# Learning to think and learning to learn:
# From formalism to positive idiosyncrasy

**Résumé**

Si le langage, tel que considéré par les linguistes est contenu, formulation, notion et intention, suffit-il pour autant de dire que parler un langage est simplement articuler des mots, produire des sons et des sens?

Dans la société, les gens dans leur diversité, formulent, énoncent un langage et à chaque fois ce langage est différent et est nouveau.

Dans cet article, c'est cette même idée de nouveau, donc d'idiosyncrasie, que je veux inculquer et à faire apprendre à nos étudiants pour qu'ils soient attentifs dans leur apprentissage de la langue étrangère, et à développer, chemin faisant, leur propre langage (diction, style, etc…).

J'essaye donc de discuter les problèmes qu'ont justement nos étudiants à apprendre le langage cible, et je suggère des solutions d'un point de vue d'une politique de langue, laquelle s'affiche précisément dans la logique de la bipolarité : « apprendre à penser et apprendre à apprendre ».

Ces variations de langage sont dues principalement aux différentes situations. C'est précisément ces contextes de situations qu'on doit, nous enseignants, faire valoir et faire comprendre à nos étudiants pour qu'au lieu de répétitions mécaniques, ils apprennent à penser et apprennent à apprendre qu'à chaque contexte, qu'à chaque situation, il y a lieu d'adapter son langage et/ou le développer ou l'enrichir.

L'enseignant et sa science aidera l'étudiant à accomplir les deux tâches « d'apprendre à réfléchir et apprendre à apprendre ».

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**ملخص**

يجمع علماء اللسانيات أن اللغة هي: محتوى، كلام، ظرف ونية. والسؤال الذي يطرح نفسه هو: هل تكلم لغة يعني فقط تكوين جمل ومعاني والإدلاء بآراء؟

يتكلم الناس في المجتمع العام في عدة مواضيع مستخدمين في اتصالاتهم لغة معينة.

يسعى هذا المقال إلى إبراز فكرة التجديد في للغة و في الكلام، و فكرة

Linguists in their dispersion agree that language is fourfold : proposition, content, notion, and intention. In speaking and in communicating, people form a network of messages with the intention to enunciate something or put ideas across. In other words, speakers in their diversity establish every time new and personal relationships with their ever-changing environment.

It is precisely that idea of newness, of change, and of idiosyncrasy that our [novice] learners must comprehend and be aware of to develop, later on, their own language (diction, style, etc.) instead of a mechanical repetition of a stereotype thinking. In effect, our learners are taught, most of the time, a formal language when they needed a lively

الخاصية والذاتية ليتمكن الطلبة من تعلم
و تطــوير أســلوبهم الخــاص (الخاصــية
الإيجابية) في اللغة الأجنبية.

يستعرض هذا المقال المشـاكل التي
يعرفها طلبتنا في دراستهم للغة الأجنبية،
ويقترح حلولا من خلال سياسة لغة تدور
حـول محـورين أساسـيين: "تعلـم التفكيـر
وتعلم التعلم".

إن نوعيــة اللغــة وتقلباتهــا يمليهــا
الواقــع و"ميـادين خاصــة" التـي تولـد كل
مــرة كلامــا وأســلوبا ومفــردات جديـدة
بإمكان طلبتنا فهمها و استخدامها لتجنب
التكـرار الممـل لـنفس الأفكـار أو لـنفس
العبارات.

language as it is spoken in the target language (T.L) community.

In the present paper, I will try in a tentative fashion to discuss the drawbacks of such a teaching of language and suggest solutions in the view of a proposed language policy. A language policy which is structured around the polarization "Learning to think and learning to learn" i.e. the student can acquire the T.L through learning how <u>to think</u> and how <u>to learn.</u>

On the part of the teacher, too, we emphasise the idea of idiosyncrasy. He can, according to this students' needs, and to the ethos of his class advance his personal endeavours to implement as well as he can the two concepts of "thinking" and "learning".

