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AN INTUITIVE APPROACH TO SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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My presentation is an attempt to ground wholistic, student-centered language teaching within a firm philosophical foundation. What I am suggesting is a fundamental re-direction of focus in second language teaching. I believe that we ought to move away from the idea that we can teach language in much the same way as we do other subjects in the curriculum. In other words, as though it were a body of information--rules to be learned and vocabulary to be memorized. We are all too familiar with the consequences of this approach since our students come to us at the university level after several years of English study lacking even a rudimentary facility with the language. Be that as it may, what follows is not a diatribe or polemic against the old ways, which I believe ought to be retained in part, but an attempt to cut directly to the dynamics of the language learning situation. For it is only by means of a genuine understanding of the learner and his or her relationship to the language that real progress can occur.

In my view there are two basic methods of second language acquisition: Informational and Experiential. The former method, which tends to regard language as a static phenomenon, is amenable to organization and manipulation and as such offers certain advantages to teachers, particularly in large classes. There is, however, a price to be paid for such convenience. Part and parcel of this situation is the fact that there is a dichotomous psychological space set up between learner and language. The Informational method has the inherent characteristic of keeping the subject matter "at arm's length" as it were. As a result, the new language will always be seen as "foreign".

The Experiential method, on the other hand, understands language as a vital, creative activity--the "human essence" as Noam Chomsky pointed out. Clearly, language and the thought processes are closely connected; so much so in fact that they can be said to be reciprocally determinative of one another. Indeed, language is a very personal, intimate phenomenon. Viewed in this light spatial differentiation between learner and language will tend to be counter productive. Furthermore, it stands to reason that if language is absorbed into the person it is likely to be better learned and more easily retained than otherwise. This, in a nutshell, is the Intuitive approach to second language acquisition. Its great strength lies in the fact that learner and language become one.

In support of my thesis I shall cite as well as explain the basic epistemological theories of two of the twentieth century's most influential philosophers: Nishida, Kitaro and Henri Bergson. Both of these men placed a premium upon experience as the prime source of human knowledge. According to Nishida "The distinction of subject and object is the relative form which arises when one loses the unity of experience." He goes on to claim that intellectual intuition is only a further deepening and enlargement of our state of pure experience and that even the scholar's acquisition of new thoughts is based on the expression of this kind of unity.

Bergson differed from Nishida in that he made a distinction between intellection and intuition as ways of knowing. Bergson was concerned with redressing the imbalance which he believed had evolved in the West between these two powers. He felt that the two ways of knowing ought to operate in a polaristic, complementary fashion rather than permit the continual dominance of the spatially disposed intellect.

Finally, I shall look ahead to some of the problems involved in the implementation of an Intuitive approach to second language learning, particularly here in Japan. Certainly methods which have been only marginally successful in the past should be reevaluated and progressive new approaches instituted. One new approach ought to be concerned with the level of acceptance on the part of the students. For if language is as intimate and personal as has been maintained then the attitude of the student will be a critical factor in determining whether the language is merely regarded as information or becomes intuitively absorbed into the person.

Since a good deal of everyone's identity is bound up with one's native language, for some the new language may initially be perceived as something of a threat; whereas, in fact, it ought to be seen as a means of empowerment. Consequently, teachers might do well to invest some of their time and creative energies in this heretofore neglected dimension for it stands to reason that the more a student really wants to learn the new language the more quickly, thoroughly and permanently it will be learned.

Nowhere, I think, could the challenges be greater than in the present place and under the present circumstances. Since our respective languages--English and Japanese are so different and our resultant cognitive processes so diverse, intercultural linguistic problems are perhaps brought into sharper focus here than elsewhere. To lay a foundation for success here in Japan would seem to be a worthy goal; one which fully supports our theme of "Cross-cultural Communication Through English Education" and promotes globalization in the best sense of the word.