

THE ARTS, LANGUAGES AND LEARNING

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By

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I initially set out to select two very different or divergent content areas to compare and contrast in terms of how learning takes place in the respective domains. The more I read about learning in the fields, the more similarities began to emerge. For many people, the arts are a form of self expression, a method of communicating with their surroundings—in short, a language. If not strictly a language, communicating through the arts appears to share some similarities with language, but employs different symbol systems and grammar structures.

### Languages

Building expertise or literacy in both of these areas requires knowledge of the accepted semantic structures of the language and lots of deliberate practice. Ericsson, Krampe and Tesh-Roemer (1993) surmise that no expert performance is really ever reached in less than 10 years of methodical and deliberate practice of relevant activities. They argue that one's supposed propensity and aptitude for a certain skill is more likely a result of an early nurturing of a particular interest or skill. They make a strong case with their argument, but their theory fails, in my mind, to account for some of the particulars of language acquisition; specifically the learning of accent and cadence. In my own experience learning languages (Dutch, German, Hebrew, Arabic, Italian, Russian, Tagalog) I credit my ability to pick up language accents and cadence with early exposure to the languages through my multi-lingual parents, to living abroad amongst different languages, and to my entire k-12 schooling experience in an international school where 70% of any given class represented distinct nationalities and languages—many initially

speaking no English whatsoever. Although many people can learn languages quite fluently, a good number seem to fail to achieve natural accents or reproduce the rhythm and sound patterns of the new language...despite practice.

One might argue that one's exposure and/or immersion in the new language environment is a form of practice. This, however, does not follow Ericsson's definition of deliberate, purposeful practice. Incidental, but frequent exposure to foreign languages on a bus, on TV, radio from neighbors does not constitute deliberate practice according to a strict interpretation of Ericsson, but it does nevertheless, seem to have great bearing on future language learning. Children understand spoken language long before they learn to read (Schunk, 2004, p. 394). They hear the sounds and rhythms of language while yet in the womb. Trying to acquire a new language later in life can prove to be very challenging. In 1967, Lenneberg wrote a classical work and hypothesized that "foreign accents cannot be overcome easily after puberty" (p. 176) and that "automatic acquisition (of second languages) from mere exposure... seems to disappear after this age" (p. 176). His idea that this phenomenon coincides with when cerebral dominance is set, is well established, but what has been contested by some, is when cerebral dominance is set (Krashen, 2002 pp. 72-73).

Interestingly to me, as a child, I could mimic gibberish narrative that sounded just like the respective languages long before I could read or generate any meaningful sentences made up of authentic vocabulary. While I've prided my self on this ability generally, I have not been able to mimic the nuances of the Chinese language to which I had no early exposure—indeed I appear to be (discouragingly so) quite deaf to the tones,

inflections and sound patterns of Chinese still to this day, despite some deliberate and prolonged effort with listening and speaking activities.

In a study (Pallier et al., 2000) of these sound patterns in languages, participants were shown to comprehend accelerated speech in their native language even when habituation to accelerated sentences happened in a language they didn't know. That is, when listening to accelerated Dutch sentences, both monolingual and bilingual English subjects would get used to the increased speed such that when they listened to accelerated English sentences, they showed high levels of comprehension. This same trend exists between the Spanish and Catalan language pair, even when sentences were constructed of nonsense "Spanish" words. Language pairs, such as French and English that do not share similar cadence, phonology or pre-lexical elements, show no such transfer of the habituation, i.e. habituating to French sentences played rapidly, did not transfer to being habituated to fast sentences in English or visa versa . The researchers conclude that there is a great deal in language learning and comprehension that is pre-lexical, or not directly grammar and vocabulary related, but is related to phoneme and sound pattern recognition. This study seems to support the notion that early and frequent exposure to even the just the sounds of other languages can lead to easier and more fluent language acquisition later in life.