## 1- LANGUAGE AND SOCIETY

A description of the speech act in true language can be seen in that it is a human activity, a means by which people express their purposes. Yet, language can be subject to specific and multiple variations in different situations, or <u>contexts of situation</u>. There, language is determined and/or modified and thus sociolinguistics tries to demonstrate how human speech activity (parole) undergoes changes and modifications in those different contexts (cf. Pride. 1971). Therefore, insights into the social meaning of language can lead us to understand how language operates in society and how different individuals establish every time new relationships to achieve particular effects.

### 1.1- A sociolinguistic stance

Departing from certain accepted schemes ('scheme' means the first denotative meaning of a word), people in their manifold interactions enlarge their environment by participating in the talk exchange, and by so doing bring novelty and diversity. Bertrand Russell, quoted by Chomsky (1975) clarifies that idea of diversity and novelty in language. He posits :

'How comes it that human beings,
whose contacts with the world
are brief and personal and
limited, are nevertheless able
to know as much as they do know. '

(Russell. In Chomsky.1975:5)

The full piquancy of the above reflection reveals, in our sense, the importance of learning a language not simply for speaking it, but rather for establishing relationships with people, and for creativity -a pure product of the mind, as opposed to a parrotry

repetition. As a matter of fact, expressions as: 'a month of Sundays', 'Robinhood act', 'Rip Van Winkle money', 'wordsmith' (as reference to Thomas Jefferson's 'invention' of strong and powerful words), 'Mona Lisa smile' - you name it ! are new creations of the mind which have added to the English language.

Earlier on, discussing the same idea of departing from a certain scheme, Turner (1973) argues that the English language is a complex interaction of different schemes, that, for instance, 'Scots English varies from American English and form the English of the Caribbean' (p.16). Elsewhere, and still departing from a certain scheme, a word as 'boomerang', formerly known as an Australian weapon having the characteristic of returning back after being thrown in the air, comes to mean in the 'new language' (probably of the South West of the Pacific) a 'return ticket'; just as 'tyre station' has replaced 'petrol station' or 'gas station'.

More so can be said on the dreaded rude words, which form, anyway, an intrinsic part of language, formal or informal. These words of the type of the 'f-word' are said to be easily acquired, but somewhat difficult to use in the society at large. For instance, D.H. Lawrence's Lady Chatterly's Lover published in 1928 was banned because considered as greatly offending where the 'f-words' appeared frequently. On both sides of the Atlantic, in another register, 'the f-word is carefully dubbed over when movies are shown on T.V' (Glebe.1991:37).

The other question about language and society is the Standard English (SE) and the Received Pronunciation (RP). Standard English is correct English on the levels of grammar and vocabulary. This leads us to say that according to dictionary codification, British and American Englishes are correct (respectively Hornby's OALDCE and Noah Webster's Webster Dictionary of American English).

Stubbs (1980) sees that standard English is a 'geographical and social class dialect : a from of English used by a particular socio-economic class.' (p.21). An example of such a socio-economic class is well illustrated by Mel Calman's caricature, which appeared on the cover of a book of American civilization. So runs the caption :

> 'You mustn't think you understand
> AMERICAN politics just because
> they speak English!'

<div align="right">(Calman. In Lees.1983.Author's capitals)</div>

Such a 'declaration' reveals the other intrinsic aspects of language, namely denotation and connotation. Indeed, language in society is intrinsically ambiguous and it may function denotatively as well as connotatively, again according to the context of situation.

Received Pronunciation (RP), on the other hand, means a particular accent, which has sometimes a certain prestige (Stubbs. 1980), and thus different classes have different Englishes (Munby. 1978). Therefore, in saying 'right English' or 'wrong English', we advance a social judgement, not a linguistic one. Let us consider the following example:

The weather's fine today.
/    we  (r) z  fain  t 'dei /   RP accent (British?)

/ w z fain t dei / American accent

Standard English as in the example above in then, at least for the native speaker, a social indicator. However, the non-native speaker should not be restricted to learn to speak only one language at the expanse of another but should rather be exposed (taught) the different varieties of the language he is learning and he has to make his own choice about which 'English' he is more keen to speak.

## 1.2- Language and communication

In order to talk about language and communication, I would like to give credit right to here to Fishman's classical 'Who speaks what language to whom and when'. (Fishman.1972). This, in my sense, resumes all what can people do with language between starting a conversation and stopping or terminating it.

