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## Extraits de la conférence de James Dean BROWN *Fluency and Appropriacy*

### **The Chinese experience**

I first ran into the distinction between *fluency* and *accuracy* when I was teaching in the People's Republic of China for two years, between 1980 and 1982. There, we discovered a group of people who had been studying English secretly. For although you could study Russian, until 1978 it was dangerous to study English.

The people we were dealing with were top scientists from all over China who had been studying English secretly in groups or alone, sort of by candlelight. The only input they had in terms of language was BEO special English and the BBC. So, they did not really have very much natural input. These were really interesting people. When we first encountered them, we didn't know what to expect so we gave them some tests. They did very well on the grammar section and in reading. The writing scores were close to 0. The listening scores were terrible and their ability to speak was non existing. They knew a lot about the English language, the grammar, but they couldn't read, write, understand or speak it.

This is a situation that we find in lots of places in the world, not just in China. But it was very stark there because China had just opened up and it was such a very closed society before that. What they wanted us to do, was to teach them more grammar. I had a Chinese student tell me: "No, no, no. You, Americans, have it all wrong. What you should do is come into the class. We will stand up. You say 'Sit down', we will sit down. Then you open the book, tell us which page and we will discuss, no, **you** will discuss a paragraph for one hour. It sounded to me a lot like 'explication de texte'".

### **Teaching ideas**

My point of view was a little bit different.

Although it had been in Europe for more than ten years, we had just discovered communicative language teaching in the U.S. We thought it was brand new and wonderfully exciting. We had discovered notional/functional syllabuses as early as 1979 and so we were going to take those to China and we were going to save them with these new language teaching methods.

And we arrived in China and we got off of our white horses and we said: "Here we are". And they said: "No, thank you very much. We've been learning languages for a few thousand years using grammar/translation methods. Please open the book and explain the paragraph. We will be happy that way." So, we

had run into a conflict, the conflict between us who were right and righteous and young and bright-eyed and them who were one billion strong. There were a billion of them and there were nine of us. So, we had a problem on our hands.

The first thing we had to do was to figure out what it is that we really wanted them to do. The second thing was to try to convince them to do it our way.

None of this was very easy. We thought about what was happening to us and we realized these were people who did not need any more structural thinking. They knew more about the English language than we do. So, it was not a comfortable situation really and they didn't need any more grammar. They had learned English like we learned Latin and they couldn't do anything with it. How could we change the situation? Since they had the accuracy we wanted to increase their fluency. How could we get them to become more fluent? And so we tried to figure out how the two things were related and how they were different from each other.

### **Constituents of accuracy and fluency**

My guess is that *accuracy* is about phonemes. It's about syntax and it's about lexis or vocabulary. It's about the kinds of things we habitually teach in a grammar/translation or even in an audio/lingual course. It's a very narrow set of linguistic items that the students learn as a useful system, but a set of things that are not in and of themselves enough to create fluency.

The next question of course is: what is *fluency*?

- *Spontaneity* and *ability to actually communicate* and a large range of *syntax*.
- Somehow *idioms* often get left out of the vocabulary. Idioms have another aspect to them that is a little different from the kind of oralized language approach. They are chunks.
- *Rhythm*.
- *Speed and speech delivery*. Fluidity, although speed has something to do with it. Sometimes, native speakers speak more slowly in some situations. Appropriate speed.
- *Stress*.
- *Gestures*. Attitudes compared to speaking French. When speaking English, you have to become colder and less emotional and more puritanical. Ability to adapt.
- *Understanding*. It's a fallacy that fluency is about speaking. I think interactive spontaneity is also related to the unpredictability of language.

## **The mistakes of native speakers**

When I speak English, there are pauses, hesitations, errors. It's a cluster of things. You don't notice them because you concentrate on the message. It's a whole set of strategies that native speakers use and I suspect that one of the main problems that occur for students, in terms of their fluency in English, is that they demand far too much of themselves. With the Chinese students, what I would say is : "Watch how I am delivering the language and what mistakes I am making. Although I am a native speaker, there are pauses, hesitations, backtracking and repetitions." I would actually have to illustrate that to them. "What you, Chinese students, are expecting is to speak English perfectly in complete sentences, with perfect syntax, perfect phonology. But I don't." In a sense, it cripples people. This is the result of teaching them model sentences - which is all right, up to a point.

