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by

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Deep down, I thought that my fledgling Greek would re-emerge once I reached Athens. We planned to spend six weeks in Greece, moving slowly, meeting people. Since I like to know something of the language of the country in which I am traveling, I had started studying modern Greek three years ago at the local community college. Learning some Greek would only make a trip to Greece more likely. Despite good intentions, I did not look at Greek again until just before our departure when I started playing language lab tapes as background sounds to accompany packing my suitcase. I nourished dreams of finding a small town with a friendly schoolteacher who would swap Greek lessons for English tutoring. Several weeks of instruction, I reasoned, combined with total immersion in the language and the country would give me a sound footing in the language.

Part of the reason for this trip was to get far away from my classroom, to immerse myself in the unfamiliar worlds of ancient and modern Greece. I discovered, though, that reflecting on my struggles to learn Greek led inevitably to thinking about teaching and about the linguistic development of all children.

I knew that it would take time, but I was confident that the language would come. Previous travels in Mexico, in the Andes, and in Spain had gone smoothly. Even if I didn't always understand what I was hearing there, I had little trouble sounding out printed Spanish, so I never felt totally lost. I could always look at the signs and consult my dictionary.

Greece was a different matter, however. I had forgotten about the Greek alphabet. The guidebooks had warned that knowing the alphabet was essential, and after three semesters of instruction I still had trouble with capital letters. Shortly after arriving in Greece, my head ached, and only partially from jet-lag and the Athens smog. This was immersion in confusion. My journal records some of my feelings during the first few days:

> *June 30, Athens: I find myself trying to sound out many signs, reading headlines, seeing bilingual signs and making a point of decoding the Greek. Capital letters are especially difficult, but I'm forcing myself through them. Much of the time now I actually read* π *as pi and not as a squared-off "n" and I read the Greek letter P with its proper "r" sound. I imagine that this is what kids go through with "b" and "d" and with "p" and "q," knowing that the letters are supposed to be different but trying to remember which*

is which. Still lots of miscues for me, especially when I rush through a word. The joyous moments come when I start slowly to decode, then realize from context and the sound so far that I know the word, and I say it out loud, then often finish reading it, letter by letter, to confirm my guess. Sometimes when it's a word that simply makes no sense, I sound it out and repeat it over again, looking at the letters, just trying to ingrain the sounds in my head.

This language I first encountered in Greece was new to me. The Greek I had learned in class was oral, domestic Greek: "Hello. How are you? My house is large. There are flowers outside." I didn't see that on any signs. Instead, I found written, public Greek: "Brakes repaired. Laundry. Special Sale--Bargains Galore." How many children enter school and discover a new language lurking in those shelves of shiny books?

This point has been argued elsewhere, of course. Young children encounter in school not just a different language but a different way of being in the world. School learning, like my ultimately successful attempt with Greek, must build on what has come before, instead of making a clean start. Working from that base permits steady progress:

July 6, Nafplion: Reading signs in Greek is getting easier. I often don't know what they mean but sometimes the words have close derivatives in English. In any case, I'm starting to find combinations that go together--standard ending blends, for example, like -opoulis. There's a feeling of intense satisfaction to simple decoding, worth remembering when I work with beginning readers in English.

I last used basal readers in my elementary classroom some ten years ago, and I have never done much explicit phonics instruction. I stress reading for meaning, and make frequent use of Frank Smith's wonderful term--"barking at print"--to describe children who have been phonicked to death. I'm not about to change my entire reading program, but I do have a renewed respect for letting young readers experience the satisfaction of making sounds out of strange squiggles.

Richard Scarry Goes to Greece

Going to Greece, I was not a big Richard Scarry fan. I knew his *Best Word Book Ever*, of course, but I never liked his cute animals in human situations. Browsing in an Athens bookstore, however, I saw several Scarry paperbacks--those all-too-familiar pictures with text translated into Greek--and I eagerly purchased them to use as textbooks. I knew from other travels that children would be my best language instructors, and they would enjoy helping me through Richard Scarry more than *Introduction to Demotic Greek*.

