Overcoming Barriers

Cognitive load theory
Why conversation is harder than you think
Learning *tough* constructions
IN THIS ISSUE

In this issue ........................................ 2
Editor’s Note ..................................... 3
Contact Magazine ............................ 4

Articles

Cognitive load theory and teaching English as a second language to adult learners .......... 5
The art of conversation ........................ 11
Learning the tough constructions ............. 16
An interview with Wajiha Naqvi and Brett Reynolds ......................... 22
Indigenization in the ESL classroom .......... 27
The private refugee sponsorship experience in Kingston ....................... 34
The teaching of suprasegmentals within a task-based or communicative ESL class .... 37

Viva la lingua franca

I Just Called to Say I Hear You ............... 41

Calendar

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>October 5</td>
<td>International World Teachers’ Day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 20–21</td>
<td>Ontario Modern Language Teachers Association Fall Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>October 29</td>
<td>ESL Week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2–3</td>
<td>TESL Ontario’ 45th Annual Conference: “Celebrating Success”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 8–10</td>
<td>Bringing IT together Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 11</td>
<td>People for Education Annual Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 15–17</td>
<td>York Region District School Board Quest Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 18</td>
<td>BCTEAL: Lower Mainland Regional Conference</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 17–19</td>
<td>American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages; ACTFL Annual Convention and World Language Expo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
EDITOR’S NOTE

With our new website up and running, we’ve been able to pre-publish four articles from this issue. Hundreds of people have downloaded these. We will continue to publish individual articles along with complete issues like this one.

We would like to see more engagement with the articles through commenting. Please, consider saying how the article fit or didn’t with your existing ideas. Do you see some way that it could change what people do in the classroom? Has the author overlooked or something? Whatever your reaction, please consider writing about it. We will moderate comments to ensure that you don’t get abusive replies.

Our current issue looks at barriers, challenges, and difficulties. We open with John Sweller’s “Cognitive load theory and teaching English as a second language to adult learners”. Sweller shows how we interfere with learning when there’s too much going on. Antje Meyer and Svetlana Gerakaki build on similar ideas in “The art of conversation: Why it’s harder than you might think”. In “Learning the tough constructions”, Misha Becker discusses a set of adjectives that are rarely focused on in ELT but which are often misused by English-language learners. Continuing the theme, we feature a conversation between Wajiha Naqvi, a blind learner of English, Pankaj Bhattacharjee and me in which I learn that teaching a blind student wasn’t as big of a barrier as I’d thought. And finally, Amy Abe guides us through the challenges we face in responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action.

Rounding out the issue, Lorraine Hudson gives us a look into the private refugee sponsorship experience in Kingston, based on a panel group discussion at TESL Kingston’s Spring Workshop and AGM, and Mike Tiitnanen presents some ideas about teaching suprasegmentals.

As usual, Eufemia Fantetti returns with another instalment of her Lingua Franca column.

Thank you to all the authors who contributed to this issue and to all our readers!

Brett Reynolds
editor@teslontario.org
CONTACT

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COGNITIVE LOAD THEORY AND TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE TO ADULT LEARNERS

By John Sweller, University of New South Wales

Most second language teaching recommendations place a considerable emphasis on “naturalistic” procedures such as immersion within a second language environment. Immersion means exposing learners to the second language in many of their daily activities, including other educational activities ostensibly unrelated to learning the second language. While immersion may assist in learning a second language, anyone who has lived in an immigrant society cannot fail to have noticed the many adults who learn almost nothing of the second language despite years or even decades of immersion. Furthermore, within an academic environment, even if immersion assists in learning the second language, it is likely to be associated with a considerable decline in learning the associated academic subjects. Simple immersion is unlikely to be effective.

While not always explicitly stated, the argument for immersion seems to be: “Look how easy it is for people to learn their native language. Despite little explicit vocabulary or grammar instruction, they pick it up easily and effortlessly within a few years simply by immersion in their native language environment. If we use the same procedures for a second language, it too will be learned easily, effortlessly, and largely unconsciously.”

