

REFLECTIONS OF A LANGUAGE LEARNER

by Beverly McLeod

The department of English as a Second Language of the University of Hawaii requires its students in the Masters program to enroll in a foreign language course in order to appreciate the experience of the language learner.

During the past two years, I have taken both Japanese and Thai courses at the University of Hawaii, and I am currently involved in a tutoring situation on a one-to-one basis in which I am learning French. In addition, in past years I have studied Latin, French, Spanish, German, Japanese, and Thai for varying lengths of time and by various methods. The following are some of my reflections on my experiences as a language student.

First of all, I would like to offer my reactions to my own language learning experiences in general. My experiences have been generally pleasant. I have never had the feeling of being forced to take a language, and I have never taken language courses just to satisfy a requirement. Thus, I have always felt that I was taking the language course out of my own free choice, which I am sure had a positive effect on my motivation. Probably as a consequence, I have always enjoyed studying languages, and I have always done well, at least as far as success is measured by tests of classroom performance. Thus I was not consciously aware of the many problems which students are said to face in language classes, the anxiety, the feeling of frustration and failure. I, myself, had these kinds of feelings when I attempted to use the language outside the classroom, but in the classroom situation, while I felt nervous some of the time, I didn't see it as a big problem. Perhaps I have been lucky also in that I have had for the most part "good" teachers. None has been authoritarian, rigid, unsympathetic. Some have been excellent. From this background, I would like to say more specifically what I have learned from the experience of being a student which will help me to be a better teacher.

First of all, having been a student has

given me an appreciation of the students' position and feelings. From having observed my fellow students, I know that some of them were considerably more frightened and bewildered than I, and of course I have experienced the same reactions in other classes. Some of the students were also bored much of the time, and I have also been bored in language classes, especially when repetitive drills dragged on and on. I have realized that what is interesting to the teacher may be boring to the student, and there is a need to vary the activities often to keep all of the students interested, not just those whose motivation will carry them through anything. I have become more sensitive to the kinds of techniques and settings which are interesting, and less tolerant of those which are inherently boring. Also, I can judge more accurately the length of time necessary to learn different aspects of the language, and the relative difficulty of various items.

I have learned several things that I will try to avoid in my classroom. For example, I, as a student, find it very difficult to read a passage aloud for the first time and then to translate it. I cannot concentrate on pronunciation and meaning at the same time. I think that many teachers do not realize how difficult this task is, because it is relatively easy to read a short, simple passage in one's own language, and be able to comprehend it simultaneously. But it is quite another matter when you try to do it in a foreign language. Also, I will be wary of manipulation drills which produce unreal sentences. For example, a sentence may be perfectly acceptable in the declarative, but when the drill calls for making as many questions as possible from that sentence, some of the questions, although grammatically correct, are unnatural and would never be said by native speakers. Such drills are not only useless, but also possibly confusing.

Another thing which I have come to realize is that some exercises, while purporting to test the students' comprehension, progress, or ability, are really only testing the students'

facility at manipulating forms. The students I taught in Thailand were amazingly skillful at any kind of drill which was presented to them, but they would invariably miss an item from the same drill if it were in isolation on a test. I have also experienced as a student the kind of mental acrobatics which many drills require, and am able to do what is asked without any comprehension of what I'm saying. This seems to be especially true under the conditions which are typical of such drills, in which the teacher forces the students to do them as rapidly as possible. Perhaps if the pace were slowed a little, the students would have a chance to think about what they were saying.

I would like to describe more specifically some of the good techniques which I've observed in the various classes I've taken. First of all, out of all the teachers I've had, those I remember most fondly are also those from whom I learned the most. I have had three teachers who were middle-aged women, and who presented sort of a mother-image to me. They were warm, encouraging, non-threatening, and personally interested in the students. They were also willing to reveal themselves as real persons, not just as teachers, by telling anecdotes from their own or their family's experiences, or telling of their own foibles and amusing mistakes in learning English. I find that I learned best from such "motherly" types, and when my own motivation lagged, I kept working so as not to disappoint "mother's" hopes and expectations for me. Regardless of whether or not second language learning is like native language learning, surely there is some psychological connection between the two for the learner, and recreating the emotional, if not the cognitive or environmental conditions of first language learning, may facilitate learning of a second language.

One of the good techniques, or rather talents, used by one of my teachers was her ability to draw out the students' knowledge in directed informal conversation. She talked very little, supplying only the minimal help necessary, but somehow the conversation flowed on and on, and students said things which they hadn't believed they were capable of saying. One often sees such a talent in good discussion leaders; they are able to control the discussion with a light touch, an appropriate word here and there, while letting the participants do all the talking. Too often

in language classes, the free conversation time ends up being a monologue by the teacher, and the students don't get sufficient time to practice. I was very impressed by this particular teacher's technique; it was almost as if she "tricked" the students into revealing their knowledge and ability, and they would often be surprised at how much they were able to say. This technique seemed to work much more effectively than that of confronting the students directly, putting them on the spot and demanding that they perform correctly.

Another thing which contributed to the relaxed atmosphere in this teacher's class was her encouragement of the students to work cooperatively and help each other when help was needed, rather than competing against each other. She tried to arrange the seating so that a slow learner would be seated next to one who tended to catch on quickly, and during the lulls in the class, the better student could assist the slower one.

I am the type of learner who tries to connect a new item to something which I have learned before, and I am always inventing relationships, correct or not, between items. I often feel like asking the teacher for confirmation, for example, whether this new vocabulary item is a synonym of the one we learned two weeks ago, and if not, how they differ in meaning. This particular teacher was always very tolerant of my questioning, and quite willing to explain relationships. She also did this on her own, making an effort to connect new material with that learned previously. It was not a matter of a five-minute review of yesterday's lesson at the beginning of class, but while she was introducing a new item, she pointed out its relation to something which we had already covered. I found this very effective, and it gave me a better feel for what I was learning as an integrated system. I have found that my short term memory is much better than my long term one, and thus I tend to forget easily what was covered a few weeks back. This teacher's method of reviewing old material in the new context helped to keep it fresh in my mind.

The teacher also used this technique in correcting student mistakes. If the student made a mistake, she corrected it, had him repeat the correct form, and then went on to another student. But later in the period, or even the next day or the next week, she would ask the same student a question of the

same type, in order to review for him the correct form of the item which he had missed. She was able to remember each student's weak points over a long period of time, so that she didn't waste time asking students questions which were too easy for them, but judged precisely what level of difficulty or what area would be appropriate for each student. A course in memory training would certainly be useful for language teachers!

In any activity, the teacher encouraged the students to stretch their usage of the language to the limits of their knowledge, for example, by encouraging them to paraphrase if they had forgotten a word or pattern. I learned

from this teacher that it is just as important for a teacher to know the right questions to ask to elicit the maximum response as it is to know the right answers.

It is a valuable experience to be able to look at one's profession "from the other end" and I have certainly learned a great deal about teaching from being a student. Perhaps the most important thing is to be able to keep that awareness in mind of how it is to be a student, to be able to put oneself in the student's position when trying out new techniques, to be able to answer the question, "How would I like it?"

