

Scientific Verbal Concepts and Second Language Acquisition: How Scientific Verbal Concepts of the Learners' First Language Can Facilitate Adult Learners in Acquiring a Second Language.

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Abstract

In the world English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching, it has been debated for many decades about how to teach and what to teach for the learners to become more fluent. ESL teaching has undergone a paradigm shift with the advent of many approaches in the teaching arena. Thus, it challenges the teacher to design which better suits with the ESL learners. As for the English teaching in Thailand, especially adults, the teachers always struggle with getting the learners to speak more, and the teachers to speak less. There is ample evidence that reveals the learners' English deficiency. This article describes why the learners have difficulties in learning the English language. It also examines a method in teaching ESL learners based on Vygotsky's research of *Thought and Language*, along with Heath's ethnographic research, and how scientific verbal concepts of the learners' first language can facilitate the learners in acquiring a second language.

One of the questions that Thai learners, as well as other adult second language learners, always have in mind is "*How long will it take me to speak English fluently?*" This question is always in the back of the learners' heads and never seems to disappear. After many years of learning English, the learners do not seem to gain language proficiency, especially in speaking because Thai and English are significantly different from each other. Many studies show that in order to be able to become fluent, the learners should be in an immersion situation, where they

are surrounded by people who speak English, or attend an immersion learning program. This way the learners have an opportunity to learn and be exposed to the second language's culture and be able to become fluent faster than learning in the classroom. However, not many people can afford to study overseas. Thus, a question arises here whether we, as teachers, can help the learners to master their second language competency. Therefore, this paper will explain on how scientific verbal concepts of the learners' first language can facilitate the learners in acquiring

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a second language. Nevertheless, it is crucial to understand the term "scientific verbal concepts" coined by Vygotsky and the discrepancy in acquiring both first and second languages of adult learners.

After reading Vygotsky's *Thought and Language*, "The Development of Scientific Concepts in Children" I was struck by the notion of the concepts that Vygotsky addresses at the beginning of the chapter: "We assumed that concepts, i.e., word meanings, cannot be assimilated by the child in a ready-made form, but have to undergo a certain development" (146). My initial reaction was that concepts can be assimilated in a ready-made form, but by a second-language adult learner. Usually, adult learners acquire their second language through scientific-process learning, assisted by the teacher in a regular classroom setting. As a result, they are conscious of the second language they acquire from school, which reveals that they understand the ways with words and the syntactical rules of the target language and are able to use them correctly; especially in writing. However, in order to be able to use these rules, the learners have to have an advanced knowledge of their own language; as stated by Vygotsky, "...the advanced knowledge of one's own language also plays an important role in the study of the foreign one..." (159). This statement suggests that scientific verbal concepts of the learners' first language facilitate the learners in acquiring a second

language.

For adult learners, it is very difficult to acquire a second language because they have two independent systems in their language performance. On the one hand, they have "the acquired system" or "acquisition" in their first language. The second-language learners acquire the grammar rules and structures of their first language spontaneously. As a result, it is extremely difficult for the learners to acquire a new language because their brains and minds adhere to grammar rules and structures in their native tongue. Therefore, it becomes a problem when they learn a second language. When their grammar rules of the first language are internalized, adult learners concentrate on the communicative act, not in the form of their utterances. Hence, they acquire concepts such as word meaning and tenses spontaneously (as Vygotsky terms it "spontaneous" concepts). These concepts are formed as a result of ordinary, day-to-day experiences. In other words, they know exactly how to use those rules but don't necessarily know what they are. Thus, adult learners are not consciously aware of the grammar rules of their first language, but rather develop a "feel" for correctness or revise correctness intuitively by ear.

When learning a new language, on the other hand, adult learners require an accommodation of a new structure into the existing ones by not only acquiring forms but

also by learning forms. Ample studies reveal that adult learners in a second language are basically able to acquire a new structure or a new language system by being in an informal, immersion environment which provides, as Krashen uses the term, "comprehensible" input of the target language. *Comprehensible input* refers to the input or instruction that is just above the learners' abilities. The instruction is embedded in a meaningful context, paraphrasing and repetition. This *comprehensible input* is in relation to Vygotsky's concept of "*zone of proximal development*" or *zo-pad*. According to Vygotsky, the *zone of proximal development* means "the place at which a child's empirically rich but disorganized spontaneous concepts 'meet' the systematicity and logic of adult reasoning" (*Thought and Language*, xxxv). However, being in an immersion environment is not always comprehensible to the adult beginners because they acquire the target language as native speakers acquire their native tongue. The learners, as a result, are not self-aware of what the words mean or how the words are placed in a sentence. As Krashen notes, second-language acquisition is the product of a subconscious process very similar to the process children undergo when they acquire their first language. According to his notion, therefore, the adult learners will become as parrotlike as a child acquiring his first language without knowing what he or she says. Acquiring a second language is very rarely possible for the adult learners whose native language is

significantly different from the target language and who has already acquired their first-language system in their brains and minds.

