

TESL

Teaching English as a Second Language

REPORTER

Published by:

English Language Institute
The Church College of Hawaii

Vol. 3, No. 3

Laie, Hawaii

Spring, 1970

What Are Your Answers, ESL Teachers?

By Yao Shen

A skill which insightful teachers strive to cultivate is what poet John Keats called "Negative Capability." Negative capability enables a man to have imaginative and objective insight into the minds of other men. Keats could be referring to the speculative faculties of negative capability when he says in "Hyperion,"

*... there grew
A power within me of enormous
ken
To see as a god sees, and take the
depth
Of things as numbly as the outward
eye
Can size and shape pervade.*

Teachers of English as a second language in a community in which English is the native language frequently wonder what could be

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which English is not the speech of the community. One way to help realize this negative capability is to ask such teachers directly, about the specific uncertainties that plague them. Two factors, however, often impede this: a lack of occasions on which to ask such teachers and the teachers' unwillingness to voice their problems.

Invitations from Korea and the Philippines to consult on language teaching provided an appropriate opportunity to seek out some of the problems in the minds of

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within the minds of their fellow teachers who are non-native speakers of English and who teach English in an environment in

such teachers in their respective non-native English speaking communities. Since lectures are only one-direction communication, a question-answer session following each lecture brought forth some of the problems. Those who did not wish to speak up, wrote out their questions without furnishing personal identification and turned them in for discussion. Such a technique increased the output of questions both in quantity and in variety by minimizing the inhibition of the participants. Inhibition often is the primary cause of non-vocal reactions. Assistant Professor Alice Pack, the editor of this journal, was of the opinion that information in the questions could be advantageously shared by other interested ESL teachers to identify convergent and divergent problems, to weigh emphasis on various problems, and to devise possible solutions.

Lectures and discussions took place in Seoul; Manila and Quezon City; Cotabato in Mindanao. Participants were mainly high school English teachers. Others included professors of English literature and English language, language teachers other than English, and administrators from deans of graduate schools to kindergarten principals. Subjects requested to be dealt with varied from detailed matters of pronunciation to transformational grammar, language testing, writing-composition, and the latest theories in language acquisition.

The most frequently raised question have been edited (in style only) and grouped into the following nine areas. No oral questions, with the exception of one, are included as there were so many of them. The exception which is included here occurred time after time but did not appear once among the written questions. Other than that, in general, the oral questions touched the same areas as those of the written ones.

- A. How important is proper pronunciation when the majority of students do not have the opportunities to use their English in communities in which English is their native language?
1. To what extent should teachers tolerate poor pronunciation?
 2. Isn't it bad for a small group of students who have good pronunciation to be jeered at by the large majority who have poor pronunciation?
 3. Should each dialectal group keep its

own pronunciation of English for local communication?

4. Would you be against the idea that dialectally different groups should keep their respective local pronunciation of English so that others can identify each as (name of dialect) English?
- B. If, as some recent socio-linguists say, most adult native speakers of English produce ungrammatical sentences, then should we also teach ungrammatical sentences?
1. Which group of adults are they referring to?
 2. What do they mean by ungrammatical sentences?
 3. Which kind of ungrammatical sentences should we teach?
 4. Do transformational grammarians consider the kind of ungrammatical sentences referred to here as grammatical, ungrammatical, or agrammatical?
- C. How useful is transformational grammar in teaching English as a second language?
1. In what way can transformational grammar benefit non-native speakers of English when neither the teachers nor the students have the "native intuition" called for in working with transformational grammar?
 2. Why are some language teacher-trainers buying and selling transformational grammar when no transformational grammarian has as yet analyzed a single language?
 3. It seems that transformational grammarians are getting farther and farther apart among themselves. What is the cause of this phenomenon? Don't they have common ground to work on?
 4. What is Chomsky doing nowadays? Has he forsaken his flock? Or is he changing his mind again the way he did between *Syntactic Structures* and *Aspects*?
 5. Why do transformational grammarians speak so unkindly of the "structuralists" when at the same time they use a fantastic amount of the research results of the structuralists right and left?

