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LEARNING FROM NATURAL LANGUAGE LABS¹

ABSTRACT: With recent budget constraints in higher educational institutions, language labs have become an important support service for our students. In this article, I try to describe the "natural language lab" which was responsible for my learning English and other languages. What is unique with this natural language lab was that it provided me the experience of real and meaningful interactions with native speakers of the language, which is crucially needed for successful second language acquisition.

Recently, a colleague of mine asked if I remembered how I learned English. It is always difficult to remember the process of anything, especially when one grows up with it—having it as part of one's life; everything is done automatically and unconsciously. Indeed, a few years ago, when language teachers began to talk about "the composing process," I started to ask myself the question, "Yes, how *did* I learn languages?" I found that I did not know. My colleagues suggested that I compare myself to childhood friends who were monolinguals. I tried, but it was impossible because almost everyone among my family and friends were bilinguals or multilinguals. The more I thought about this question, the more fascinated I became.

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In 1945, the store my father owned in Leyte [a city in the

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Philippines] was frequented by a majority of the Americans and other foreigners in town because it carried many otherwise unavailable imported goods. Of course, there was also the local community. Most of them were from the middle and upper classes of society. This did not mean that the lower status group did not frequent the store. They did, but not often because they could not afford the prices. Thus, my father's store was known as the meeting place of a certain "elite." Because of this, most of the people who came to the store spoke English, and English became the medium of communication 90% of the time. Even the local people working as employees there had to be able to speak some English.

We, the children of my father, had the advantage of participating in a "living" language lab even before such a term existed. In fact, I never even heard of a language lab until I came to graduate school in New York many years later. However, at my father's store, my language skills—whether English or the Filipino dialect—automatically got exercised as we practiced these languages in a very "natural setting," with "real" people.

The anxiety and stress that resulted from speaking another language slowly disappeared as we tried to communicate with people who came into the store. Even the Filipino customers spoke to us in English with some Filipino words inserted at times. There were also opportunities to practice Fookienese, the local dialect of the Chinese community, and any other dialect that the customers happened to speak. In general, the customers were kind, hospitable, and helpful to us in our attempts to learn English. Although they were not necessarily ideal people to model the various languages, they were ideal in the sense that they were native speakers of those languages. Thinking back now, I cannot imagine any setting better than this one.

I remember one time when a foreign ship docked at the Tacloban harbor and a group of Taiwanese sailors came ashore. As children, we were always curious and excited when "new visitors" arrived. How often do we meet "people from other lands?" On this occasion, we managed to use our newly learned "Mandarin" in order to communicate with these visitors. It was always fun.

My father encouraged me and my siblings to spend time at the store. During the academic year, we always helped out after school. This was true of all the families in town who were engaged in commerce, but my brothers and sisters were disciplined so that working in the store became partly our responsibility as early as I could remember.

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Our's was a small town grocery store. Behind the store was the

sea. There was a bar where hard liquor was served and the American GIs frequented it. There were legs of smoked Chinese ham hanging from the ceiling. In 1947, a fire broke out across the street. Unfortunately, the wind reversed its direction and fire swept across and gulped down the store.

I remember how my father and mother hurriedly took all of us out through the back door onto a barge that was docked at the wharf. As the barge moved towards the ocean, we saw our store burn and collapse into debris. This was Christmas Day. Our family was about to have Christmas dinner. The night had turned into a nightmare! The next day when my father went back to the site, all that was left were burnt ashes and a metal safe. My father almost gave up his business after the fire of 1947. He planned to take the whole family back to China.

A few months later, using the small amount of insurance money which he had received and the money my mother had managed to save over the years, my father rented another building and started his business all over again. He had lost virtually everything. However, he was determined to save his family of eight from poverty. Since he was a trusted customer, the wholesale companies were willing to help my father get started by giving him credit for certain goods. He worked night and day to rebuild the business he had lost.

