

COMMUNICATIVE PRAXIS, ENGLISH CLASS,
AND REALITY

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One summer afternoon, drinking beer with a Chilean friend in a bar near a Santiago English institute (audio-visual approach with emphasis on repetitive shouting), I noticed a young office clerk, who probably likes to think of himself as a young executive, filling in the blanks in his English exercise book. Dressed in a good, but slightly dated, blue summer suit, English cut, and undoubtedly bought in the bygone years of the so-called 'milagro chileno' (it was a miracle that anyone saw it as a miracle except foreign banks), the fellow had the air of nervous business, of hanging on to a job in a country where a third of the people have none.

Impelled partly by the good will brought on by several beers in good company, partly by curiosity and partly by a hostility toward 'método rápido' English institutes, I asked him in English if he needed help. He answered in Spanish that he was busy with his English lesson. I countered that he was in luck: I was a North American and my friend a polyglot poet, both happy to converse with him in English. Our new acquaintance glanced at his watch with an authoritative gesture: his class began in 20 minutes and he had to finish his exercises.

Perhaps our beery friendliness scared this young man off -- a Chilean trying to climb the now non-existent ladder to success -- probably perceives two tieless characters over 30 drinking beer in the afternoon, as semi-unemployed, and hence as somehow a source of contagion. However, it may be that while studying English is, as the ads say, the key to the future, learning it (or

anything else) is the key to unemployment, since advancement in our society is based on certification of studies completed, not on knowing something or doing something well.

Did our young executive confuse the means with the ends? Did he take the means of completing an exercise over the end of using the language? I've found in so many situations that students and teachers prefer the satisfaction of finishing something concrete, like a lesson in a book, to real use and knowledge of the language itself. I have night English classes with the employees of one company, and in the past I've generally tried to get them to speak English with me. That's all. The results unfortunately are hard to measure. Their English fluency has increased; however, they're dissatisfied with the course. They want dictations, books, tests. If they were forced to complete a lesson a week, they'd feel they had learned something, and since they had learned that something in an English class, they must have learned English.

Many students entering an institute teaching ask how many years they must study to receive their certificate, as if a certificate from an English institute were something like a driver's licence. In reality, a driver's licence signifies a person has the minimum ability requisite to drive a car, while a piece of paper certifying completion of a course in a language is not a permit to speak the language but certification of completion of a course; a course in a language is not the language.

We must distinguish between students (or non-students) who have learned how to learn and students who have learned how to play the game of mastering the lessons.

Aaron Ben-Moshe (born Roberto Gómetz) was and still may be a waiter in a café near the University of California campus. At first he irritated me since he addressed me in Yiddish, a language I, although Jewish, don't understand, and which for reasons of snobbery unfortunately bequeathed me by my parents, I felt a

certain repugnance toward. Gradually, through mutual friends, I became aware that Mr Ben-Moshe was a natural linguist and spoke bits of countless languages learned from the foreign students who frequented the café. Ben-Moshe learned the languages by talking to native-speakers whenever he could, at times consulting a dictionary or a grammar book, but above all, actively searching out what he found necessary as the next step in his road to mastery of the language.

OK, you say, we're not all autodidacts like Mr Ben-Moshe. Teaching involves getting to the average student. Let me roughly divide the average student into 3 categories. First, there are those who know how to learn and will learn in almost any situation with any or in spite of any methodology. The second category are those who play the game of school. They may want to 'know' English without necessarily learning it.

Their principal motivation is not the subject matter, but achieving the rewards which completing the course brings.

The third category of student includes those who want to learn, but don't know how. They may be aware that completing lesson is not equivalent to mastering a language (and this awareness may disturb them), but unlike Ben-Moshe they do not actively seek learning situations. They may become discouraged when they realize they are not learning a language in a classroom situation, in contrast to the second category of students mentioned above who will continue in a course while learning nothing because what they really want is to complete the course.

Why is there such a gap between learning language lessons and learning languages? For example, we may say that a student who has assimilated his history text has at least a partial view of history, that a student (or reader) who has carefully studied his philosophy text has mastered at least one approach to philosophy. There is a radical difference between a foreign language as an object of study and history as a body of studies. We may say that

mastery of history is almost equivalent to mastery of the facts and theories contained in history books, while a language is not a body of data to be learned, but a praxis to be applied in an infinite or very great number of possible situations.

Although the difference between mastery of a language and of other subjects is generally theoretically acknowledged in schools, they are still taught in much the same way: the student is given a book (even a book which insists that a language is a praxis, not a content to assimilate) and no distinction is made between mastery of the book or content of the course (taught as a closed system) and the use of the course contents and the book as steps to real praxis.

But there is still another problem. When you do exercises, you generally learn what you exercise, not much else: that is, swimming in a pool teaches you to swim in a pool, not in the sea. Practicing karate in a gym may certify you as black belt in gymnasium karate¹, but does not prepare you for a real fight. Similarly, practicing the most complicated exercise in an English text may teach you how to master that exercise yet not necessarily prepare you for the always more complicated real-life situation.

Role-playing is often used to simulate those real-life situations. But role-playing lacks the nervousness, the urgency, the necessity of real language situations. Just as a gymnasium karate match, even among black belts, is similar to a streetfight only in terms of the form of movements performed, so role-playing duplicates real-life communication only in terms of the structures or notions used. In role-playing there's nothing at stake between the players, although the players may be interested in a grade from the teacher.

As in my previous article (MEXTESOL Journal, August

¹ It is interesting that there are almost as many 'rapid method' karate institutes in Chile as rapid method English institutes. Is this an index of Oriental cultural penetration?

1983) I offer no solutions. This time, however, having read "From the Editors" in the August Journal, I offer my criticisms with more humility, for, as the editors point out, debunking may point to decadence as well as renewal. However, I sustain that the present system of exercises and lessons generally does not work; that is, we have no choice but to criticize or play an ever more empty farse. Criticism may destroy or create; I insist, very humbly, that it's the only card we have to play.