



I am a bit nervous as I enter the huge auditorium filled with hundreds of students on their first day of university. As I walk down the stairs from the back, I sneak glances at all of them fiddling with their new information packets, checking their cellphones and sneaking glances back at me. I walk to the front of the room and sit in the first row with the rest of the teachers. Behind me I can hear the students nervously chatting, anxious for their new lives as university students to begin.

This year I do not have to give a lecture. Another colleague does. This does not relax me, as it is easy to feel nervous in sympathy. Talking to students in your own class is one thing, but being observed by fellow teachers is very discomfoting. I can see the lecturing teacher's head down reading over his lecture notes. The dormant computer hums and throbs, the power point projector waiting to spring to life. Without looking around, I can sense the energy of a room full of teenagers waiting to hear advice and guidance about their new adventure in learning, language and thinking! The teachers, me included, fidget on the first row, happy to not be lecturing. We fiddle as nervously as the students. Finally, after an introduction by the chairperson, the lecturing colleague steps up to the podium, dims the lights, clicks the computer and the university education of hundreds of young people commences.

My colleague starts to talk:

Learning a language involves three main abilities.

(I think, yes, they need to know this!)

The first is the ability to speak fluently.

(OK, tell it! I'm thinking, make them understand what's important!)

The second is the ability to think and reason in the language.

(Yeah, get 'em ready! Preach it! They have to start using language to think.)

And the third is the ability to tell a correct from an incorrect sentence.

(I frown at that, confused, but it can't hurt the students to be careful.)

Among these three, the last one is the most important. If you cannot tell the difference between right and wrong grammar, you can never learn a language!

(Um, I have to repeat what he said in my head. Then, I'm shocked. I have to suppress the urge to jump out of my front row seat, turn to the students and shout "No, no, no! Don't worry about correctness! Just speak! Think!") Instead, I twist in my chair, grimacing but resigned to listen to the rest of his argument. However, the lecture quickly becomes a list of what to do and what not to do. It's about rules, in other words. And then, after the students had already succeeded in passing the entrance exam, the lecture becomes, unbelievably, another test! Power-point-ing paired examples of sentences, one correct, one incorrect, the lecturer asks students to pick the correct one. That's the lecture!

I can't believe it. On the first day of university, he gives a test to inspire students? That will have the exact opposite effect. They already had to take a standardized test to be placed into levels for their classes, but a lecture that is essentially a test? Where's the inspiration? Where's the guidance to the broader reaches of learning? Where's the

education

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Linguistics has forced itself into language learning in a strange and bizarre ways, mistaking the methods of analysis of structure for ways to learn a language, and failing entirely to motivate students. Speaking, writing and thinking are crucial skills to gain. They are the hardest because they are the most active. They in turn allow other more passive skills to develop. Discriminating right and wrong might help a little, but it is not the backbone of language learning.

Native speakers may know the difference between right and wrong grammar, but they are not always able to explain it. When someone asks me to explain a grammar question, I often reply, "Well, it just sounds better." Knowing what "sounds good" and what "sounds wrong" means that the rules of the language have been internalized. That is different from knowing what is right or wrong for a choice on a test.

This

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approach fails on two points. Language has a soft side to it, where the rules do work, but they work with nuance and subtlety. You can make right and wrong tests, no question about it, but the focus on that restricts rather than expands. Secondly, this

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approach does not help articulate the reasons for right or wrong. Failing on those two points means that the rule never becomes internalized into the grey area of hunches, guesses and "sounds better." True ability to use a language, as opposed to knowing about structure, involves a lot of grey areas. In the middle of a real conversation, the ability to identify wrong sentences is of little use.

Research into language structures is a great field. I am all for it. I encourage linguists to keep on with their amazing research. They are probing into the depths of the mind with this

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research technique. They are finding out how language works in fascinating new ways. However, the application of their results to learning a language should be taken with caution. What are more helpful to students are strong motivational tactics, interesting practice routines, and efficient study habits. Students also need ways to relax and develop that native ability to say, "Well, it just sounds right." The first two points the lecturer skipped over were more important than the third. Learners need to be able to communicate and to think.

On the train home after that welcome ceremony, I wondered about how many students were turned off by the lecture, how many were confused about how to study, how many were disappointed or even frightened off? I wondered if, on their first day at university with all its hope and promise and freedom, they felt trapped in a system of testing and correctness, where they

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must continually decide between right and wrong. Would they be able to find the middle grey area between the

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, that area where much of our communicating, and almost all our thinking, take place?