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LING 2142 Fall 2019
Second Language Teaching
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Tutee Language-Learning History

Overview

All three of my tutees are enrolled in the English Language Institute's Intensive English Program (IEP), which consists of Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Grammar classes across five levels. During the first meeting, I surveyed them as a group about their prior language learning experiences and shared my own language background with them as well during a structured group conversation. Two tutees, A-chan¹ and Lala, are L1 Japanese speakers from Japan, while the third, Bogota, is an L1 Spanish speaker from Colombia. All three learners agreed that they wanted to focus on speaking and vocabulary in general for tutoring sessions; Bogota also wanted to practice grammar.

Tutee 1: A-chan

A-chan is a full-time student in the IEP at level 4 (Intermediate). She has studied English for ten years, and this is her first experience studying English in a predominantly English-speaking setting. In addition to English, A-chan has also studied Thai, having lived in Thailand for three years at the age of 13 and attending a Japanese-language school there. A-chan's Thai instructors were L1 speakers of Thai with limited knowledge of Japanese. In Thailand, her English teachers were largely Indian and Filipino, and she was unable to identify whether they were native speakers or not. At her home university in Japan, A-chan's instructors were all L1 speakers of English: one from Australia, one from England, and one from the United States.

For both Thai and English, the method of instruction described by A-chan seems to fit most closely with the audiolingual method: instructors would provide them with set phrases and dialogues and task the students with repeating them. However, once a month, they would cook Thai food as a

¹ All participants were invited to select their own pseudonyms

class for a more task-based lesson. They used an in-house Thai as a second language textbook made for L1 speakers of Japanese, but A-chan was unable to recall any details of its content.

In previous English-learning experiences, A-chan explained that the students had largely focused on reading and writing in the language by using a textbook that was written *only* in English by Japanese authors, and that any listening and speaking was done by hearing and repeating pre-fabricated dialogues. The content of their English textbook included exemplar sentences, thematic vocabulary lists, and explanations of grammatical rules. Very little information about culture or pragmatics was given (the book did not focus on English in any particular country/region), but it did feature highlights of a few celebrities.

I am concerned that A-chan may fixate on grammatical structure as a focal point of language learning (given the focus on reading and writing by way of grammar in her Japanese EFL classroom) as opposed to communicative competence. Also, because of her past programs' reliance on *repeating* dialogues for pronunciation instead of *understanding* them, I worry that she may struggle to actively comprehend materials and make deeper connections to any material beyond linguistic form. As a positive, it seems that A-chan is comfortable with using English-only materials, having previously used a textbook that contained no Japanese explanations of English or its grammar.

Tutee 2: Bogota

Bogota is taking all classes in the IEP (except for Grammar) at level 5 (High Intermediate). Although she studied French for two years for her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in International Relations and attained a B2 proficiency level in Colombia, she claims to "forget a lot" and be "out of practice." This is her first time studying abroad, although she has come to the US before for vacation. Bogota studied English in Colombia for roughly 10-15 years, both at a private university and at language schools. Her prior instructors for both French and English in Colombia were all L1 speakers of Spanish, but she had also previously enrolled in an English language school in Colombia and participated in

courses taught by L1 English speakers from Australia and Washington (state). She studied at this language school for approximately one year before coming to the US to join the ELI.

For both French and English, Bogota noted that her textbooks were similar to those used at the ELI, containing a mixture of text types (dialogues, descriptive narration, stories), explanations of grammar concepts, and activities for different skill types and presentational styles. These textbooks were formatted according to CEFR guidelines from A1 through B2 and were written entirely in the target language. Despite the similarity in textbook type, Bogota did make it clear that the structure of a typical class followed a more traditional, grammar-based approach to language teaching: a normal class activity would be for the teacher to write on the board for the class, draw a verb table, and have students practice conjugating those verbs, or talk about the importance of subject-verb-complement agreement. Students would then watch a video containing core vocabulary or grammatical structures and try to talk about it in the target language or listen to music.

As with A-chan, I am concerned that Bogota will be prone to focusing on grammaticality over expressing an idea because of the way her previous teachers have seemingly based their classes on the importance of grammar. However, I am less worried in her case because the materials she was using are more similar to what I expect she is working with now, so there should be less of a barrier in acclimating to new material and a different approach. Additionally, out of all three tutees, Bogota has the most experience with learning another L_n (French) and attaining a stated proficiency level (B2) in two years, so this may imply a high base aptitude for language acquisition (although it must be noted that French and Spanish share many typological similarities that aid in learning the other).

Tutee 2: Lala

Lala is only enrolled in Reading and Writing classes (R4, W5) in the IEP, although unlike both A-chan and Bogota, this is her second semester at the ELI. Lala has the least experience with learning a language other than her L1 and English, having only studied a very small amount of Korean (basic

greetings, some common nouns, and the alphabet) for one month in order to host Korean exchange students in Japan for a week when she was 12. She has, however, been learning English the longest, claiming to have started at the age of 5 and studying English in school for roughly 9-14 years. This is her first time studying a language abroad, although as mentioned, it is not her first semester in the US.

While learning Korean, Lala's instructor was also an L1 Japanese speaker who had learned Korean as an L2. Her English instructors were also L1 Japanese speakers who had learned English as an L2, studying in either Britain or Canada. No textbook was used for Korean, and when studying English, Lala stated that "[they] mostly just played card games," using a textbook that was written almost entirely in Japanese and contained little English. For her, an average class consisted of the teacher writing English words on the board, explaining their meaning in Japanese, and asking students to repeat them in common carrier phrases (ex. "I would like _____", "Where is the _____", etc.). These classes centered the curriculum on grammar and pronunciation, privileging reading and writing to the detriment of listening and speaking; in fact, Lala claimed to have never done listening activities in her English classes in Japan.

My hope is that Lala will be more accustomed to activities that emphasize communicative competency over grammatical accuracy because she has been in the US longer and has been part of a program with a communicative focus. Given that she is only currently enrolled in reading and writing classes, though, I fear that her lack of exposure to overt instruction in listening and speaking may have a notable impact on her ability to communicate verbally when compared to her peers. She may be more skilled in committing her thoughts to paper quickly and accurately than her peers as a result of how she has had to approach language learning in the past, but if her only practice with listening and speaking has been interacting in straightforward situations with L1 English interlocutors, there will likely be a gap to address regarding how well she can handle more complicated speech tasks like narration or comparison.