July 10, Karistos: Yesterday was the first time I actually sat down to try to read some Greek, using the Richard Scarry book bought in Athens on that hectic travel day. It's slow going--I painstakingly sounded out words, occasionally coming to one where I had a start of recognition, oh glorious brief moment! I took one page, read it through with mumblings, then tried to figure out some of the words, using clues from the pictures, my existing Greek, and my vague memories of how Richard Scarry books work. I'd go to the dictionary to check my guesses, which often proved right.

As the weeks went by, I found myself worrying less about print. The alphabet started looking less threatening, more familiar, and I was able to look calmly at a dozen signs advertising Greek ferry lines and find the one we needed. My journal reflects this change in attitude, and the last month's entries contain nothing about sounding out words. My attention turned to the more profound problem of personal communication.

The early days of the trip I was surrounded by Greek and frequently overwhelmed by the unfamiliar sounds of the language:

> *June 30, Athens: On the way back last night, we stopped by Aeros Park and came upon an outdoor forum of some sort--we stood at the edge of the crowd for a few moments, trying to figure out what was going on. I caught "Palestinian" and then "Israel" and then other words here and there. For the most part, the words just flowed over my head and the novelty of listening to a strange tongue wore off. I thought of young children listening to the dinner-table conversation of adults, and realized anew why they're so eager to leave the table. Most of that constant talk is just a foreign language to their ears.*

By the end of the trip, I welcomed that flood of language. I was acutely aware that to make progress, I needed to hear the language spoken as much as possible, to duplicate the process that children go through learning their own tongue. I went out of my way to start conversations, knowing beforehand that most of what was said would simply wash over me. If I rehearsed before asking, I could manage a question that sounded like good Greek, so I found myself starting conversations just to get a long response. I'd nod, act as though I understood, and ask another question to keep up the flow of words. Sometimes I'd catch one word in the answer, leaping out in context, and then sentences from the past five minutes would come back, their meaning suddenly clear. I wonder if young children's "why?" questions are posed for that purpose, to elicit a flood of oral language in response. I also think about my answers to older children's questions. How much do they hear of what I say? How much of my verbiage flows over them while I assume that they comprehend each word?

Context Is Crucial

Most of what I didn't understand, I ignored. When I needed specific information, I set up situations where I was more in control of the language, asking simple questions which could be answered yes or no. That way, I'd know if my question had been clear. Often, though, even the simplest transactions left me bewildered:

> *July 22, Skyros: Context is so important. I think of Frank Smith's dictum, that we bring meaning to the written word, not from it. That must apply as well to spoken language. If we know a word, we might recognize it when used by another, and we can bring all our associations. We anticipate what someone else will say, and listen to have that confirmed. And our problems come when the other says something unexpected.*
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> *This morning, for example, we went into town and bought postcards on the way from the man with the carnation bud on his right ear. The other day, I bought four small cards and one fancy one at his store, and it came to 90 drachmas. I guessed that the fancy one was 30, which was the going*

rate, so the small ones would be 15 drachmas each. Today we picked out six small ones, and I took out a 100 drachma bill, certain that it would be enough. I asked, in Greek, "How much?" and waited for him to reply, "enaninda" (or "ninety" in Greek). I didn't understand his reply, which turned out to be "ninety" in English, so fixed was my mind on verifying the expected Greek answer.

If I could narrow the range of possible answers, I stood a better chance of understanding the reply:

July 10, Karistos: Take the simple transaction of asking "how much?" I often stumble at the fast-paced replies, unless I already have a rough idea of what to expect for an answer. I bought two straw mats yesterday, on two separate occasions. The first time was hard, and I couldn't make out the slurred "...katonexinda." (I'd expected "ekaton exinda" for "one hundred sixty," not this slurred combination with accents in what seemed like the wrong place.") The second time, in another store, was remarkably easy, since I knew roughly how much I was listening for, even when the price turned out to be "ekaton saranda" ("one hundred forty"). It's that power of prediction that we use to teach our kids at home, working for me as well.

