

An example of natural teaching

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Abstract

This essay is an introduction to one natural, evolutionary-based approach to teaching English language to Spanish children of 5 years old. It takes the view that teaching of any kind is a natural process and that learning is equally natural, and essentially analytical. It puts forward the idea that the teacher, not the textbook, should be the chief tool of the child. It gives an example of a natural learning and teaching situation, and gives an example of how this may be applied in the classroom. It outlines some topics for future discussion.

Resumen

Este ensayo es una introducción a un enfoque natural de enseñanza de lengua inglesa a niños españoles de 5 años, basado en la evolución. Propone que la enseñanza de cualquier tipo es un proceso natural y que el aprendizaje es igual de natural y fundamentalmente analítico. Propone, también, que es el profesor, y no el libro, el que debería servir como herramienta principal del alumno. Da un ejemplo de una situación de enseñanza y aprendizaje natural, y da un ejemplo de cómo se puede adaptarlo al aula. Hace referencia a otros tópicos para debatir en el futuro.

Key words: Socrates, successfully-evolved, pre-programmed, analytical-learning, blank-page, evolution, child, language, English

This is an essay which I seek to challenge some of our perceptions about children, learning, teaching and teachers. If we are to help our children, if we are to specialize our society so far as to outsource one of the most important functions in it, then we must rely on those who are involved and we must understand what they are up to.

In 399 BC the Athenian philosopher Socrates was given cold hemlock to drink for “Corrupting the minds of the youth of Athens”. He had taught them to question, and to analytically reason out answers for themselves. He took the view that giving the problem correctly was the teacher’s job (teaching) and analysing the question and reasoning out the answer was the students’ job (learning). The job has not changed; and, sadly, it seems sometimes neither have the expectations.

Humans have been successfully learning for 2.5 million years, whereas they have been being taught - in the modern sense- with books for the past 200. The human mind is very weak and puny when compared to the human brain. It is the brain we seek to have learn, not the mind. If the student is conscious of *what it is learning*- that learning will probably be much less effective.

A fundamental concept is that a child is not a blank-page, rather it is a sophisticated, successfully-evolved creature whose success in evolution and whose sophistication are due to its pre-programmed ability to learn analytically. I believe it is a teacher’s role to guide and feed that learning, and to use that natural ability as much as possible. As such, the teacher is the chief tool of the child.

Teaching books are inadequate, counter productive and really of value only to a state which does not wish to invest in teacher training- it's a lot easier to control three or four publishing houses than many thousands of teachers free to think for themselves- and to publishing houses, which profit by their sale. A good example of the rationale for this view of books may be found in Stephen Jay Gould's essay "The Case of the Creeping Fox Terrier Clone" published in "Bully for Brontosaurus": Hutchinson Radius, 1991.

In this first essay I shall simply recount a story, enumerating the points which it illustrates, and giving one small example of how this can be applied to the classroom. In this essay I will not deal with all the points raised.

The story is very simple. The vast majority of people, of whatever nationality, of whatever culture, age, or sex would react in the same way. The story is as follows.

Story 1

It's Saturday morning and here comes Johnny, into the kitchen. He is two years old and he is not too steady on his feet. Johnny points at the jar of biscuits on the shelf. "Aah ha ga ha," says Johnny and makes his very big eyes very wide.

I raise both eyebrows as I look at him. I hold the look, and then smile too, because he's Johnny and he knows that I love him really. Then I take down the jar, screw off the top and hold out a biscuit. Slowly and clearly I say, "Can I have a biscuit, please." Johnny looks at me, and Johnny looks at the biscuit and then Johnny looks at me again, at my raised eyebrows. There is no choice.

"Biscuit," says Johnny.

"Can I have a biscuit, please?" say I.

"Can I have a biscuit?" says Johnny slowly and not too confidently.

I raise my eyebrows just a shade higher.

"Please" says Johnny.

"Well done, Johnny."

Johnny gets his biscuit.

It's Sunday morning and here comes Johnny, into the kitchen. He is still two years old and he is still not too steady on his feet. Johnny points at the jar of biscuits on the shelf. "Aah ha ga ha," says Johnny and makes his eyes very, very wide.

I raise both eyebrows as I look at him. I hold the look, and then smile too, because he's Johnny and he knows that I love him really. Then I turn back to the sink and get on with what I'm doing.

"Biscuit," says Johnny and makes his eyes very, very, very wide.

I turn round and smile and nod, "Yes, there are biscuits on the shelf. Good boy Johnny.", and then turn back to the sink and get on with what I'm doing.