For the adult beginners in a second language, the classroom is better than the real world in providing comprehensible input. In other words, the beginners require *language learning* in order to acquire a second language afterward. *Language learning*, or what Vygotsky calls the "scientific" process, refers to the conscious knowledge of a second language, knowing the rules and being aware of them by the cooperation of the adult learners and the instruction.

Scientific verbal concepts of the language system is thus essential for the adult learners in acquiring a second language because the learners do not function as two monolinguals shutting off one language while using the other, but as an integrated individual with two active languages affecting each other and serving as efficient resources for communication. In order for the two languages to affect and serve each other, adult learners should become aware of both scientific verbal concepts of their first language and scientific verbal concepts of their target language, especially in areas such as the grammar. When the second-language learners learn a grammar rule, there is a place for grammar that is different from the native one. The grammar's major rule here is in the use of the *Monitor*, which allows the second-language learners to produce more correct output when they

are given the right conditions to actually use their *Monitor*, as in some planned speech and writing. As mentioned in Flower and Hayes's "A Cognitive Process Theory of Writing," "The monitor functions as a writing strategist which determines when the writer moves from one process to the next" (*Thought and Language*, 283). As for the adult learners in a second language, they use grammar rules they learn from the instructor to test for correctness; seen mostly in writing.

Nevertheless, knowing is merely the scientific verbal concepts, i.e., grammar rules, of the target language are not quite sufficient for the second-language learners to write or speak the second-language efficiently. According to the article called "Composition Studies and ESL Writing: A Disciplinary Division of Labor" in the *Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, Leki mentions her studies of Japanese International students about their writing abilities and points out that, "after ten years of studying English in classrooms abroad, ESL students still may have trouble writing effectively in English...and students who can recite grammar rules...are not always able to use those rules in producing language" (789). The ESL students here know the grammar rules well but cannot apply those rules competently because typically whenever the second-language learners try to produce language beyond what they have acquired, they tend to use the rules they have already acquired from their first language. Hence,

the grammar rules of their native tongue do allow them to communicate but not really progress in the second language. This notion can be explained by and applied from Lunsford's statement on the "Cognitive Development and the Basic Writer" of the native speakers, "Instead, they tend either to describe the characters or, more typically, to drop the comic strip character after a few sentences and shift to what they see as their own values" (*Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, 300). If one applies this notion to the adult-learning development, one possibly assumes that the unconscious natural behavior (or the spontaneous system) of the learners in both first and second languages, is more dominant than the scientific one. Therefore, the adult learners try to shift the target grammar rules into their native grammar rules habitually and unconsciously during a discourse or writing a paper. This shift I call "concept-switching."

Inevitably, *concept-switching* becomes one of the major problems for the adult learners in the second language learning. One may suggest that *translation* might be a useful tool to facilitate the learners to speak or write eloquently in the second language while they are having the existing knowledge of their own language. A question is raised here whether or not the process of translation will be fruitful if the learners do not understand their own language consciously, especially when the first and second languages are drastically different in terms of

grammar and structure, because the process of translation is beyond the spontaneous one. Comparing to the native speakers, the adult learners in a second language will not be able to monitor their own writing output and write academically proficient if they are not aware of their first language grammar rules. Therefore, the second-language learners should know scientific verbal concepts in their first language and a second language mutually as Heath addresses, "Making explicit the rules of each system become possible through active involvement in experiencing how facts are known and how they can be built from bits of information into structure carry more information" (*Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, 355).

It is thus essential for the learners to have a self-conscious command of the grammar of their native tongue. As Vygotsky states, "He may not acquire new grammatical or syntactic forms in school, but, thanks to instructions in grammar and writing, he does become aware of what he is doing and learns to use their skills consciously" (*Thought and Language*, 184). This statement suggests that one can learn a second language more easily when they are aware of what grammar rules they should use in order to lessen misunderstandings, especially in writing when the reader has to decode what the writer is trying to express his or her thoughts without visualizing the physical acts or being in the situations that the writer mentions. By being aware of their

language, adult learners are able to employ their "linguistic tools" or grammar rules in their native tongue as a bridge to accomplish the second language learning. For example, when the second-language learners understand the use of words or tenses in their language, they are able to make connections to the target language by seeking similarities between the two systems such as comparing the word "informacion" in Spanish to "information" in English or comparing "tablette" in French to "tablet" in English.

Awareness here obviously plays a great role in learning a second language. According to Claparede's law of awareness, awareness refers to "an impediment or disturbance in an automatic activity makes the author aware of this activity" (*Thought and Language*, 30). This implies that awareness occurs when we experience the difficult situation that is beyond our consciousness thereafter adapt to the situation; as Claparede states, "The more smoothly we use a relation in action, the less conscious we are of it; we become aware of what we are doing in proportion to the difficulty we experience in adapting to a situation" (*Thought and Language*, 163). In the adult-learning development, for instance, he or she needs to become aware of the target language's grammar rules because he or she does not want to undergo painful experiences from communication failures with the native speakers in the target language. Thus, the adult learner creates that need. As a result, the second-

language learners will not be able to communicate with the native speakers in the target language if they carry less awareness of both languages. For example, some second-language learners will not be able to distinguish the simple past form from the present perfect form of the target language because they have distinctive grammatical systems in their mother tongue that they are unaware of (as the native speakers know mechanically that these two forms refer to the action that is complete already, one is indicating the action that is complete at a certain point of time, but the other is not specifically indicating the time).