When we listen, we try to understand what the speaker intends to tell us. As speakers, on the other hand, we aim at making the audience recognize our intentions. This is very likely what speakers –even non-native speakers- are expected to do during a talk exchange in the T.L. community.

Sociolinguistics tells us that the speaker who knows the addresser talks to him according to a certain code, which Hymes (1972) identifies as the code of communicative conduct. Hymes describes four sectors (Possible grammatical use; Feasibility; Appropriateness; and Accepted use) according to which he sees communication-taking place.

These four sectors should not be seen for their own sake, but should rather be considered as overlapping aspects of the whole communication system. These sectors, although having a demanding nature –especially on our novice students– permit, however, to the language user to produce, understand and interpret language in social and cultural manifestations.

In like manner, Hymes further argues that speech habits must be introduced to particular receivers by 'using a particular code with messages of particular forms (…) about particular settings.' (p.288). This emphatic 'particularity' in Hymes' standpoint reveals the correlation of linguistic codes, discourse pragmatics, and social interaction. Hymes' sectors denote, so, a declaration of **social relevance** for they put sociocultural demands upon the communicator.

To Grice (1975) conversation is a cooperative principle, i.e. what is said is expected to relate to a common topic or a topic framework. So, inferring meaning in a talk exchange is essential for a successful communication, and a possible description of communication can be seen in the inferences of intentions.

Language has manifold guises and the line between what is said and what is implied becomes unclear. This is so particularly when communicators make their meanings less accessible, and the talk exchange less effective plaguing the listener with sentences of unwanted senses. However, being ambiguous does not occur in every instance of speech, it is rather a deliberate (or an accidental) attempt by the speaker.

In respect of all these language realizations, Grice advances his principle of communication: the Cooperative Principle (CP). Grice (1975) formulated a general principle, which he expects the participants (in a talk exchange) will observe. Thus goes the principle:

'Make your conversational contribution such
as is required, at the stage at which it occurs,
by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk
exchange in which you are engaged.'

(Grice.1975: 45)

In other words, if one wishes to carry out a perlocutionary act of, say, convincing someone, he must then agree with that principle to maximally reach his aim.

With the CP, and the notion of relevance and purpose, Grice (1975) developed his conversational maxims of Quantity, Quality, Relevance, and Manner. He expects that the speaker has to utter a sentence within a context, and that at least one of its interpretations obeys the CP. (It is rare, we must contend, that one flouts all the maxims at one go). As a matter of fact, the first maxim of Quantity 'invites' the speaker to be clear enough when he speaks by providing the hearer with as information necessary in the talk exchange as possible, provided that the speaker has also to avoid being confusingly prolix. Such a provision is secured by the subsequent maxims of Relation (Be relevant) and of Manner (Be brief).

As we said above about the four sectors of Hymes, all the maxims are interdependent and the meaning of one might overlap with the other.

Grice (1975) presents his standpoint on how communication is to be carried out with the contention that 'appropriate social interactional framework must be provided.' (Garton et al.1989)

## 2- LEARNING TO THINK AND LEARNING TO LEARN

### 2.1- Learning to think

In learning, the subject goes through a process (i.e. a set of operations which involve a number of skills so as to achieve some social and cognitive goals) for the acquisition of language and knowledge. Through this process, the individual seeks to apply a concept (mental representation) or an idea (mental event) already known or formed. Later, in this practical life, he uses the knowledge he obtained to understand the world around him in which he lives (Gardner.1993). This is in general what we expect students to do: to have the possibilities for creativity, and for building up their new ideas and concepts. In other words, students should learn to unlock their unbrushed minds to construct and use new thoughts.

In the present paper, we will attempt to show that learning to think is an issue of a paramount importance for the students' self-realisation, or the fulfilment of their own potential. We expect our students to learn to be skilled, that is to be 'more reflective (….) and more affective in their problem solving' (Gardner. Op.cit., p.109). This is believed to lead, in the long run, to the emergence of "intuitive understanding'', to use again Gardner's words.

By "intuitive understanding" is meant a mode of understanding characterized as occurring without conscious thought. In other words, it is a response to subtle cues (which the student is expected to pick up from the environment) and relationships comprehended implicitly or unconsciously.