For young children, this argument probably is valid. For adults beginning to learn a second language, the argument is almost certainly invalid. Adults do not learn a second language in the same way as young children learn a native language. The suggestion that learning a second language should mimic the learning of a first language ignores much of what we know of human cognitive architecture and its consequences for instructional procedures. Cognitive load theory (Sweller, 2015, 2016; Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga, 2011) uses our knowledge of human cognition to devise instructional procedures. That theory will be used to structure the remainder of this article, beginning with our knowledge of human cognition.

Human Cognitive Architecture

Categories of Knowledge

For current purposes, there are two categories of knowledge (Geary, 2012; Geary & Berch, 2016): Biologically (or evolutionary) primary and biologically secondary knowledge. Primary knowledge is knowledge we have evolved to acquire over countless generations.
It is acquired easily and without conscious effort. It is modular in the sense that we may have evolved to acquire different types of knowledge during different evolutionary epochs and so the cognitive procedures associated with the acquisition of different types of primary knowledge are likely to differ. Learning a native language provides an example of a category of biologically primary knowledge. We have evolved to acquire listening and speaking skills in a native language and so can acquire the skills without conscious effort or explicit instruction.

Biologically secondary knowledge is required for cultural reasons. We have evolved to acquire secondary knowledge in general but we have not specifically evolved to acquire a particular category of secondary knowledge. The manner in which secondary knowledge is acquired tends to be similar irrespective of its category but vastly different to the acquisition of primary knowledge. All categories of secondary knowledge are acquired with conscious effort and unlike primary knowledge, are best acquired with explicit instruction (Kirschner, Sweller, & Clark, 2006; Sweller, Kirschner, & Clark, 2007). Learning a second language as an adult provides an example of secondary knowledge acquisition as do most of the topics covered in educational institutions. We invented education to deal with biologically secondary information. Learning to listen to and speak a second language as an adult requires conscious effort on the part of the learner and explicit instruction on the part of instructors. Little will be learned solely by immersion. Furthermore, since learning to read and write are biologically secondary because we have not evolved to acquire these skills, they also require conscious effort by learners and explicit teaching by instructors, irrespective of whether we are dealing with a native or second language.

**Human Cognitive Architecture Associated with Biologically Secondary Knowledge**

Learning a second language as an adult conforms to the structures and processes associated with acquiring any other category of biologically secondary knowledge (Sweller & Sweller, 2006). In this section I will briefly outline those structures and processes.

**Information-store principle.** In order to function, we must store immeasurably large amounts of information in long-term memory. The difference between people who are more as opposed to less competent in any area including competence in a second language is heavily determined by the amount of knowledge held in long-term memory (Ericsson & Charness, 1994; Nandagopal & Ericsson, 2012).

**Borrowing and reorganising principle.** How do we acquire the huge amounts of biologically secondary information that constitute substantive areas such as learning a second language? Such knowledge is mainly obtained from other people by reading what they write and listening to what they say. For example, anyone who deliberately studies information produced by others, either written (e.g. in a textbook) or spoken, is using this principle. Once knowledge is obtained, it is usually reorganised by combining it with previously stored information. Based on this principle, learning a second language requires
copious, explicit, written or spoken instruction.

**Randomness-as-genesis principle.** While most of the biologically secondary information we process is obtained from other people, that information must first be generated. Usually, the process of generation occurs during problem solving by a random generation and test process. If we are unable to obtain information from others, we must attempt to generate it. While there is no alternative to generate and test when we are unable to obtain accurate information, this process tends to be inaccurate and clumsy. One merely needs to observe a second language learner attempting to generate spoken or written text from an inadequate knowledge base to realise the deficiencies of the process. It needs to be emphasised that pure random generation rarely, if ever, occurs because we rarely take any action in the complete absence of knowledge. The major point is that in the absence of complete knowledge, action is determined by a combination of knowledge and random generation. The more knowledge available, the less random generation is needed.

