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Frustration and Communicating in Second Languages

by

Alan Beaudrie

Frustration: That is what many people feel when they fail to communicate with someone from a different language background. With our world being so intricately connected because of business and technology, but yet still divided by different languages, many people deal with this problem frequently. Whether it is not being able to understand a young child, a person with a regional accent, or the many people who have English as a second language, the frustration experienced by those trying to communicate is still the same. Imagine how a student must feel when his/her language is not English but most of the classroom instruction is in English. I experienced a small dose of this frustration while participating in a Lakota language class and also in my experiences with Lakota songs.

The Lakota language class is designed to give the participants a very basic understanding of this Native American language. It is not expected that anyone will become a Lakota speaker by just attending the once a week class. During the class, the instructor will often speak for a short period of time in Lakota. The other students and I are supposed to use our "knowledge" of the Lakota language to interpret its meaning. I have a limited vocabulary and understanding of this language. At best, I can understand one or two words of the two or three sentences spoken. Very seldom do I guess the correct meaning of these sentences. The students and I often ask the instructor to slow down and repeat the sentences in order for us to pick out the words we have learned.

Often during the repeating of sentences I unconsciously look and listen for clues that can help me understand the sentence's meaning. I look at facial expressions, hand gestures, or other body movements. I also listen to the tone of his voice or for voice inflection or anything that will help bring meaning to what is being said. I can sometimes understand what he is saying just by the visual and verbal cues, but most often I cannot even offer a guess.

I encountered the same feeling of frustration during my Lakota song class in which most of the time was spent memorizing and singing Lakota songs. We also discussed the history and meaning of each new song before it was sung. Lakota text, with English translations, was sometimes given to the students to help learn the songs. However, many songs that were introduced later in the course were taught strictly orally. The instructor believed the absence of text would help develop the students' listening skills.

I became fairly proficient at singing many of the Lakota songs. However, most of the time I did not grasp what exactly I was singing. I was able to remember how words sounded and was able to repeat them. Without very much language training, I often became frustrated when learning new songs because I did not really know how Lakota words were formed or said. I could not distinguish many of the sounds from each other; they just seemed to run together. I sometimes wondered if the songs I was singing actually contained words with any meaning or just noise that happened to sound good together.

Recently, I listened to two Lakota song tapes. My hope was that my Lakota language class would help me understand some of these songs. I listened as carefully as I could to find words that could help me bring meaning to the words in the songs. After listening to a few of the songs and not being able to understand any of the words, I found myself tuning out the music and letting my

mind wander. With no visual stimulus or word comprehension it was hard to stay focused on the words in the songs. After two hours of trying to comprehend words I did not know, my brain felt thoroughly drained. Is this what happens to many of the ESL students? Is this what they feel after their first few days of school?

The level of frustration of a student in a classroom in which he/she does not understand what is being said must be very high. This would help explain the statistics in many books and magazines that state English as a Second Language (ESL) students are failing classes and dropping out of school at higher rates than English speaking students. What can be done to end some of the students' frustration? The answer is simple: the ESL students need to have a clear understanding of what is being taught to them and to the other students in the classroom. The best way to accomplish this is to have a bilingual classroom teacher who can explain everything in the students' own language. However, this is not usually possible. In some schools, the students will be pulled out for ESL instruction for part of the day with bilingual teachers, but mainly the students will spend the majority of their time in schools with English-only speaking teachers. What these teachers need to do is to help keep the frustration level low and the enthusiasm for learning high in these special students.

There are many things the teachers can do to accomplish this goal. Visual aids are probably one of the best methods of helping students gain understanding. Some examples of how visual aids could be used are: blocks for adding and subtracting in math, watching or participating in plays in social science or for social skills building, hands-on activities and experiments for science, pictures for word acquisition, and demonstrating how a game is played for physical education.

Verbal cues such as tone or voice inflection, along with body language, can also help get a point across. Of course, the teacher should also adjust lessons to the students' ability to understand English. The students may need instructions repeated or need to be given more examples of problems and more chances to get their work done correctly. The teacher should also try to make sure that the ESL students experience success more than failure. Constant failure will not help a child learn and will only serve to frustrate him/her further.

There are severe consequences to having students who are frustrated from not understanding what is being taught. A student may start to tune the teacher out, withdraw from participating in class, and become bored with school. With frustration building up, this otherwise normal student could start to act out and become a discipline problem. If the child does not understand what is being taught, he/she will inevitably fail and may become thought of as "slow" or not very smart. If a student is failing, school will probably not be very fun and he/she may no longer try to learn. With all of these potential things going against an ESL student (along with possible social and economic factors), it is no wonder so many of these students do poorly in school and have a higher dropout rate than their English-speaking counterparts.

If a student's frustration from a lack of language comprehension is recognized and dealt with properly, everyone involved will benefit. The student will learn what should be learned in class, the teachers could correct many potential academic and social problems, and the parents will be happy with the type of instruction their child is receiving.