

Language Learning and the Mother Tongue: A Personal Experience

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This paper is a personal reflection on the author's experience of language learning in different periods of her life. The contemporary debates in Hong Kong over mother tongue teaching prompted reflection on her early years with the learning of English as a mother tongue, and how this laid a basis for the effective learning of several other languages that began relatively late, on entry to secondary school at the age of fourteen. Each experience of language learning, in different conditions and at different phases of life, is described and a broad set of conclusions reached. Effective language learning is most likely when systematic and thorough teaching is provided and when there is a learning motivation that is intrinsic and linked to appreciation for the culture of the language community. It can be enhanced by a period of immersion in the language community.

語文學習和母語：我的個人體驗

本文是作者個人不同階段的語文學習經驗的反思。香港目前就母語教學掀起的辯爭，激使作者回顧其語文學習經驗。作者早年先習英語，即其母語。其他數種語言的學習則較遲，在她十四歲入讀中學之後才開始。本文記述了早年的母語學習如何為作者奠定根基，使她日後學習外語時，能收事半功倍之效；旁及在不同的時期、不同的客觀條件下，每一段語言學習的經驗。作者並提出多項結論，指出學習語言如能得助於富系統而深入的教學，加上自發的動機，與及欣賞該種語言代表的社會文化的意欲，便最能見效。若能在所習語言的環境裏日久浸淫，學習成效亦會有所提升。

Learning the Mother tongue

My earliest memory of language learning goes back to my first grade in primary school, when I suffered severe chest problems and had to be kept out of school for much of the year. Fortunately, in the first month at school I had learned the alphabet and become excited about reading. As a result, during the months at home, books were my constant companions, especially several books of fairy tales with stories such as Cinderella, Red Riding Hood and the Wolf, Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and the Princess and the Pea. I have a vivid memory of my delight, when I sounded out a word in one of these children's stories, and then was able to match this sound with something that had meaning in my repertoire of speech. I also remember following my mother around the house with a book clutched in one hand, pointing to words and asking her, "How do I pronounce this word, and that word?"

Somehow the power of words had gripped me from an early age, and the exciting links between words and the world of ideas and objects had captured my imagination. I was a passionate reader throughout my eight years in primary school. I grew up in a monolingual home and only started to study other languages when I entered secondary school at age 14. This was the case even though Toronto of the 1950s was already a multicultural city, with areas of the city where Italian, Portuguese, Chinese, Korean, and Greek were spoken as much as English.

Secondary school experience with foreign languages

During my four years in secondary school, I studied four languages: Greek, Latin, French and German. All were taught in a formal way with a strong emphasis on learning the structure and grammar of the language, building up knowledge of new vocabulary and doing extensive exercises in translation both to and from English. Relatively little attention was given to speaking the languages, even French and German. The result of this education was that I came to appreciate language learning as a kind of discipline of the mind and as a window on other worlds, other cultures, other systems of meaning.

From my study of Greek, I came to love Greek mythology, the heroes and heroines of the

Trojan War and imagination-gripping phrases such as "rosy-fingered dawn" from Homer's Iliad. From Virgil's Aeneid I got the sense of the epic history of a nation over centuries, the ups and downs the Roman people experienced, summed up in phrases such as "there were tears for things and human destinies touched the heart." In German I enjoyed Albert Schweitzer's reflections on a life of music and of service to humanity in "Leben und Denken" (Living and Thinking). In French I enjoyed Saint Exupery's tales of early flying experience, Le Petit Prince, and French Canadian stories such as Gabrielle Roy's "Tin Flute."

Throughout my secondary school years, language study was more a discipline than a means of communication. This situation continued in university, when I studied Classics and read in depth the works of Plato, Aristotle, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Pindar, Virgil, Horace, Catullus, Seneca and others, all in the original Greek and Latin. I also continued with some studies of French and English literature. However, there was very little opportunity to use the modern languages I had learned for oral communication.

Language Learning for Communication

Only when I moved to Hong Kong in 1967, at the age of twenty one, did language learning become an urgent matter of communication. I found myself living in Diamond Hill, a part of Kowloon where little English was used or heard, and within a week of arrival I had started my studies in Cantonese. I was extremely fortunate to find a teacher who believed I should start with learning Chinese characters as well as colloquial Cantonese and who gave me systematic instruction in character learning, in the structure of written Chinese and in the spoken language. Sometimes my teacher would make me repeat a sentence as often as ten times, in order to ensure that I had mastered the tonal structure. This was one of the most difficult challenges, quite different from anything I had experienced with European languages. I remember the sense of putting my voice, long used to the flow of English, into a vice as I tried to master the seven tones of Cantonese. Only after months of intense practice, did I begin to realise how the discipline of tonal structure made possible subtle variations on the seven tones and thus a much broader range of expressive

emphasis than in my native language.