In the same line of thought, "understanding" means an intuitive process whereby

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one succeeds in understanding the deep significant meaning of an event, a concept or an idea.

Such an "intuitive understanding" as an ultimate stage in <u>learning to learn</u> should be opposed, for more clarification, to "disciplinary understanding". In the latter, learners are expertly aided in their understanding by their scholars in their respective disciplines. The role of the teacher is -as we will see further down- is very important. As an example, the teacher clarifies to his learners the idea that English is undergoing an ongoing transformation that can be described and analysed according to three basic features : a/ archaism ; b/ borrowing, and c/ coinage and semantic modification (cf. Ahulu.1998).

Indeed, English has undergone a transformation in its lexis, grammar and even pronunciation (other than English/American pronunciations). As a matter of fact about archaism, people no more receive or send <u>missives</u> but rather <u>letters</u>, but still some of them are **'**inclined to use the literary word than the plain one : (…) to call a building an <u>edifice</u>; (…) neighbourhood (…) <u>vicinity</u> ; (…) <u>fatigued</u> than, like most people, (…) <u>tired</u>**'** (Maugham, 1978: 189).

For borrowings, English has many words such as 'automobile', 'bureau' (Federal Bureau of Investigation), 'dossier', 'par excellence', and other words and expressions that are now accepted as standard English. Ba'alabaki (Baalabaki, 1979) denotes many borrowings from Arabic into English, as 'alcohol', 'jerboa', 'mattress', 'azimuth', and many others.

Deviation, compounding are the other aspects of English coinage. Words like 'markedness', 'easification' and expressions like 'to easify', to 'Englishize'; or compounding as 'oh-so-nice-to-be-with-you feeling', or 'cut-through-with-a-knife-like mist' have become familiar to us. More so can be seen in grammar and sentence constructions, such as the double negative as in 'I ain't gotta go nowhere'; or 'I ain't gonna give nobody none of my cake', examples of American colloquialisms.

We do not think that such 'fluctuations' about language are familiar to our students when they come from the lycée. Either such an English would seem 'strange' to them or simply 'incorrect' because, first they don't have an experience of it, or second because they have not heard <u>their teacher</u> speak such an English. In either case, our learners have to learn to keep abreast with such 'Englishes'.

Our view is thus confined to consider the kind of thinking our students have when they <u>emerge</u> from the lycée with their secondary thinking and educational heritage -on to the university.

In that sense, our classroom observations lead us to contend that our students think they can simply do <u>as in the lycée</u>, and this naive belief is quite often seriously thwarted in the face of university requirements. Indeed, the university is a totally new environment of thinking which they have to cope with. Such a fact about university in general, and university tuition in particular might raise a cloud of darkness if our students continue to have no awareness that in high school they were only acquiring stereotyped traits and behaviors while learning English.

So, the learner has to be highly aware of such a fact and that he has a competence, which is in fact composed of a welter of stereotypes. He has thus to reconsider, reshape and update it, with the help of the teacher, of course. By doing so, he will activate his perceptual schemata, i.e. he will learn how to match up the incoming data with

knowledge he already has.

Such a mental and cognitive activity will, it is highly expected, prepare the student and allow him to well integrate the new world of university, **his** new world.

## 2.2- Learning to learn

If completely aware of such changes in environment and tuition, and also aware of their respective requirements, the student has to waste no time to start to fulfill his new duties, - the duties of **a new brand of thinker and learner.** For doing so, we suggest the following:

1.   He should not be afraid of change. This change will not undermine his new 'life' if he simply understands that he left one particular pedagogic world having certain guiding principles for another one. He must now expect himself to meet, interact, and behave with different people, as a matter of fact, in different situations of speech exchange. Those people include his teachers whom he can approach more easily and **that all shibboleths of deference** have [now] been replaced by adultwise and more appropriate deference.

2.   He should not be afraid of taking initiative and engage firmly into creative works and activities. Indeed, since the university offers him grand opportunities of self-access to audio, video, and even electronic materials, he must so realize that with all this, and with the competence he already has, he can broaden his mental capacities, his background knowledge – and thus his creativity. His style (as in writing) will become more refined, educated and dignified; his speaking more fluent, accurate, and, with an even importance, spontaneous and thus idiosyncratic.