While not related to sound patterns, Merrill and Christensen (2003) report on a method of language instruction (Diglot) that boasts rapid language acquisition through the reading of familiar first-language texts. Spanish words are slowly introduced into English text eventually replacing many of their English correlates. In related

experiments, a familiar text is translated from the second-language quite literally (transliterated) into the native language of the student, retaining all the sentence structure of the second language. Simplistically explained, the story of *Little Red Riding Hood* would appear in English words, but with the structure of Spanish. The English words are slowly replaced with the Spanish equivalents, such that by the end of the story, one has gradually become familiar with common sentence structures as well as new vocabulary in the second language. Their research found the “Diglot” method superior to traditional computer-based vocabulary drill and practice exercises.

### Arts (Film & Video)

Being literate in the structure of language is key to proficiency in any language, including the languages of the Arts. By the time children leave elementary school, there is little Art left in their curriculum. Subjects such as “art” (usually painting, drawing, crafts) and music, can be added back in, but at the expense of “important” classes. For many, their literacy in this area is halted, and growth in areas dependant on and enriched by the Arts is stunted.

As one of the Arts, film and video also employ a learned language. Like other language learning, comprehension of film language structure usually precedes the ability to generate original dialog or discourse in the language. The language of film and video, in particular, share a set of rules and structures that are used to communicate messages to an audience. Assume for a moment that while viewing a film, the focal character looks up from tying her shoe and gazes out of the frame. Subsequent images show a child skipping down the sidewalk. The images alone are completely unrelated, but sequenced,

we can safely assume that the child was the object of the woman's gaze—she was looking at the kid skipping down the sidewalk. Violations of the language rules are tantamount to spelling and grammar errors in a written text at best, and can completely miscommunicate at worst. They call attention to themselves and serve to distract the viewer's attention from the intended content or message. Likewise, a dissolve commonly conveys the sense of a passage of time. Dissolves used where no obvious time has elapsed cause confusion in the viewer, and may elicit a myriad of irrelevant interpretations.

Learning these skills comes fairly naturally due to our highly developed sense of (indirectly-acquired) media literacy from a young age. Again Ericsson's notion of deliberate practice seems to insufficiently account for our proficiency in comprehending the language of film. On the other hand, we have spent countless hours viewing television, gaining procedural knowledge in comprehension. By the time we are teenagers, we've engaged in thousands of hours of arguably not-so-deliberate practice. When it comes time, however, to create and generate our own video communication, many students are still severely challenged by the task of voicing their own thoughts or telling stories visually. In this case, nothing beats learning and rehearsing the basics of plot, grammar, lighting, cameras, sound, acting, directing and gaining skills in the procedures and techniques of the language.

Art in general, and the process of creating video in particular, can be a very collaborative and motivating activity. It has been shown to help children develop creativity, higher order thinking skills, cooperation, confidence, self-discipline and

responsibility (Psilos, 2001; Theodosakis, 2002). Video creation is a particularly good and motivating way to integrate arts into the curriculum. Interesting and challenging issues can be found in any subject matter from presenting the sides on the euthanasia debate to discussing pollution at school or in the community, to documenting how to dissect a frog etc. As students set out to create their productions, they develop skills in many important areas (Thosadakis, 2002):

- Organize and work in functional teams
- Discover how to overcome obstacles, of time, equipment, and other resources. (problem solving)
- Research and Plan
- Schedule and Budget,
- Imagine, and brain storm
- Effectively communicate their ideas with one another
- Writing and editing
- Applying principles of sound, light and motion

This interdisciplinary approach “allows student to solve problems and make connections within the arts and across disciplines” (Toney, 2003 p.4).

Mannino (2003) describes the Discipline Based Arts Education (DBAE) in his paper which appears to be an emerging and effective K-12 approach to teaching and learning *with* the arts, rather than merely *from* or *about* the arts. DBEA seems like particularly good way to build literacy in the language of film and video. Students are taught art production, history, criticism (especially important for youth) and aesthetics.

Learning has the potential of becoming very relevant to the students in such situations, which has been shown to be both a motivator as well as an important condition to effective long term memory encoding (Shunk, 2004).

Developing critical viewing skills as well as becoming skilled producers of media—or alternatively, developing comprehension skills as well as becoming skilled conversers in the language of video is arguably a very important real-world ability in today's society. Acquiring abilities and literacy in any language only serves to enrich one's life and build bridges of understanding between different communities. It is a pursuit worthy of any student's deliberate effort, and a pursuit worthy of any family, school and nation's deliberate support.



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