You have to realize that, in China, they had the syntax. We didn't want their accuracy to go down, but rather, we wanted their focus to shift. They started out with 100% focus on accuracy and we gradually wanted to increase their focus on fluency. How do you get these things to begin to happen when people have been indoctrinated and trained in this way? Little by little, you sneak up on them by making sure that the language they are using is purposeful language, that the messages they are trying to communicate are real.

In his book on applied linguistics, H. Widdowson made a distinction between *genuine* and *authentic*, particularly with reference to people learning ESP. We often use the word "authentic", meaning we are using real language. For example, we may use real engineering language with the students to read an engineering passage and answer multiple-choice questions. Typically, in the U.S., engineering students will solve problems on their examination.

Whatever they do or will have to do with English ultimately - would be the authentic use of the language. We do language training in engineering. In China, we tried to give the students some reason to actually communicate.

As we didn't know much about the sciences at all, we would ask students to explain things to us as a way of creating situations where they had to authentically or at least genuinely use the language for real purposes, to explain to us or to the others in the classroom, whether they were physicists, biologists, chemists and engineers.

## **Giving presentations**

At the upper level, the last project consisted in speaking for ten minutes about their own field of study such as building dams on the Yang Tse river or using acupuncture in surgery, topics that were interesting to them to actually communicate with us.

So, I think that was one of the primary tools we used: forget accuracy, focus on the message and get the message across.

However, speaking in small groups among themselves created the fear of losing face. And so, we had to explain to them what we thought language was and how it worked. We talked to them of how, in group work, you don't learn from the others' errors. You learn from yourself. You learn fluency by getting what you know to actually come out and correcting it.

So, we had to convince them. When they realized that it was necessary for them to make mistakes, then they were finally able to break free. So, errors become a very important thing. Of course if you say that, you absolutely must not stand there and correct their errors. You must tolerate tremendous variations in English but try to understand their message while they get it across.

### **Teaching register and style**

Let me back up and give you another example. I studied French for four years at university in L.A. and then I studied at l'Université d'Aix- Marseille for one year and, during that time, I was basically crippled. The first few months I was just desperate. I knew I could do just about everything if you gave me enough time. The problem was that people wouldn't stand around and wait. I was addicted to nicotine, but I couldn't buy cigarettes. I was an alcoholic, but I was afraid to go into a bar.

Since all of us were going to Aix-en-Provence, a little bit of Marseille dialect might have been useful, slang phrases or at least those phrases that are idiomatic. What's the difference? Slang is passing perhaps and idiomatic is permanent. Give me the idiomatic stuff, don't for goodness' sake tell me to use the "vous" form.

At University, they had told me to use "vous" for it was always safer. But nobody did except the professors, of course. For goodness' sake, tell me what "vachement" means. This obviously has been around for twenty years. What is a "sèche"? I didn't know that word for "cigarette". They didn't teach me, although some of them were French people.

They were trained very narrowly in literature. I would have liked to see a lot more expansion in what they did.

They never taught us about *registers*. And when I was getting into arguments in a bar, I had nothing, no recourse.

The point is, they gave me a very narrow view. They didn't show me much by way of register.

How about sexual, psychological and social roles?

Of course, there are differences between the way men and women speak. In any culture, I should guess, certainly in North American culture, there's been a lot of research done on that. At research meetings among equals, it turns out

that women speak less often and less long than men do, regularly. Why is that? They don't consider themselves as important. There's also the issue of size and volume.

We have dialectal differences and I referred to that briefly earlier. It's well worth thinking about dialectal differences between R.P. and the 150 other dialects in England that have more speakers by far and/or North American English. There are basically three dialects in the U.S. and in Canada. How about Australia?

*Prise de notes par Anne Péchou*