3.   All the same, the student must also know that in his enterprise of learning to learn and learning to think he has to understand that :

> ' becoming  competent  at
> intellectual  abilities  is (…)
> to guarantee a  fruitful  or
> productive life [and] undoubtedly
> helps enormously.'

(Howe . 1988 :358)

So, being aware of constructing his knowledge, the student will enable himself to well carry out his studies at the university, and to well prepare himself for his future duties of a would-be teacher.

## 3- PERCEPTION OF LANGUAGE

According to all what we discussed above, we must so explicate to the student how vital it is to become active in learning a language effectively, and that secondary and tertiary intuition have no common values, but that they are more or less in complementarily.

As far as language perception goes, it can be seen (or diagnosed) in how much experience our learners have with the language to possibly be able to infer any of the speaker's intentions.

## 3.1. Language obeys changes

Our position here is precisely to eschew stereotype thinking –which has become a vexing issue- reductio absurdum and [to start] to inculcate in the student(s) the appropriate new concept of language i.e. that language is not a set of rules to be learnt by heart (rote learning) but that it is a social phenomenon which grows in an intricate network of propositions, levels of meanings, intentions, etc. The student must be made aware that English is 'in a state of constant flux (…) changing all the time in thousands of tiny ways' (Honey, 1998: 42).

## 3.2. Crossing the Rubicon?

In all these perspectives about language, which demands shall we put on our learners ? None. Our learners are deprived of authentic and natural context of English use, i.e. deprived of ''linguistic baths'' as to have long and repeated stays or sojourns in the target language community (maybe because they are costly), nor they have intensive exposure to authentic and/or non-authentic materials. The learner is thus deprived of grasping in vivo how language does function. The teacher is then frustrated to see that his students' ''sensory context'' (i.e. the T.L community at large) is reduced to the confined classroom situation. He is also frustrated because he knows well that no assimilation or perception of language can work when the student **remains alien** to the sociolinguistic factors. Then, Hymes' sectors(1972), Grice's maxims (1975), Munby's classification of social class dialects (1978), and Stubbs' purports (1980) ) would seem Greek to our novice students if they do not have the opportunity to perceive and practice them in the T.L community. Language, it is feared, would become their Rubicon, as Muller put it, and no one 'will dare to cross it.' (In Harris.1987:9). Our students have the ''unique'' opportunity to listen to English –with sustained authentic and pedagogic materials– in the language ''practitiatory'' (Labed.1997) or in the video room, **when** there is enough time on the timetable.

Having rounded up the many serious problems our students have, it is now a growing necessity to reflect over the crux of the problem, i.e. to adapt a language policy capable to 'perchance' enhance teaching and learning – as we view it – in our university.

## 4. WHICH LANGUAGE POLICY?

The best treatment of the problem of communication our learners have must be confined within the framework of the well-thought language policy. We will try in the present paper to show the contours of a proposed one.

First and foremost, no language policy, we take, will have its practical applications only if we consider the type of thinking, motivation, and awareness our students have to develop at the university while they carry on with their foreign language studies, with the expectation of the occurrence of "an explosion of concepts" (Hawkins, 1984).

Indeed, our classroom and outside classroom observations lead us to contend that our learners seem to be unable to truly expect such an ''explosion'' to occur. It is all probable that they are afraid in 'kicking open an anthill', to use again Honey's (1998) words; afraid that their own:

> ' stereotypes and misconceptions
> will be challenged and that a more
> realistic and comprehensive perspective
> will begin to emerge.'

( Gardner. 1993 :224)

In effect, such an ''explosion'' has the merits that it will reveal, as expected, the different manifestations of language, one of which is free and idiosyncratic communication.

Second, it will also make students aware of the drawbacks of learning only one aspect of English and not another. Such a 'linguicide' (cf. Pool,1991), i.e. the obliteration of all other Englishes except a single one (viz RP English) takes us again to carefully reconsider our present language policy.

### 4.1- Enthusiasm or disenchantment?

In fact, we have a language policy that allows any student from <u>any stream</u> to register in the department of English. When this is done, a 'compensation system' again allow those students to move from one year to another with an incredible easiness!

