

## **Band, Sports, and Language**

Going through the Peace Corps' training program on teaching English as a Foreign Language, something struck me recently: I think that language learning has more in common with physical activity than with mental activity. A few months ago, I would certainly have grouped language and speaking along with other intellectual or mental things like doing math, learning the scientific method, or understanding the history of your homeland. Maybe this was because all of these things are taught in school; physical education classes and school sports always seemed pretty disconnected from the rest of the classes.

The other class that stands out as different, looking back on my secondary school life, was band. I want to say that the difference was that band was primarily *doing* rather than *being told*, but I'm not sure that's enough. We certainly did plenty of math problems in algebra class, for instance, yet it doesn't feel the same to me at all. Perhaps it is something to do with how abstract math was – and while the events described in history class or the principles described in chemistry are certainly real, tangible, observable (or once observable) things, they have been translated into facts and theories, both of which are, I think, somewhat abstract. It is up to the student to take the information and translate it into experience within their own minds, but it's still an imagined experience, completely mental. Chemistry experiments and historical reenactments, of course, might be exceptions, but they are not the majority of chemistry and history classes, nor is the goal of a chemistry class to be able to conduct an experiment or the goal of a history class to be able to conduct a reenactment (although who knows how interesting such a course might be?)

On the other hand, music, sports and language all have as their goal the ability to take the abstract information about how something works or is done and translate that into actually doing that thing. It doesn't seem like such a stretch that there would be similarities in the way that each is taught or learned or done. It pains me to say it, in fact, but it does rather match up with the P1, P2, P3 sections that we were trained in and which may be a common form of foreign language teaching in America (I really have no idea). Whether each class is properly divided in this way or whether, as in music and sports, it's better to divide time into larger, more meaningful chunks is something that I don't yet know.

In case you don't know, P1, P2 and P3 are Presentation, Practice and Production respectively. First new material is presented to the students. In a class on English, this might be on the topic of, say, days of the week. This would be a very low-level topic, so the presentation might consist of translating them from the students' first language into English to make sure they understand them. Alternatively, perhaps visual aids such as a calendar could be used – or a reference to the current day of the week and an expansion from there. At any rate, the meaning and pronunciation of the words is shown to the students.

In the practice section of such a class, the days of the week might be combined with existing vocabulary in order to approximate actual sentences in English. Students could repeat such sentences out loud or could, after being given some kind of framework, be divided into teams and ask each other questions involving the days of the week. Certainly more interesting and imaginative tasks could be created with a little time, but at any rate, the goal is simply for them to repeatedly practice the new vocabulary, hopefully in some sort of context.

The production stage would involve the students creating something themselves – perhaps they will

write short dialogues. They might have to create seven-section stories where a new thing happens on each day of the week. The key, as far as I understand it, is that they are finally involved in, as you might guess, “producing” something of their own.

Now let's compare this with how the three stages would work in, say, band class. The goal now is not to learn the days of the week but to be able to play, say, “Dream a Little Dream of Me.” Let's assume students of a similarly low level, rather like the fifth-grade band at my middle school; this was the first year we had band, and we were all learning how to play our instruments.

The presentation in such a class could take a couple of forms. Some teachers and conductors like to play the piece of music for the students before they play it themselves and some do not, but I always found it inexplicably helpful; perhaps I was more aware of my own mistakes after hearing the correct version. However, the class moves almost immediately into the practice phase even if there are new things to be learned in the piece of music.

In the practice phase, of course, the music is played repeatedly in different ways. Sections are played by themselves. Individual instruments are asked to play solo. Difficult parts are repeated over and over again. Eventually, this should lead to some sort of performance – the production phase – which is when the students will use everything they have learned about the piece of music in creating their own performance of it.

But there are some key differences between language and music. In most music, designed to be aesthetically appealing, it's quite clear when a major mistake is being made; even a beginning musician can hear that the notes they are playing simply do not sound good. Language, on the other hand, doesn't have to be aesthetically appealing, and mispronouncing a word or misplacing the stress is very easy to do without even noticing.

There are also fewer outside factors in the final performance of a band. Certainly the auditorium might change the sound, and the instruments must be kept in tune, but in the end, every member of the band is working together to build on their practice and create that performance. The final step in language, however, is a genuine conversation not with a fellow student but with an ordinary person; they may share the goal of understanding and being understood, but they have not been through the same practice which renders, hopefully, more predictable the playing of the rest of the band. It might be interesting to consider how jazz or improvisational music might affect this analogy, however.

But those are the reasons that I think sports matches most nicely with language. Although conversations are not (always) competitive, as sports matches are, they do both involve a second unpredictable half that isn't truly present during practice, although it can be imitated. And the rules in sports can be quite complicated and, to someone untrained, confusing. I was watching a soccer game earlier today, and I have no idea why the players did most of the things they did. However, I know there is an underlying logic to the way they play the game just as there is a logic to the pronunciation and grammar of a foreign language, though it may seem hopelessly hidden from a beginning learner.

In addition, those rules are easy to break if you don't know what you're doing. If I organize a soccer game in my backyard and invite some friends who also know very little about soccer, and one of us shoots from an area that it would be illegal to shoot from in soccer, who will tell us? I don't even know if there *are* areas that are illegal to shoot from.