I loved these language lessons, and found myself constantly pondering the meaning of the characters and what they revealed to me of Chinese people's culture and ways of thinking. This may well have resulted from the pleasure I had had over the years in reading and exploring ideas in my own language of English, and also from the way in which I had learnt both classical and modern languages of Europe during my secondary and tertiary education in Canada. It was somehow a natural thing for me to see language as a window into other worlds of thought and meaning, others ways of describing and making sense out of the world. The more I enjoyed reading in my mother tongue, the more I felt enticed to explore the worlds that opened up to me through other languages.

What was different from past experience in my study of Cantonese, however, was the experience of total immersion in another cultural system. I taught in Heep Yunn School and though my lessons were given entirely in English, outside of the classroom I was immersed in a world of Cantonese. This was the case among students and in the teachers' room where I had a small desk among many others, and most colleagues communicated with one another in Cantonese. In addition, I was living within a Chinese family where Cantonese was the language of communication, and constant exposure to television and radio allowed the language to flow through my brain, with its clear ringing tones, day and night. Before very long I was able to communicate quite effectively, and within a couple of years I was able to teach and preach in Sunday School and Church circles in the language.

From Cantonese to Putonghua

The constant exposure to Chinese educational and church circles drew me more and more to a life of thought within the culture and gave me a growing curiosity to explore China itself. This was something very difficult for a Canadian to do during the Cultural Revolution decade. However, I decided to learn Putonghua in order to be prepared for the day China would open up, and signed up for a full-time program at the Chinese University of Hong Kong in 1975. There I had lessons in

Mandarin as it was then called, as well as modern and classical written Chinese. My teachers despaired at the task of getting rid of a strong Cantonese accent in my spoken Mandarin, but I learned the tonal structure systematically and gained a deeper and more scholarly grasp of the written language. In Hong Kong of the mid 1970s, there were minimal opportunities to speak the language and only occasional chances to hear it spoken, such as those provided by the movies. I was fortunate, however, in the fact that my Chinese mother, in the home where I had lived for six years, was a teacher of Mandarin in a well known private school, and we remained in close touch after I moved away from her home in 1974.

Only when I went to Shanghai in 1980, and spent two years teaching at Fudan University, a prestigious national institution drawing students from all over China, did I begin to use Putonghua as a daily means of communication. Immediately I discovered that the year of systematic study I had done at the Chinese University of Hong Kong stood me in very good stead. Within a very short period, I was fluent, and indeed as comfortable in speaking Putonghua as Cantonese. Over subsequent years, I maintained fluency in both languages but noticed that I had a rich professional and academic vocabulary in Putonghua, which contrasted with the vocabulary of daily life I had acquired in Cantonese.

During the two years in Shanghai, I also took up French again, having regular lessons with a French student. Bilingualism was becoming a more and more important aspect of the Canadian identity and I did not want to be left behind. Both then and later, when I worked in a bilingual context in the Canadian Embassy in Beijing, I found the systematic studies of my high school days provided a solid foundation for an increasing oral fluency in the language. This was possible in spite of the fact that I never had the opportunity of immersion in a French speaking environment.

During my Shanghai days, immersion in a Putonghua speaking academic environment drew me further into philosophical and cultural studies. I attended lectures in Chinese philosophy given in Putonghua, and joined an informal study group in a home, where we read the Four Books of Confucius in a traditional way. The teacher was a worker from a family with high Communist credentials. He had never learned any alphabetic language but had attached himself as disciple to a

traditional scholar and made an exhaustive study of various classical texts. I prepared for these lessons in a way that greatly helped my written Chinese - copying out several pages of the Great Learning, then the Mencius, in a notebook on double spaced lines. Then while the teacher explained each line, I wrote his explanation in modern Chinese.

One day during one of these lessons, the teacher mentioned the fact he had heard I also could speak Cantonese, and asked if I would be willing to read a page of the classical text in Cantonese. I agreed, and did so to the best of my ability, while he marvelled at a foreigner who could read in a southern dialect he could not understand. His next request was that I should read the text in English! It was only then that I reflected on the fact that this might have been possible in Japanese, Korean or Vietnamese, and on the very deep differences between alphabetic and ideographic writing systems.

After completing my doctorate in London and returning to Canada to start a teaching career at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in 1984, I began a new period of my life. It was marked by regular research visits to China every year, and an interlude between 1989 and 1991 when I was seconded from the University to the Canadian Embassy in Beijing, and made responsible for cultural and academic affairs between Canada and China.

In addition to research interviews and ceremonial speech giving, I became more and more accustomed to delivering academic lectures in Putonghua, and in 1994 I taught a graduate course on the subject of international academic relations to a group of graduate students and young faculty at the Higher Education Research Institute of the Huazhong University of Science and Technology in Wuhan. I still remember the stimulating conversations I had with a Chinese graduate student, who had come with me from Canada to assist, over which Chinese phrase would best translate such concepts as centre and periphery, nomothetic and idiographic approaches to knowledge, phenomenology, and postmodernism. The interesting point was that there were often two or three possibilities to choose from!