According to the above information, once the adult learners are aware of both systems, they are able to speak or write a second language effectively by being able to use scientific verbal concepts (or conscious language learning) in his or her native language to compare and contrast with the scientific verbal concepts in the target language. This process is called "contrastive process." The process possibly offers potent tools for second language learners by contrasting concepts of the learners and the target language. By comparing and contrasting the differences between concepts of two languages, adult learners will be able to explicitly differentiate the two systems and put them to good use. The second-language learners also acquire consciousness in both languages when they compare and contrast the concepts.

Theoretically speaking, this process is analogous to Heath's ethnographic research. Her research is in tracing the children's language development from "Trackton" and "Roadville" communities in the south-eastern United States. She shows the deep cultural differences between the two communities, whose ways with words differ as strikingly from each other as either does from the pattern of the townspeople, the "mainstreamers." The children of these communities learn from "the familiar to the unfamiliar," by transferring students' knowledge in their culture or community to the target language or dialect with the cooperation of the teacher. As Heath states, "The goal of those teachers was (1) to provide a foundation of familiar knowledge to serve as context for classroom information; (2) to engage students in collecting and analyzing familiar ways of knowing and translating these into scientific or school-accepted labels, concepts, and generalization; and (3) to provide students with meaningful opportunities to learn ways of talking about using language to organize and express information" (*Cross-Talk in Comp Theory*, 340). Here for the adult learners, the ways with words of their communities have an influence on learning the mainstream language in much the same way as the adult learners whose native language has an influence on the second language. The second language acquisition is thus enhanced when the first language is supported and developed.

One of the scientific-verbal concepts that the "contrastive process" can be used to explain in a classroom is the concept of time. In order to explain this concept, however, it is beneficial to provide an example of Thai learners in English learning the simple past and the present perfect forms. These two forms are very challenging for the learners because Thai verbs have no inflected forms as in English; for example, a single word *go* (or *pai* as in Thai) covers not only *go* and *goes*, but also *went*, *was going*, *has gone*, *is going*, *will go*, and *would go*. English has many forms to distinguish the simple past and the present perfect forms and so on. In contrast, the word *pai* in Thai covers only *pai* or *go* in English, for instance. Nonetheless, there are tense markers, such as the word *kuay* meaning *ever* in English, are used to indicate tenses. Then, the second-language learners have to understand the uses between the Thai word '*kuay*', indicating a tense marker occurs in Thai with an indefinite and definite time reference, and the English word *ever*, the equivalent word of *kuay*, used with the perfect tense in questions. To explain, the Thai learners have to learn the uses of the word '*kuay*' that is used in Thai to indicate an incident that happened in the past on a time line at both exact and inexact times. In contrast, the word *ever* in English is used with the perfect tense in the question form which refers to the incident that takes place in the past on a time line with an indefinite time reference. Once the adult learners are aware of the uses of the word *kuay* and *ever*,

then they can learn the different possible uses and relationships of the scientific verbal concepts in both languages within a variety of contexts of the simple past and the present perfect forms. For instance, the adult learners should practice the four uses of present perfect in contexts, such as describing as follows:

- Past events with current relevance:
e.g., "*Your car **has broken** down again.*"
- Talking about past experience: e.g.,
"*I **have sung** on stage before.*"
- Describing habits: e.g., "*He **has been** a teacher for 20 years.*"
- Discussing states that began in the past and continue now (and possibly into the future): e.g., "*Bangkok **has been** the capital of Thailand for 200 years.*"
- Describing recent past events: e.g.,
"*I **have just met** the new girl.*"

According to the Thai language, there is merely one way for the speakers to express the past form, which is by using the word *kuay* with both the present perfect and the simple past forms. It is possibly helpful for learners to observe the ways native speakers can change between the present perfect and the simple past: such as in the context of a conversation talking about a previous holiday, where the speaker moves from an indefinite time *I **have been** to Thailand*, to definite time *I **was** there last year*. This suggests that by being aware of both language systems, Thai learners are able to see the differences of

the usages of English and Thai tenses. Once they realize the distinctive facts, they will be able to understand how to use English tenses more effectively; they will eventually acquire the target language by using those rules frequently in the real world.

In conclusion, scientific verbal concepts (conscious language learning) of the learner's first language certainly facilitate adult learners to acquire a second language. Keeping in mind that when the adult learners learning a new language, they are not learning it spontaneously as a child acquiring his or her mother tongue; but learning the two languages at the same time. However, all the grammar rules of the target language

possibly become internalized when the adult learners practice and use those rules everyday or by being in an immersion situation, for instance.

Here they are learning the target language in two ways: one by experience (spontaneous process) and the other is by the cooperation between them and the instructor (scientific process). The adult learners thus should be aware of the grammar rules of both languages, especially of their own one. Because if one only knows how to use the grammar rules in their mother tongue but does not know what they are, one probably will not be able to connect the two languages together since one system is learned by the spontaneous process and the other is learned by the scientific one.

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