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Native Language Environment Is Source Of Confusion

It has long been recognized that literal translating from one language to another is impossible. Even when one language vocabulary becomes a problem because of environmental distinctions, such concrete nouns as "table" or "desk" suggest different objects to each of our several sub-cultures--to one a low flat table just six inches from the floor, to another a long damask covered banquet table, to another a folding card table, etc. depending on the experiences of the hearer.

Even such apparently simple and obvious words as "yes" or "no" may have different meanings from

those we are accustomed to. This is particularly true in English in comparison with pidgin, oriental, and Polynesian and Melanesian languages. When teachers often fail to recognize this difference, they feel that students can't understand a simple "yes" or "no" and, hence, underestimate the student's ability; at the same time, students are often discouraged when they fail to understand clearly and make a wrong response. Students often give up and decide that English is an impossible language to learn. There have been many Polynesian students at The Church College of Hawaii from high schools in the South Pacific who have not recognized these differences.

The use of "yes" and "no" in English (the "ioe" of Samoan and the "io" of Tongan) and in Polynesian languages is easily understood if one realizes the following: In Polynesian languages the "yes" and "no" refer to the meaning of the preceding utterance, and indicate the speaker's opinion of its correctness. For example, Tongan "io" means "What you've just said is right;" "ikai" means "What you've said is wrong;" if a speaker says "He hasn't come, has he?" the answer is "Yes, he hasn't."

In English "yes" and "no" normally refer to the structure of the answer and indicate the speaker's intention of making a positive or negative statement. Thus an English "yes" is used regardless of the previous statement if the affirmative is indicated; "no" is the response if it is negative.

The answer in English depends

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entirely on the situation rather than the previous utterance as it does in Polynesian languages. This distinction should be clearly explained and demonstrated in the first English lessons and periodically reviewed throughout the years of English study.

In the lower grades many English patterns might be introduced through songs and games. At present the Hawaii Curriculum Center is carrying on an experimental program with songs as one of its phases. As an interesting approach to the English "tag question" is the little ditty below.

The children demonstrate the situation through body actions. The teacher might present picture or stick drawings depicting various situations and students might sing the answers. Note that the intonation pattern is followed with "Yes, it is." and "No, it's not." giving normal timing and inflection.