The newly rented store was a little smaller than the previous one. On the left, shelves were stacked with varieties of liquor—Martini, Gordon Dry Gin. There were also two glass cases where imported chocolate was displayed—M & M's, Whitman, etc. Only the rich and affluent Filipino and foreign customers could afford these expensive items. In the middle aisle, imported delicious apples and oranges could be seen in square wooden containers. There was also a glass case where imported cigarettes were kept—Philip Morris, Camel, Chesterfield, and Kool. Aside from the usual canned goods, my father's store was unique in its gourmet selection of imported jams, jellies, and peanut butter combined with a display of traditional Filipino mango jams. On top of one shelf that used to display the imported Jacob cream crackers, were now the local MYSan cream crackers.

No grocery store is complete without a freezer or refrigerator. The coolers in my father's store were used to store fresh butter, frozen meats, cooked ham, eggs, cheese, and, later, Magnolia ice cream. On the second floor, it was very crowded. Every space was filled with cartons and boxes of goods. It looked like a little warehouse with boxes on top of boxes, some open, some half open. Around one corner were the sleeping quarters for the employees.

Space was tight, so only basic furniture was available—a wooden bed and a wooden crate used as a desk. On top of the bed hung a mosquito net made of cheesecloth. The top of the net was pulled together by its four corners where strings were attached and tied to a nail on the wall. During the day, the net was pulled up, and at night it showered down onto the square bed where a tireless body lay resting.

This store moved to another location nearby ten years later after my father bought a new piece of land (150 square meters) and built a building of his own. This more modern store has glass walls all around, and there is only one entrance/exit compared to the multientrances of the previous store. The mezzanine has become a storage area. In addition, there is an office space and an apartment on the third floor. The rooftop is flat. One can see a large part of the city from the roof since there are no neighboring buildings to block the view. At night, the ocean breeze is delightful!

Although nowadays more grocery stores have been established in my city, my father's store has become "an institution" to most foreign visitors. Some remember "the good old days," and the special personal contact the store offered its customers. Despite modern technology and improvements, the store continues to deal with customers on a one-to-one basis—thus, maintaining the uniqueness of a small country-style store.

My most recent visit was in the Summer of 1991. The store remains a haven for customers to shop and "chat" in. Instead of going to the local bank, for example, the German Redemptorist priest brings in heavy bags of coins collected in church to change into bills; another young man visiting from California comes in with his chauffeur, only to be told by his middle-aged driver that his father used to shop here. The man is too young to remember anything. An American couple with their five-year-old boy steps into the store asking, "Are these fig bars fresh?" A Japanese engineer with an interpreter is looking for Evian "mineral water."

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At the beginning stage of our learning experience, my siblings and I were afraid to ask for clarification or repetition of what the customers said. This was due partly to the whole cultural notion of "loss of face." We considered it impolite to ask questions. While Americans need to carry on a conversation, we had been taught that "polite silence" is preferable (Howard Gardner, 1989). As soon as we had sufficient practice and developed confidence, we also developed socialization strategies and used nonverbal strategies to compensate for our lack of familiarity with the linguistic code. In

addition, when the customer asked for "butter," we had to pay close attention to the specific brand requested.

In this "natural language lab," I learned new vocabulary through associations. Grapes, oranges, and apples were classified as fruits in my mind. Butter, cheese, milk, and ice cream were all in one refrigerator labeled "dairy products." The first time I saw the phrase "dairy products" was when I opened the case of Kraft cheese and the carton had these words printed on it. It was also in this "natural language lab" that I learned to distinguish between the confusing pronunciation of "beer" in San Miguel beer and "bear" from "Bear brand milk." And, of course, the imported cigarettes such as Camel, Chesterfield, Philip Morris, and Lucky Strike were lumped together. Because I worked in the store, I responded when the customer asked for these products. I had to listen to them carefully so that I could give them the correct goods.

There was plenty of opportunity to work on listening comprehension. Words were repeated several times. It seems that lists such as the ones I mentioned are better learned by rehearsing, repeating, and rereading (Carroll, 1977). My skills were enhanced by rehearsing the same vocabulary, rereading the labels, and rewriting the new words on receipts. I probably wrote approximately twenty receipts (fifty and more when business was extremely good) each day. Sometimes I repeated the word in my mind as the customer asked for it. Since most of the interactions were conversational and short, it was easy for me to interpret and remember the details of the conversation.