With no guidance, I think you could say we are playing a sort of pidgin soccer based on our own meager observations and with no guidance, but the likelihood that we would end up playing official rules soccer is fairly low. This is the reason that native speakers and fluent speakers are so important in language learning; I could teach someone some simple things on the piano even though I'm not very good myself, but using my poor Spanish to teach someone else would be a disaster.

Sports can have rules that are very complicated and perhaps even abstract. American football, for instance, has many rules, some of them quite specific and some general; in addition, it has something similar to rules that you could call *the way it should be played*; these are sort of flexible rules, or guidelines, based on the fact that sports are competitive, and they are always changing. The non-competitiveness of conversation, on the other hand, means that the ratio of rules to *the way it should be said* in a language is probably tilted towards the former; to really figure it out, you would have to figure out where to draw the line between things that are said incorrectly and things that are simply said in a strange or uncommon way, which I think would be more difficult than it sounds.

It is certainly uncommon to say, for instance, "I shall be pleased to meet you in a fortnight at the bus stop," but it isn't, as far as I know, incorrect. However, because it is so uncommon, it is also less likely to be clearly understood, especially by anyone who is not a native speaker of English; thus, if being understood clearly is the main goal (and not being humorous or anything like that), such a sentence probably wouldn't score highly on *the way it should be said* although it follows all the rules of the language perfectly.

At any rate, when learning a sport, it is necessary to have the rules and the way it should be played explained to you. But more importantly, it is necessary to have someone who knows what they are doing there while you practice in order to force you to follow these rules repeatedly. And why isn't it enough to simply be told the rules? Even if they were so few and so simple that they could easily be memorized, this wouldn't be the case.

The goal of all this preparation for sports is to play well, and to win, when it's game time. For this to happen, everyone involved, whether it's a team or just an individual, has to know and follow the rules. They also need to know the way it should be played, which is more flexible, and they need to be able to apply what they know about that in a flexible way during the game because they will be responding to a sometimes unpredictable team or player.

And in addition to all this, they need to be able to do both these things *without thinking about them*. Certainly some sports involve more planning and strategy; choosing plays in football or pitches in baseball, for instance, would be an example of this. But the act of playing the game itself occurs in the moments of physical activity; there is no time, when the linebackers are charging at you, to consciously run through all the possible responses you could make, from a conservative pass to a hail mary to simply collapsing on top of the ball; a tennis player does not have time to calculate the velocity and trajectory they need for each volley.

Language and speaking need to occur at a similar speed – which means often without conscious thought. In a very serious conversation, of course, it might be necessary to think carefully about your words and about what the other people in the conversation say and mean, but in casual conversation, this isn't very necessary. You don't pause after someone asks "What time is it?" to consider which

question word they used, what the word 'time' means, and what the pronoun 'it' refers to before answering – or at least you don't once you are comfortable in a language.

The way that something becomes this internalized is, of course, through practice, and I think, since there are so many similarities, it would be worthwhile to think about how, in general, you practice in sports to prepare for a game. There are two main parts of the practice; the first is drills where you repeat some basic or fundamental part of playing the game over and over until you master it. The second is imitating the conditions of the actual game, with someone standing in for the opponent; this, too, will usually be shortened and repeated. They correspond pretty clearly to P2 and P3, in fact.

So maybe there are some things in sports that would be useful to think about in relation to learning a language. First of all, of course, it is important to practice very regularly. Spending one hour a day is not the same as spending seven hours a week, all of them on Thursday. Because repetition is so important, frequent practice is crucial. I don't think this is at all controversial.

In addition, you do not have a game after every practice; this would require each practice to contain the entire spectrum of ways to prepare for a game, starting with basic drills and moving into simulations of the actual game. It would be rushed and exhausting. This is my fear for the P1, P2, P3 method – in a 50 minute class, is it really helpful to be pushing the students through everything on a topic (say, the weather) with the imagined goal that they will be able to converse about the weather after that single class – or would it be more useful to think in terms of slightly bigger goals, perhaps, and definitely longer stretches of time?

What if you could make your goal, instead, for your students to be able to converse with a native speaker about the weather, both asking about the weather and answering questions about it (depending on the progress a class has made with tenses and time, you might even include the weather in the past and future or in general)? Certainly this is not something to be mastered in 50 minutes unless the class is inexplicably at an advanced level yet currently ignorant of the terms for rain and snow.

Instead, it might be the goal of an entire week of classes – someone with more experience in teaching foreign languages could estimate it better than I can. However, in the planning of many foreign language classes, I have observed that the goals for lessons are based on topics like “weather” or “health” while the overall unit goal is more likely to be grammatical – we will cover all these vocabulary topics while learning about how to use the past continuous, for instance.

But how does that match with the goal of being able to have a conversation – what exactly will 'game time' be? Simply saying 'using past continuous' is much too big – it must be, I suppose, 'using past continuous on the topics of weather, health, family and hobbies.' This is a better goal to use than anything based on grammar – the grammar itself will grow out of what is needed for the conversation.

There's a fine line in language learning between managing the overwhelming way that actual conversations go, especially if you're a beginner, and the necessity for drills that are useful and yet cannot really approximate what actual communication is like. Of course, I've barely begun to teach, but I think that coaching probably has some important lessons for how language can be taught – more as an internalized physical activity than an intellectual one.