Such an **irresponsible policy** keeps undoubtedly our students far from even ''thinking'' about making the least effort to accomplish the mission of <u>thinking</u> about a language and <u>learning</u> it. Instead, they laze around in the university campus, becoming indefatigable bench warmers! (Labed, 1997).

We suggest that our position vis-à-vis such a 'registration' or a 'compensation system' should be addressed at the highest levels of the Ministry of Higher Education <u>and</u> the Ministry of Education, but also at the lowest levels of the classroom. Indeed, we have to make our learners always know that if such systems linger on they will, every year, add their names in the swelling ranks of students leaving the university with an impoverished language competence.

Such a language policy and its levity in behaving with a foreign language at the university represents an unjustifiable defiance of our students' interest, and a real crucible for us teachers which is feared to mar our enthusiasm of genuinely performing our task, an enthusiasm which **we do not want** on any account to let it wither away.

### 4.2. The teacher's role: the positive idiosyncrasy

Waiting then for any better language policy, the teacher, at the lowest classroom level, has to sustain and boldly claim that language learning cannot be hemmed in the narrow classroom but that it also takes place 'overthere'. For this, the practitioner has to inculcate in the student the self-sustaining growth (cf. James, 1988), that the student has to listen to the different sources (mass media) which propagate the 'sound of English'.

However, in the classroom, the teacher has to save no effort, no time, to give his help and advice, **preferably uncontaminated by ideology** to reshape or simply eradicate any stereotype or obsolete thinking he finds in these students.
He can run his class in his:

'own personal and often
idiosyncratic ways (….)
conceding that there may
be a distinctive ethos to
every class.'

(Swales, 1990: 218, Emphasis mine)

It is quite certain that every class is quite different from another one, and in many ways. So, either students are cheerful, enthusiastic; shy, coy, or completely devoid of cheer, it is not an established program that would best enhance their learning. It is rather the teacher's personal endeavours to make each student participate in 'response to his motivations' (Orbell et al., 1991).

Such an idiosyncrasy and the teacher's hard-earned experience can both contribute in well implementing "thinking" and "learning" which 'can bring the individual up to an effective functioning level' (Anastasi,1982: 342). Anastasi further comments that the learner can learn with a relatively short period. The time given on the timetable will, we believe, still heat an ongoing debate. (cf. Labed, 1997).

### 4.3. The student we expect to have

According to all the difficulties, inadequacies and the hopes, which we enumerated, we do not very much expect our learners to become expert communicators. We simply want them to become **good users** of the language they are learning.

In respect to Band's proficiency scale (cf. Hutchinson and Waters.1987) consisting of nine scales in a descending order, he classifies the language user from ''Expert User'' down to ''Non-User''. So, following our treatment of the subject and our objective (and modest) expectancies, **Scale 6** seems to be the most appropriate. This scale describes the **Competent User** as having:

'generally effective command
of the language, although
occasional misunderstanding
and lack of fluency could
interfere with communication.'

(Hutchinson et al., 1987: 150)

Scale 6 thus offers easy and convenient opportunities to the teacher to precisely not spur upon his learners to do more than what they can do, at least in the short terms of their tuition.

Later on, with their own efforts, **if impinged upon** by a genuine and sincere desire to learn and acquire the T.L, our learners can then "percolate" very easily through the other stages of proficiency to reach the so ambitious Scale 9 of expertness!

### CONCLUSION

We do not think it altogether inappropriate to consider that our polarization "Learning to Think and Learning to Learn" a bona fide deal of some sort, we more so

pledge ourselves to such a deal.

The guiding commitment of this polarization, which we consider as a stepping stone for our language policy, is that a student can enrich his knowledge about language only through action (Saadi, 1996) i.e. by learning to always get new things; and from the perspective of performing through all ages and levels of education (Saadi, 1997), an ongoing search towards near-nativeness.

On the part of the teacher, we do emphasize the very idea of idiosyncrasy. He can, according to his students' needs, wants, and problems refine, invent, correct, recast, scratch his head (Labed, 1997), to disentangle himself from blindly following a well-rounded program of language study when he sees that it precisely does not fit his expectancies.

With industry enough, single-mindedness and enthusiasm to lead it, we wish to be among educators and language enthusiasts of the model of Pitman, Crystal, Honey, and the other striving few.

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