Talking to Yourself

Framing questions often involved long preparation beforehand, taking what I wanted to know and finding ways to phrase the request appropriately, using my limited vocabulary and understanding of grammar. Sometimes, faced with a blank stare, I had to find an alternate wording to get my meaning across. Jean Eisele (1984), studying the language development of her son and daughter, found much the same fascination and experimentation with language. Her son, at two years five months, worked his way through such a linguistic puzzle: "Say 'Hi, Gretchen,' Daddy," he requested. When his teasing father replied, "Hi Gretchen Daddy," the boy thought a moment and tried again with "Daddy, say 'Hi, Gretchen.'"

I spent hours in Greece going over words I knew, rehearsing sentences, practicing grammar. One snapshot captures me standing close to the middle of nowhere, surrounded by the prickly ground cover, leafing through my pocket Greek dictionary. I am thinking about the end of the day, describing our adventures to our landlady. Instead of simply pointing from the balcony, I want to tell her, "We went around the peak." I spent much of that hike practicing the phrases that I anticipated using later in the day.

Britton (1970) points out that such rehearsals are a part of language learning from the earliest days. He shares a transcript of Anthony, who is recorded at age two and a half, alone in his crib at night, talking to himself and taking pride in his own accomplishments:

One two three four.
One two.
One two three four.
One two three.
Anthony counting.
Good boy you.
One two three. (Weir, cited in Britton, p. 81)

Anthony had a tape recorder nearby which caught his early conversations with himself; my journal contains a similar record:

July 10, Karistos: I find myself drifting into imagined sentences as I'm walking around town, sometimes making up mini-travelogues:

"Here is a house.
Here is another house.
Now we are going to the restaurant.
Is this store open today?
Yes, it is open now but it closes at 9:00 tonight.
The car is red."

Actually, it's blue, but I can't remember "blue"--how much of children's writing is determined by words they can remember how to spell? By words they know?

In children, talking to oneself is a common and important phenomenon, sometimes referred to as "running commentary." Vygotsky calls it "speech for oneself," and Piaget labels it a form of "egocentric speech," distinct from "socialized speech" (Britton, 1970). This speech is *to* oneself, requiring no response from a listener, and *for* oneself, used to aid the child's exploration of the world. In children, we find running commentary beginning about age three, peaking at four or five, and fading out by age seven, for reasons hotly debated by theorists. The monologue becomes silent as it is internalized, but it becomes vocal again when it is needed to solve particular complexities. For an adult learning Greek, running commentary might appear for similar reasons. (Britton cites his own case of talking out loud when he is frustrated trying to start his car.)

I've discussed common experiences with others who have struggled to learn a language by immersing themselves in a foreign culture. Many noted that they could think only about the basics which they could express in that language: food, drink, shelter. My linguistic age in Greek was that of a young child, so I lost many of the subtleties that I would normally express in English. Those complexities just didn't exist for me, and thinking became a series of simple declarative sentences:

July 14, Limni: Life in Limni begins to resemble the Richard Scarry book that I pick up from time to time, working desultorily on my Greek:

"Here is the waiter; he serves the drinks from the cafe.
Here comes the garbage man.
He cleans out the litter boxes.
His helper comes along 15 minutes later to clean them again.
The baker is taking fresh bread out of his oven.
It is hot in his store."

Negotiated Meaning

The best moments of my trip came when I was able to hold a successful conversation in Greek. These successes came at unexpected moments: the lady who ran the kiosk, who politely corrected my grammar and waited while I repeated the phrase before continuing; the two girls who explained frog-catching techniques; the women busy whitewashing their neighborhood church who understood my explanation about why I was taking so many photographs; the Greek Orthodox priest

who was excited by Jesse Jackson's political campaign. My own ability to speak Greek did improve gradually, but successful communication depended more on the ability of my Greek listeners to understand what I was trying to say and to confirm their hunches with me.