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Your Questions--

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- D. If, as some of the recent psycho-linguists claim, a child does not learn language by imitation, how does he learn it according to them?
1. Does this mean that when a child is left alone without hearing anyone saying anything he can produce a language on his own?
 2. If two children are left alone by themselves without hearing anyone saying anything,
 - a. Would they be able to increase any of the vocabulary used by others?
 - b. How would they learn the modals?
 - c. How would they know the inflected forms, especially the irregular ones?
 3. How come a child growing up in a Mandarin speaking environment speaks Mandarin but not Tagalog, and a child growing up in a Tagalog speaking environment speaks Tagalog but not Mandarin?
 4. Does a second language learner acquire his second language by imitation or does he not?
 5. I refuse to believe that there is no imitation. There has to be some. Don't you think so?
- E. When should we begin to teach reading?
1. Would it be psychologically right to teach reading (of two different languages) to grade one pupils at the same time, especially when one is phonetically spelled and the other one is not?
 2. We teach elementary school students oral English, and they enjoy it immensely. Beginning junior one (seventh grade), we teach reading. How they hate reading. Because they hate reading, they gradually stop speaking. Many end up hating English as a subject. What can we do about it?
- F. Don't you think that too much time is spent on oral drills, and how about the written aspect of the language?
1. Structure, mode of paragraph development, and organizational pattern are some of the items that may be controlled in the teaching of writing. Can you suggest others and elaborate on them?
 2. Teaching English composition has always been a very vexing part of the instructional program--English. How can the teachers as well as the students be helped along this line?
 3. What type of controlled writing can we give in the high school or in college?
 4. I would allow pupils to talk as much as they can, provided they speak good and intelligible English. Unless the pupils can't express anything, don't you think controlled composition will just cramp pupils' ideas.
- G. What norms should an English teacher follow in teaching English to non-native speakers?
1. Is there such a thing as formal or informal English?
 2. In the Philippines, the learning of English as a second language is motivated *mainly* by a desire to understand the language of instruction and *not* to use it for communication. At this juncture, what should we stress: the stilted English language patterns, structures and words used in textbooks or the patterns and vocabulary used in conversational English?
- H. How bad is it to use students' native language in class?
1. I have spent a lot of time using English to explain. When the level of English of my students is very low, they don't understand what I am saying. Then I waste time and feel discouraged. Now I use our native language to explain. Some people think it is bad, because I interrupt the students' listening to a stream of English. But my students know what they are supposed to do. What is your opinion?
 2. Sometimes I tell my students a little story in our native language, and then ask them to write it out in English. I find students enjoy doing it. They talk to teach other about the story in English, frequently in bad English, I admit. I am also upset

by the idea that I may be making them associate their native language with English. Is what I have been doing something to be discouraged?

- I. What is your opinion concerning the use of audio-visual aids in a language learning class?
 1. We cannot afford to buy those so-called up-to-date electronic gadgets. Will not using them promote bad English production? To what extent have such gadgets been proven successful in teaching language in general, besides the obvious fact that businessmen have made a lot of money?
 2. How do I distinguish between the language teacher who spends so much time using all sorts of audio-visual aids and the teacher who teaches audio-visual aids?

It must be remembered that the purpose behind this write-up is to share present day information for constructive future planning. Learning on the part of the students and teaching on the part of the instructors involve ever-moving and ever-unfolding processes: we may recall what King Arthur said to Sir Bedivere before his passing:

*The old order changeth, yielding place
to new,
And God fulfills himself in many ways,
Lest one good custom should corrupt
the world.*

While "to see as a god sees" remains a harsh demand, to know some of the present problems might help direct language teacher to

*...rise on stepping stones
Of their dead selves to higher things.*

Dr. Shen left her replies out. She is sharing these questions with us with the hope of receiving responses from you. We will be happy to publish short pertinent, precise answers.

(Typewritten, double-spaced, 1 to 3 pages)
