

Native Language Interference and its Implications in English Language Teaching in National Schools (Part 2)

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In the last issue, I commented on the potential areas of difficulty for the Malay native speaker. I would now like to consider the practical implications in language teaching.

(i) The native language acquisition takes place in early childhood. By the time a child comes within our ()uence his native language competency is already well-established. Intuitively he knows the rules of the grammar of his own language. He is able to discern the grammatical from the non-grammatical forms of his language. Consequently, in the learning of a second language, the spontaneous responses he makes, when he does so, will tend to be expressed in the grammar of his L1 with the resultant errors I have referred to. It is important to realise here the great impact this can have on his learning of English. What should be the attitude of the Language teacher to the pupil's consistent production of non-grammatical sentences? I would advocate a tolerant attitude on the principle that as long as a pupil responds he is trying to generate sentences of his own, and therefore, he is learning; the old adage that we learn by making mistakes is particularly true to language learning. On the other hand the attitude that 'speak correctly if you must speak' is a thoroughly negative approach to language teaching.

() It is possible that some teachers of English as a second language may only concern themselves with the superficialities of language. Such teachers emphasise the word forms, structural patterns, etc., rather than the reality of the situation. There are quite a few pedagogical techniques which can lull the teacher into believing that he is actually teaching language when in fact he is not. Filling the blanks with the correct forms of verbs without any prior reason for such drills is one example of what I mean by concerning ourselves with the superficialities of language. Let me give you another practical example. In the teaching of the singular and plural forms of words there are two aspects which must be taught: (i) that the plural forms of words are generally derived by the addition of /s/ morpheme; and (ii) the establishment of the concept of reality, where the pupil is made to realise

that the forms of the nouns in the singular and plural are only signals or representations of numerical concepts. To concentrate on the word forms alone and insist on the pupils learning a list of nouns in the singular and plural without establishing the reality is deceptive teaching.

The second phase referred to above is the all important stage at which 'meaning' or 'communication' begins to take shape. It is the base on which the whole process of language acquisition is built. In the case of the native speaker this stage of language acquisition is spread over a period of time and takes place through some natural phenomenon at some level of consciousness. In a second language situation this process has to be incorporated in the teacher's methods or techniques. Consequently if we concentrate merely on word forms or structural patterns without ensuring that the vital link between reality and language forms has taken place then language learning has not taken place.

I would like to suggest, therefore, in second language teaching that the teacher will first establish the important link between the reality of the situation and the word form or structure. Once he has established this link then the second step of practising the use of the newly learnt word forms or structures should follow. The last step is when the pupil puts his newly learnt skill to the test in real life or simulated situations.

It is obvious that the techniques we use in establishing the link between the reality of the situation and the language form will vary considerably according to the age group taught and to the personalities we each possess. In the primary school it should be relatively simple and appropriate to the level of the child's mental development. At the lower and upper secondary levels some adjustment will be necessary in the technique. In many cases in the higher age groups I have found an explanation of the rules in Malay saves a lot of time and is quite effective.

Let me illustrate what I mean by this process of establishing the link between the language form and reality in terms of an actual teaching situation. We have established

the fact that in Malay the article is non-existent and we can expect our pupils to find difficulty in grasping this new concept in reality. We realise, too, that just filling the blanks with the correct article in a given structure, or drills with cue words will be futile. So our first task will be to establish the concept of 'definiteness' in relation to a noun.

At the primary school level I would adopt the following procedure:

- I. The lesson starts in this way.
Teacher: I want *a* pencil? Who has *a* pencil?
Pupil: I have *a* pencil.
(Teacher takes the pencil and places it on the table. In the same way he asks for a ruler, a piece of chalk, an exercise book, and places the items on the table.)
- II Teacher: Where is *the* pencil?
Pupil: *The* pencil is on *the* table.
(Repeat the questions and answer forms in the same way with the other items.)
- III (Teacher now shifts the objects to other places in the room, and returns to face the class. Acts in an absent-minded way and asks questions as follows:)
Where is *the* pencil?
Pupil: in *the* drawer.
(Teacher repeats the questions in relation to the other objects and gets appropriate replies.)
in *the* waste paper basket.
on *the* floor.
under *the* table.

- IV. Teacher introduces a guessing game.
Teacher: Let's play a game. I want an eraser.
Who has an eraser?
(Teacher puts the eraser in a red box or a blue box and pupils guess by responding to the teacher's question.)
Now, where is *the* eraser?
Pupil: in *the* red box / in *the* blue box.
(Repeat several times.)
- V. Drilling by questions spoken first and written later
Where is *the* post office?
What is *the* capital of Malaysia?
Who is *the* monitor of the class?
Where is *the* headmaster's office?

At the lower secondary school level the format of the lessons will be similar but I would use more sophisticated examples. At the upper secondary level and in a situation where the article has yet to be taught I would establish the link between form and reality by giving the rules in Malay. Occasionally, gimmicks present themselves which will help the adult students to remember and understand the rules. In the case of teaching the use of the article I use two rules in the form of gimmicks which can be expressed in Malay thus:
For the indefinite article, the "am rule" which states "bila 'am' guna 'a', kalau satu sahaja"
For the definite article, the 'tiga T rule' which states "kalau tetap taroh 'the'".