We were especially attentive when Americans came into the store. This was a rare opportunity and we always got excited. Sometimes they cracked jokes; sometimes they used idiomatic expressions. We were really learning the language without knowing it. There was interaction between the listener and the speaker even though it took us a longer time to respond. In addition, we were exposed to different speakers with a wide variety of accents and pronunciation patterns. Everybody wanted to speak with the Americans. Of course, there were minor pronunciation problems that I retained in the course of my learning English, such as the distinction between the "th" and "d" sounds. I started to overcome this when a speech teacher called my attention to it and, from then on, I started to monitor my pronunciation. A class could not have helped me as well.

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Do the "artificial language labs" in schools work in the same way as the real thing? For one thing, the noninteractive audiotapes present a difficult transition from hearing tapes to understanding

natural spoken language. Moreover, language labs are expensive and maintenance is costly. One language lab I know of is mostly used by foreign language students. Tapes are available and students visit the lab to practice what is on the recordings. When machines break down, however, there is no budget for maintenance. Some labs are more flexible in the sense that students are allowed to borrow the tapes or make copies of them. In colleges where students commute, students may not have the time to sit in a lab and listen to tapes.

Moreover, the language used in many lab programs and printed language learning materials is stilted and not natural. Students are conditioned to learn "language" in a certain sequence, such as encountering simple sentences before complex ones. In this way, language learning has been broken down into separate pieces and stages. What happens when the learner is confronted with a situation where different levels of language are used simultaneously? Isn't that what native speakers of a language do? No wonder many of our second-language learners find it very difficult to respond after exhausting the first few phrases they have learned in classes or texts.

Many of our students at City College live in ghetto communities where there is very little practice of oral English. Where they live, their native language is spoken in stores and shops. When they come to college, they stay within their own ethnic groups socially. They interact very little with native speakers. I remember one student commented once, "I don't seem to be able to find any native speakers of English at the college." Even though they nominally live in an English-speaking place, it seems that they are psychologically and mentally still in their own country. Their skills in speaking and understanding English remain limited.

Language labs do give our students some of the practice they need in learning a second language. In many cases, however, the practice is artificial and limited. At times, our students need to get out of these controlled situations. We need to expose our students to native speakers as they interact "naturally" on the spot. There are some wonderful programs where students are assigned to work as interns in different offices at schools. Variations of co-op education also make the experiences of these students real. The learner hears expressions that sometimes are not found in texts. The learner learns to ask questions and respond as he/she sees fit. If the learner does not know, the speaker senses it, and rephrases the conversation.

Conversation Circles were initiated at The City College of New York (CCNY) in 1986 by Professors N. Shapiro, G. Waters, and myself. The project was begun to provide ESL students "with an opportunity to practice English outside the classroom setting (Lay and Kelly 1). Many of the ESL students at CCNY do not have

enough opportunity to use the language except when they are in ESL classes. And even in these classes, with a class size of 25 or more, it becomes difficult if not impossible for our students, especially the shy ones, to interact and actively participate in class discussions. Conversation Circles have now become part of the oral communication course here at City College. Again, the concern was that our students, while attending courses, really did not have opportunities to interact with other people, especially with native speakers. Conversation Circles facilitators from different disciplines and offices enjoy meeting five to eight students once a week to share insights from different cultures.

The coaching lab at Northern Telecom, Santa Clara, California, is an example of another situation where “language coaches” work with “language players” on an informal basis to “ease a particular language difficulty.” This program is not only educational, but also helps promote a spirit of cooperation and unity among the workers. The supplemental instruction offered by the coaching lab allows employers to work with relevant materials at their own pace. But most important of all, it “provides a more social, informal atmosphere for their native-English speaking and non-native English speaking employees to work together on a common goal and to simply get to know each other” (Wiley, 12).

It is true that language labs offer some kind of language practice for second-language learners. However, what is more important, especially for our students in our institutions, is to expose them to situations where they have to converse and communicate with native speakers or speakers of that language. In spite of the years that have passed since I participated in the “natural language lab” of my father’s store, few language labs in schools or colleges provide interaction with native speakers. It seems that the workplace is still the best environment for developing communicative competence and in providing listening and speaking opportunities for learning another language. I will conclude, therefore, with a statement made by one of my students after we discussed “the natural language lab” in class. He said, “I am weak in speaking English. But I count my working place as my natural language lab.”

Note

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