ACCURACY VS. FLUENCY IN SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING [1]

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One of the most important questions that second language teachers must answer is "Do I want my students to be accurate or fluent?"

Most of us, perhaps not wanting to reveal our own limitations as teachers, will probably answer both. "I want my students to be both accurate and fluent." And you are right to feel this way because these are certainly important and reasonable ultimate goals for all of our students: the ability to communicate in another language with reasonable correctness and without undue hesitation. However, I do not believe that both of these goals--i.e., accuracy and fluency--can realistically be met in the early stages of language learning and I would like to share with you the reasons for my pessimism.

First let's look at a typical beginning or lower-level course. The lessons are most likely structured so that an average student can "master" them in the time alloted. But just what does "mastery" imply? Does it mean to talk, read, and write like a native speaker in any situation? Or does it mean less than this and, if so, what is the criterion of success? And what are the performance standards? If the student is expected to be completely accurate, s/he will obviously learn less in a given time than s/he would if s/he were working towards a less demanding (and perhaps more useful) criterion, e.g. fluent intelligibility.

Many features of the grammar and pronunciation of a foreign language carry little, if any, semantic information. Verb endings, case inflections, gender distinctions, prepositions, and many spelling rules can all be inaccurately used without affecting intelligibility. The sentence "She see her boy friend every day" is hardly more intelligible if the -s inflection is added to the verb. Of course, such errors are irritating to some people and must eventually be dealt with if the learner's ultimate aim requires accurate performance, such as becoming a teacher of the language.

In the end it is a matter of priorities: Do we want an emphasis on fluency in the early stages which will probably result in inaccuracies but which will provide the

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pupil with a useful command of the language relatively quickly, or do we want slower progress with stress laid on accurate performance of new points as they turn up in the course? It is tempting to go for the latter aim, particularly if one believes that inaccuracies tolerated early in the learning will be more difficult to deal with later on. However, how many of you have noticed that, even when the teaching is very precise and accurate, students still find it extremely difficult to achieve a high standard of accuracy in the details of the language?

It is extremely important not to attach irrelevant and biased value judgements to the two different approaches by thinking of one as "disciplined" and the other as "undisciplined," or "formal" vs. "informal." The issue at hand is basically one of timing. If our aim is fluency, we can let the student move along as fast as possible in the beginning stages, aiming only at a reasonably confident comprehension and production of the foreign language in spite of inaccuracies in semantically unimportant rules such as gender, case, conjugation, etc. Then at a later stage we can take up the details and work on a more correct performance. If we do this, there will be certain consequences. First, some students will drop the course of study before the question of detailed accuracy has been dealt with seriously. Their performance will therefore be faulty, but at least it should be useful. Second, students who have been trained to be fluent will probably resist the teacher's attempts to enforce accuracy because it temporarily slows up their fluency of expression. Finally, there may be a problem of "unlearning" points which have been allowed to pass without much comment in the past.

If one believes very strongly that language learning is essentially a matter of habit formation, then the "fluency first" argument will probably carry a lot of weight. Furthermore, we know that inaccuracies persist even with the most stringent teaching methods. This suggests that there is a natural timetable for learning a foreign language. Indeed, the utterances of small children are full of inaccuracies if measured against the standard of adult speech yet for the most part they go unchecked because they are not thought of as inaccuracies but as "underdeveloped speech." However, if a six-year old still talks like a three-year old, then s/he will likely be given special attention of some sort.

If we adopt the more usual aim of accurate performance, we can at least examine the pupils to see whether or not they have acquired this accuracy or not. Accuracy is simple to examine, mainly because it tests grammatical rules which can easily be judged right or wrong, so tests can be marked without too much argument. Fluency, on the other hand, is almost impossible to mark fairly, which is a pity since it is a more important skill than accuracy in most real-life situations. The second consequence (and a very serious one) of an accuracy-dominated approach is that many pupils leave the course of study before they have learned enough of the foreign language to be of much practical use. Finally, there is the thought that insistence on detailed accuracy is premature in the early stages, something like forcing a plant's growth in a hothouse.

Forced with a choice between accuracy and fluency, many teachers will try to compromise: as much accuracy and as much fluency as possible in the time available. In the long run, however, teaching systems being what they are with their inevitable demands for testable behavior from the pupils, the accuracy criterion is

almost inevitably bound to win out. But the problem goes even deeper than this, a veritable Catch -22. Fluency in the early stages is very difficult to recognize. After all, if a student has not learned much of the same language, s/he cannot very easily demonstrate how easily s/he can express ideas in the language. Accuracy, however, is very easy to recognize, with the result that an inaccurate student is a much more salient comment on a teacher's skill than/an inarticulate student. As teachers, we dislike inaccuracy because it's a direct affront to our teaching abilities and, ultimately, to our positions as teachers. We should not overlook the fact that accuracy tends to be the shibboleth of authoritarian teachers and authoritarian institutions

In the final analysis, we seem to be left on the horns of a dilemma. If we can't have both accuracy and fluency in beginning language learning, and if we are in a teaching situation which demands testable results, which way do we go? The answer to this question lies within your students and their goals and within your own understanding of what you're trying to accomplish as a teacher.

Personally, I believe with deep conviction that the purpose of language is communication and that communication is achieved through attention to fluency. Extreme attention to accuracy, unfortunately, tends to detract from fluency. Like the Winston cigarette commercial, we need to ask ourselves whether we want good grammar or good taste. We can't have both in the early stages of language learning.

REFERENCE

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