From Technique to Theory and Back Again – Filling in the gaps in children’s English education

Jan Stewart

A 15-minute video segment of Nishi-Hanahata Elementary School, First and Third Grades, was shown. Attention was drawn to five features of the lessons: 1) The teacher giving seals as rewards, 2) children jumping when asked “What’s your name?”, 3) the use of a rhythm machine, with increased speed, 4) a bell to signal the end of an activity (in which the pupils wandered about asking each other questions), and 5) chants and movements. The use of hand puppets to dramatize conversations was also mentioned. These techniques were discussed in terms of the relevance of Skinner’s “Stimulus-Response-Reinforcement” theory, Emile Jacques-Dalcroze’s “Eurythmics,” Carl Orff’s “gesticulative” music teaching method, Georgi Lazonov’s “Suggestopedia,” and James Asher’s “Total Physical Response” technique.

Research related to the development of language was discussed, including various schools of thought: the Cognitivist approach, the Nativist approach, and the Social Constructionist approach. Principal landmarks in the development of pre-linguistic communication were discussed. Bruner’s theory stresses the continuity between pre-linguistic and linguistic communication; Completives, Reference & Request; the Language Acquisition Support System (LASS); context, interpretation, and shared culture; formats, games, and the deep structure of games.

There are wide gaps between theoretical descriptions of language development and what we see happening in the foreign language classroom. There are also gaps between the topics that occupy early childhood and those that are presented in textbooks. Functional gaps occur, as classroom instruction focuses on grammatical functions or linguistic functions, but ignores social functions almost entirely. Pedagogical gaps occur in the use of movement to help children memorize names of objects, while true games have a language-like deep structure. If language is to be studied in lower primary schools, the gaps between L1 acquisition and L2 learning need to be narrowed.

Suggestions were made about how to fill in the gaps. In theoretical terms, Wittgenstein proposed the centrality of intent in communication, conceptualizing language as a game, whose moves are determined by culture. Fillmore stressed the importance of context in forming the meaning of utterances. Austin suggested that the context, the intention, and the interpretation of intention all contribute to the meaning. Searle suggested that there are several conditions for appropriateness, including felicity conditions for requests. Brown suggested that a child’s utterances have case or case-
like relations. In order to fill the experiential gap, it was suggested that foreign-language teachers use music and movement to evoke an emotional response, simulate the infant’s world of relationships with mother, elders, younger siblings, etc., instead of focusing on adult-like topics, and use puppets to create a “make-believe” environment. Functional gaps can be filled by stressing social functions. Pedagogical gaps can be filled by complementing Chomsky’s LAD with Bruner’s LASS.

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