but is used to politely ask "what?" as in "What did you say?" When I returned to New York and later started befriending members of the Puerto Rican community in junior college, my "*¿Mande?*" turned to "*¿Que dices?*" and I began dropping my final position "s's" and replacing "ir" verb endings with "il" (thus, "tenemos que ir" became "tenemo que il") – all very "Borinquen". And all of this was happening even though my overall Spanish proficiency was still quite rudimentary.

It wasn't until the Vietnam War and an invitation from Uncle Sam I couldn't turn down without going to jail to participate in that criminal exercise of American Imperialism, that I actually found myself living in a foreign country. So Vietnamese became my first conversational language. I was stationed in ĐàNang, which is the general location where the southern and northern dialects of Vietnamese converge. Unlike the Vietnamese barred "đ" which is pronounced "d", the unbarred letter "d" is pronounced "y" in the south and "z" in the north – thus the Vietnamese national garment "*áo dài*" can be pronounced either "au yai" or "au zai". I identified with the Northern dialect so I made a point of pronouncing my unbarred "d's" like "z's". So, as with Spanish, my interest in languages

came with some fairly strong dialect identification – even at the earliest stages when my conversational ability was quite limited.

After one year in Vietnam, I was transferred to Japan and this is where my foreign language proficiency really began to bloom. Immediately after arriving at Yokosuka Naval Base I enrolled in a University of Maryland class in Japanese. Being a US Navy photojournalist, I was subsequently transferred to Pacific Stars and Stripes in Tokyo and enrolled at Naganuma Tokyo School of Language. They taught using the Direct Approach, which I very much liked – particularly since grammar was not explicitly taught. The only language used in the classroom was Japanese but the visual and other oral reinforcements made both comprehension and subsequent production relatively easy.

I spent April of 1968 – March of 1970 in Japan before being discharged and returning to the United States to attend university under the GI Bill, majoring in Linguistics (a natural choice). During this time in Japan, I actually did become proficient in the language. I also married a Japanese woman – so the language and the culture became an important part of my identity. Along the way, we had a

son and committed ourselves to bringing him up biculturally and bilingually.

Following graduate school, I began teaching English as a Second Language at a business school in New York. I also took post-graduate courses in Applied Linguistics at Columbia University Teachers College – and then landed a job in Iran, teaching English as a foreign language. So Farsi became my next language – although I wasn't there long enough to really become fluent. In 1977 we moved back to Japan where I became the course director for the NEC (Nippon Electric Company) Language Study Center. It was during this time that JALT was just getting started.

The first conference – which I did not attend – was held in Osaka circa 1976, at which three separate language teaching organizations were informally created (the Kansai Association of Language Teachers, the Tokai Association of Language Teachers and the Kanto Association of Language Teachers). When I arrived back in Japan, I began attending meetings in Tokyo of the Kanto Association (KALT). Then at the 1977 conference at a retreat outside of Nagoya, the three organizations united to become the first chapters of JALT – and to affiliate with TESOL. I became the national program chair and began organizing nationally sponsored meetings with academics and language education specialists from

around the world who were visiting. These included such people as Caleb Gattegno of Silent Language fame, John Condon of intercultural communication fame, and John Fanselow of Teachers College Columbia University. We also used some of our funding from membership dues to pay for speakers to visit.

English was not the only area of language teaching that I became involved in. As time went on I became increasingly concerned about endangered languages – particularly languages spoken by indigenous peoples. Here, the teaching of English as a second or foreign language sometimes poses a threat to the survival of these very languages. That is, by teaching English, we may also be helping to kill indigenous languages.

What's more, forcing children from an early age to be educated in English – a language they don't understand – can also serve to dumb them out. While often labeled bilingual education and branded as a theoretically sound application based on direct method, it simply doesn't work in many of these settings. Instead, bilingual education often has horrific results. Students, who do not understand what the teacher is trying to teach, are generally seen as stupid by their teachers – and are then subjected to punishment.

In 1999, I visited Micronesia and was asked by the Department of Education there to assist in the development of local dictionaries and classroom teaching materials in the local languages. I applied for and was awarded a research grant from the Japan Ministry of Education and Sports to develop a bilingual education model which would incorporate local knowledge into the curriculum. What we did was to work with teachers, students, parents, local knowledge holders and members of the community at large to produce publishable materials, which would protect and promote indigenous languages.

We brought knowledge holders – usually elders – into the classroom and asked them to tell stories to the students about their respective areas of expertise – from canoe building to the making of thatched roofs and the gathering and grinding of herbal medicines. Students would listen to the stories, draw pictures and write the stories down. These stories were then translated bilingually and then reproduced as textbooks and learning materials, which could be used in the classroom and also be shelved in school libraries. The vocabulary was then catalogued and used to make bilingual dictionaries.

In 2007, I was asked by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Finland to design a program for their main education sector

overseas development aid project in Nepal – where well over 100 languages are spoken. I also followed this approach when asked to develop programs for two indigenous languages spoken in Far East Russia – Naanai and Udeghe. I subsequently worked for the Public School System in the Marshall Islands to develop a bilingual education program there, which supported local knowledge systems. The biographical summary below briefly outlines some of this work.

Biographical Summary

Dr. Hough has dedicated his academic career to research, teaching and activism in support of linguistic and cultural human rights for indigenous and minority peoples. He has worked extensively in Asia and the Pacific to develop dictionaries and learning materials based on indigenous knowledge systems. From 2000-2003 he was Chief Scientific Researcher for the Kosrae State Department of Education in Micronesia, a project sponsored by the Japan Ministry of Education. From 2007-2008 he served as Chief Technical Advisor to the Nepal Ministry of Education and Sports, where he oversaw a multilingual education project to enable the more than 130 minority groups in that country to be educated in their mother tongues. He has also worked in Far East Russia with the Naanai and Udeghe communities, as well as in Japan on issues of Ainu and

Uchinaa (Okinawan) linguistic and human rights. From 2013-2017 Dr. Hough served as Senior Advisor for Bilingual Education for the Public School System of the Republic of the Marshall Islands. In 2017 he received an official commendation from the Ambassador of Japan to the Marshall Islands for helping to build goodwill and understanding between the two countries. He has also spoken in support of linguistic and cultural human rights on three occasions at the United Nations in New York at the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues. Dr. Hough can be reached at davida.hough@gmail.com.