From Chinese to Japanese

In 1993, I faced a new challenge in language learning. I was invited to give a plenary address at an international conference on Education and Modernization held at Waseda University in Tokyo, and met a young Japanese professor from Nagoya University who spoke flawless Putonghua, but very little English. He asked me if I would consider spending a sabbatical year in Japan. The idea of doing a comparative study of internationalization in Japanese universities immediately attracted me, yet I knew this would be a demanding adventure. I could not accept such a generous invitation without committing myself to an extensive period of Japanese language study.

Within a week of my return to Toronto from the Tokyo conference, I started studies in Japanese with one of my doctoral students. This made a busy academic schedule much busier, with a two hour lesson and six hours of homework to be fitted in every week! Jokingly, I referred to this as my "mental gymnastics" and reminded myself of how my professors of Latin and Greek had told me, years earlier, that no matter what kind of future use I might find for my proficiency in these languages, I would come out of the Classics program with "a mind like a steel trap!" Once again I was honing my mind, this time with a difficult Asian language. These part time studies of Japanese went on for three years, and by the time I arrived in Nagoya for a six month sabbatical in January of 1996 I was able to carry out simple conversations, and find my way around the country without too much difficulty.

Several months of near immersion helped me improve my comprehension, especially in the area of education, the field I know best, also to have greater confidence in speaking. However, I knew it would be years before I could reach the level I had in Putonghua, and actually be able to lecture in Japanese. I also had the confidence that, given a longer period of immersion and continuing structured study, this would be entirely possible. Unfortunately, it was not to be possible, for the time at least. However, a fascinating dimension of my experience of learning Japanese as a mature educator lay in the fact that I found myself constantly watching the learning process. It was as if a second self was standing on the side, observing and commenting on the language acquisition process. Perhaps this is the kind of meta-cognitive experience we hope to

encourage in children, in order for their learning to become effective and pleasurable, and to constitute the beginning of a lifelong habit.

The cultural rewards were also tremendous. I found myself constantly reflecting on the connections between Japanese and Chinese, the links in the arts, calligraphy, philosophy and lifestyle, also the striking differences. Terms such as ikebana (living flowers), shogun (general), sado (the way of tea), kimono (the dress thing) took on new life for me when I understood the kanji or Chinese characters in which they were expressed. The fact that I could understand a great deal of what I saw around me through a direct perception I had of the kanji, even when I was not sure how a particular phrase was pronounced in Japanese, made me feel at home in the culture.

While eating lunch at a Japanese restaurant in Toronto, not long before leaving for Japan, my husband asked me what was the meaning of the words written on our paper chopstick holders, and I told him they meant "carved wood." "How did you learn such an advanced term in your beginner's Japanese lessons?" he asked. I replied, "I am not sure of the pronunciation, but the meaning of the kanji is clear!" Later in Japan, I experienced some of the delight I had known as a child, at the matching of a word from the page with a word in my speech repertoire, when I put a familiar sound together with a kanji, known to me from my knowledge of Chinese characters.

Language Learning and the Mother Tongue

What is the relevance of these bits of my life experience to issues of language learning and the role of the mother tongue? Not being a linguist, nor any longer a language teacher, I am not certain. Perhaps the first point is that I do not seem to have been handicapped in learning other languages by the fact that the first fourteen years of my life were spent in mastering my mother tongue of English, and becoming a passionate reader and explorer of words and ideas.

The second point is that effective language learning may be linked to love and respect for the people and the culture of that language. The notion that language learning can be a purely functional thing, separated from the ideas and literature of the language group, is a misguided one, I believe. Without a desire to embrace the world of thought and culture to which language opens a

door or window, the learning process is likely to be mechanistic and soulless.

Singapore may be an interesting case from this point of view. The desire to foster Asian values is laudable, and the policy of teaching moral values through the mother tongues of Chinese, Malay and Tamil makes a lot of sense. However the other side of this is a highly functional approach to the teaching of English which treats the cultural context of the language as somewhat suspect. Young people are to be protected from possible contamination by Western values.

In the Hong Kong context, I think we may have underestimated the degree of psychological alienation felt by youngsters pushed into studying hard their English lessons by parents concerned about their career opportunities, yet having little intrinsic interest in the literature or society of the coloniser. There may be interesting parallels to be explored with young French Canadians, pushing themselves to learn English for its functional value, yet feeling alienated from both English Canada and England.

My personal experience of language learning, for whatever it is worth, involved at least two important elements: an intrinsic desire to learn, rooted in respect for the culture represented by the language group and a systematic and structured set of study experiences. The opportunity for immersion in particular language communities provided considerable enhancement of fluency, but was not essential.

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