Gordon Wells (1986) calls this phenomenon "negotiated meaning," the successful collaboration of two partners who work at establishing common meaning. He traces the roots to early communication between infants and others around them, to a parent correctly interpreting the child's focused look and fetching a rattle that's lying out of reach, to the gleeful reinforcement of "ma-ma" gurglings. Wells argues, "If adult and child are to succeed in elaborating a shared meaning over a number of turns, the adult has to make the effort to understand the child's intended meaning and to extend it in terms that the child can understand. This requires a willingness to listen sympathetically and an intuitive ability to pitch what one says at the right level--both intellectually and linguistically" (p. 17).

Like my helpful Greek friends, who found a careful fit between their knowledge and my limited language, good teachers operate in this manner every day. In a science unit with third graders, for example, the teacher designs a laboratory procedure in which children learn the terms "epidermis," "vascular bundles," and "calyx" through observation and dissection. Sixth graders studying the Declaration of Independence discuss their rights and responsibilities at home and then branch into a broader look at political theory of the eighteenth century. First graders investigating human anatomy examine the X-ray of a classmate's broken arm. In these examples, teachers introduce new words in an understandable context; they take the time necessary to explore the concept with their students. In each case, children enjoy an environment where their shared experiences provide a base for language which furthers their intellectual and social development.

Where does the language-gathering ability originate? Chomsky points to genetic inheritance, with language capacity waiting to unfold at the right level of maturation; Piaget cites the interaction between the child and the surrounding environment (Gardner, 1980). Other theorists, though, such as Vygotsky, stress the importance of interpersonal relations to the child's developing language skills. When the child reaches for a toy, a nearby adult hands it over and by that action teaches the child the notion of pointing as a way of communication. Vygotsky reminds us that the person, not the object, responds to the gesture; the communication is created, not by the child's arm motion, but by the interaction between infant and adult (Wertsch, 1985). This interpersonal process does not end once a child learns to speak:

> *July 22, Skyros: I really like conversations with people who correct my Greek. I feel like they understand what I'm trying to do, and understand the importance of getting it right. Each little phraselet that I get right can be re-used in new settings, and through such little steps comes mastery.*

These successful conversations have their parallels in the classroom. Wells urges teachers to provide children with a place "to try out their ideas in conversation that is purposeful, yet collaborative and nonthreatening. By giving the children her full attention, [the teacher] indicates that what they have to say is important--that they have expertise that is of value. When she asks questions, it is in order to be further informed, not to check that the

child's answer is in conformity with her knowledge about the topic" (Wells, p. 113). My colleague, David Sobel, describes this process as a fitting together of two vocabularies in much the same way as a catalyst helps two molecules combine. In the same way that sympathetic and skilled Greek speakers helped me improve my speech, the teacher attempts to find the necessary common ground between what she wishes to communicate and what the child is ready to understand.

Vygotsky refers to a "zone of proximal development" to describe this process where the child's level of development is matched with the appropriate form of instruction. Instruction in this zone, says Vygotsky, "calls to life in the child, awakens and puts in motion an entire series of internal processes of development. These processes are at the time possible only in the sphere of interaction with those surrounding the child and in collaboration with companions, but in the internal course of development they eventually become the internal property of the child" (Vygotsky, quoted in Wertsch, 1985, p. 71). My good Greek conversations took place in this zone, I think, with native speakers who were sensitive to my limited language development, and who expressed their meaning using vocabulary and syntax appropriate for me. By taking me through a conversation step by step, they provided me with a model of correct speech which I could use later by myself. In the classroom, the zone of proximal development is that magic space where children are stretched just enough, where a long and labored struggle suddenly leads to a moment of "aha!"

Oral Language is Key

A child's language skills develop at home, long before she or he enters school. Our task as teachers is to nurture those skills, to provide new experiences, to give children a social space in which ideas can be explored using new language and new ways of thinking. One crucial first part of that exploration is simply to encourage talking in school. I know one school where all lunchroom conversation is barred, and teachers are concerned that children don't seem able to participate in classroom discussions! By contrast, Britton tells a wonderful anecdote of a visitor being taken through a British infant school. "I don't know what's the matter," the headmaster comments nervously. "It isn't usually as quiet as this" (p. 137).