"Can I," says Johnny, then looks puzzled.

"Have," say I

"Have a biscuit?" says Johnny. I turn myself round, I raise my eyebrows just a shade.

"Please" says Johnny.

And Johnny gets his biscuit.

"What do you say, Johnny?" Johnny looks at me

Thank you," say I

"Thank you," says Johnny.

We have seen a scene which is not strange- we can imagine ourselves- our mothers, our fathers, our grandparents, even our eternally monosyllabic totally adolescent children doing this... because this is natural. We are pre-programmed to use language and to teach its use to any and all. We would do it without thinking.

But what exactly have we seen?

- 1 A child with a need- not an urgent or life-threatening need- but a need looking for fulfilment of that need.
- 2 The adult response to that, which is to demand the use of language.
- 3 The child has been reassured by the adult- there is no threat.
- 4 The child has been shown what to do.

- 5 The child has done what is required.
- 6 The child has been rewarded with exactly what it wanted.
- 7 The child has been applauded by the adult.
- 8 The child has been expected to remember the lesson.
- 9 The child has been taught firmly that it will not get what it wants without the use of language.
- 10 The child has been helped to do what is required but less so than previously.
- 11 The child has simply been given what it wished. The applause of the adult only comes the first time.
- 12 The child at all times has understood exactly what it is doing. (This is critical)

We have also seen that the child has learned the language as a by-product of learning to ask for a biscuit. The child did not want to learn the language, the language is only a quick way of satisfying a need.

Furthermore what we have seen is that the adult teaching the child, spoke to the child in that language. Though teaching English Philology through Spanish may be useful, teaching English through Spanish is not. As teachers of English, I believe we are teaching a language not studying a language. Most children can speak long before they first enter a language class. Most adults will remember that what they did in language class except for the reading and writing was boring and pointless. Those who would disagree are probably now Philologists.

This is ***not*** arguing for only native teachers. English teachers who are native Spanish speakers frequently have a surer grasp, as well as a greater knowledge, of the problems of Spanish learners of English. The approach is equally successful, I have found, with both native and non-native teachers.

Can we now translate that to a classroom? One simple example is plasticine.

The teacher enters with a box full of little balls of different colours of plasticine. Starting with the first child, the teacher looks at the child and plays with the plasticine throwing and catching it. Then the teacher raises their eyebrows and hold out the ball of plasticine to the child. The child holds out its hand and the teacher smiles and says slowly “Can I”

The child will almost automatically repeat “Can I”

“Play with”

“play with”

“Plasticine”

“Plasticine”

“Please”

“Please”

The child comes to get the plasticine. The teacher then begins the process with the next child. If any child tries to take out a pencil or any object to play with the plasticine then the teacher must indicate that this is not permissible- this is a later lesson. If the child persists then the teacher, with a gentle sad smile, takes away the plasticine and puts it in the box. The same happens if the any child tries to talk while playing with the plasticine.

When the last child has its plasticine. The teacher allows them 3 minutes and then claps hands and tells the children to tidy up. The children will understand if the teacher gently takes the plasticine from the first child and while shouting “Make a ball” makes a ball and puts it in the box.

The following day the teacher indicates to the first child again and if it is capable of producing some part of the request then the teacher helps, and if not the teacher turns to the next child, or the next until some part of the utterance is given. Then the teacher helps that child and then continues to the next.

Each day the teacher should expect a more perfect utterance before giving the child the plasticine.

By the end of 6 or 7 weeks, at four hours per week, the following dialogue should be possible with most of the children:

Child “Can I have some plasticine, please?”

Teach “Ok, what colour would you like?”

Child “Can I have blue, please?”

Teach “OK, take the blue?”

Child “Can I take out a pencil, please?”

Teach “Yes, ok, one pencil.”

Child “Can I take out another pencil, please?”

Teach “Yes, ok, 1 more pencil.”

Child “Can I put away my plasticine and pencils and read a book, please?”

Teach “Yes.”

This is merely one activity requiring perhaps 10 minutes of a class and not every class, but it illustrates how this methodology can be used to expect from children a continuously advancing grasp of language.

It is important to state here that what we are doing is, in a very real sense, not teaching but allowing children to learn. The teacher is simply manipulating the situation to create a need in a child which can then be satisfied if that child uses language. If that child uses language to satisfy a need, its brain will learn that language because it is more efficient, quicker, to learn it and to have it ready to use than to be taught afresh each time. All learning, I believe, is simply that.