For countless millennia, oral cultures have developed skills to pass along their group identity, using techniques of memory which are all too uncommon in literate societies (Egan, 1987, 1989). Learning a new language only made me more aware of the continuing primacy of oral language for a child's healthy development:

> *June 30, Athens: I realize how hampered I am by not having a strong oral/aural vocabulary in Greek. This adds new dimensions to reading aloud in school, to telling bedtime stories, to carrying on frequent conversations with kids. If they haven't already heard the word, it'll be hard to read, and writing will be harder still.*

Most of what I knew when I went to Greece I had learned through my ears. I had an excellent instructor in my introductory classes, a native Greek speaker who also knew how to teach the language. We practiced for hours, and years later I found long-forgotten phrases from her class surfacing at appropriate moments. "Rote memorization," I had called those exercises with slight scorn;

now, I appreciated the drills. Near the end of the trip, for example, I heard a telephone ring in a taverna down the street and the correct Greek phrase--"The telephone is ringing"--emerged fully-formed from my memory like Athena from the brow of Zeus.

> *July 22, Skyros: I spent an hour or two today with Emmanuela, the great-granddaughter of our landlady. She's nine, and has been studying English two years already. We sat down with my Richard Scarry, and I got a new appreciation of those books for very young readers. Actually, I think, they're not so much for readers as for young to-be-read-to children. Again, the spoken, oral language has to come first. "Point to the broom," says the text, and the child can do so, regardless of whether or not she can read the word "broom." They learn that those marks on the page mean something.*
>
> *In my case, since I haven't heard the "broom" word before, it doesn't help. What I can do, though, is watch Emmanuela read aloud, ask her to point, draw an arrow myself and then, later on my own, go back through the text and see the word in context, along with mop and ironing board and electric oven.*

All teachers know a child who struggles with paper and pencil yet leads the class in oral facility. Another child finds it difficult to speak comfortably. Both will benefit from extended opportunities to explore the world through oral language. I agree with the plea Wells makes for recognizing the educational value of spoken language:

> Although in certain respects speech clearly has limitations--its transience, for example, and the consequent difficulty of reflecting on the verbal formulations of ideas that are produced--it also has compensating advantages. Writing and reading tend to be solitary activities and are all too often competitive. Talking and listening, on the other hand, are by definition social and, at least potentially, collaborative. They therefore provide an excellent means for fostering collaboration in learning through the pooling of ideas and the negotiation of points of view (pp. 190-191).

My Greek vocabulary grew slowly as I traveled, and took major leaps with each new setting. Moving from archaeological ruins to a weaver's living room forced me to learn new vocabulary, as did the change from a fishing village to remote mountain towns. In much the same way we hope to develop language skills by taking children to different places in the realm of language. There are limitations to language, certainly, and we cannot afford to ignore the crucial role of the visual arts, for example, to express emotion. But our language work in school often stresses only one kind of communication, the language of formal argument and abstract thought.

Learning a language has to be more than successfully manipulating the language of the academic classroom. I came back from six weeks in Greece even more convinced of the importance of exposing children to oral language in rich and varied forms--drama, storytelling, poetry, reading aloud, tongue twisters--as well as just plain conversation.

For children confidently exploring their own language, as for adults stumbling about in an unfamiliar language, oral skills are the foundation for healthy linguistic development:

July 30, Metsovo: I've gained the confidence that I can, in fact, learn to speak Greek if I work at it. I am picking up new vocabulary, and each time I drag out the photos and postcards from home I'm able to speak more comfortably about them, at greater length... Now, this is not always the most grammatically accurate Greek--I mix case endings, use improper tenses, and throw by instinct more Spanish into my phrases than I'd like. But I am able to communicate, and I've been asked several times where I learned to speak Greek, which means that ***they*** *think that's what I'm doing. And, if the native speakers think I'm speaking Greek, I must be doing something right.*

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