**Narrow limits of change principle.** When dealing with novel information, in order to avoid having to test an impossibly large number of possibilities thrown up by the randomness-as-genesis principle, only a few elements of information can be dealt with at a time. As a cognitive structure, working memory is extremely limited in capacity and duration when dealing with novel information from the environment. Working memory only can hold about seven items (Miller, 1956) and process about three to four items (Cowan, 2001) of information simultaneously. Furthermore, it can only hold information without rehearsal for about 15–20 seconds. Students learning a second language are constantly dealing with novel information. A sentence that may be easily parsed in a native language (see the next principle) may impose an impossibly high working memory load in a second language. All instructional procedures need to account for the fact that students are constantly under a high cognitive load.

**Environmental organising and linking principle.** While working-memory is severely limited when processing novel information, it has no known limits when processing familiar information transferred from long-term memory. Triggered by environmental signals, appropriate information can be transferred from long-term to working memory in order to allow us to generate action relevant to our environment. In this way, information stored in long-term memory under the information-store principle transforms us. We can carry out activities that otherwise would be beyond us. The more information pertaining to a second language that is stored in long-term memory, the better we are able to use that language.

Based on this cognitive architecture, the purpose of instruction is to facilitate the storage of relevant information in long-term memory. Learning means storing information in long-term memory. That process of storage needs to take into account the characteristics of the human cognitive system and in particular, the limitations of working memory that are directly relevant to instructional design issues.
Instructional Implications

Learning biologically secondary information, such as a second language, requires close consideration of the above cognitive architecture. Instructors need to keep in mind that novice adult learners first must process this category of information in a limited-capacity, limited-duration working memory before transferring that information to an unlimited-capacity, unlimited-duration long-term memory. There are general rules of instruction that apply to all categories of biologically secondary information and some that apply specifically to second language learning by adults.

One general rule is that instruction needs to be organised in a manner that reduces unnecessary working memory load. It should be explicit in line with the borrowing and reorganising principle. Learners should not be asked to induce relevant information by using the randomness-as-genesis principle. In second language learning, this means teachers should explicitly present the grammar and vocabulary of the second language rather than expecting learners to induce the information themselves (see Kirschner et al., 2006, for alternative formulations that emphasise implicit learning) as occurs when dealing with a biologically primary task such as learning a native language as a child. We are good at assimilating information from others. It is a biologically primary skill that reduces cognitive load compared to inducing the information ourselves.

Another general rule is that the amount of biologically secondary information that is provided at a given time should not exceed working memory limits. For example, expecting adult learners to simultaneously learn a second language, particularly at the beginning levels, while also acquiring information concerning other curriculum areas such as science or history is likely to be counter-productive (for a counter view, see European Union, n.d.). We can learn a native language at the same time as we learn other things because we have evolved to do so. We have not evolved to learn a second language in the same way. Learning a second language and learning other curriculum areas should be kept separate whenever possible.

Instruction should be specifically devised to reduce working memory load. There are many examples but three will be emphasised here. First, avoid split-attention which occurs when multiple sources of information must be mentally integrated. For example, when learners need to have vocabulary translations provided, as they frequently do, provide translations close to the original, connecting them with arrows or, if using electronic instruction, allowing the translation to appear by clicking on the relevant word. Requiring learners to go to a separate dictionary imposes an additional cognitive load. Learners should not be required to search for needed information.

Another recommendation is to avoid redundancy. Unnecessary information frequently is processed with learners only finding after the event that they did not need to process the additional information in order to learn. I discussed split-attention above by suggesting that learners should not be required to split their attention between novel vocabulary and
its translation. Instead, the translation should be provided in a manner that eliminated the need to search for it. If, however, the translation is not required because it is already known, rather than physically integrating it with the original material, it should be eliminated. Providing a translation is likely to increase unnecessary cognitive load, if only slightly, due to redundancy.

The redundancy effect leads to the expertise-reversal effect. As indicated above, information such as translations that are essential for novice learners should be physically integrated but as expertise increases, rather than integrating the translation, it should be eliminated entirely once it becomes redundant. In other words, an instructional design that is suitable for novices, gradually loses its effectiveness with increasing expertise and may become dysfunctional for more expert learners.

The expertise-reversal effect has implications for immersion in a second language environment. While attempting to teach a second language by immersion is counterproductive for novice adult learners, with increasing expertise, immersion is likely to become increasingly effective. Once they need the practice associated with immersion, it should be introduced and is likely to be effective. The fact that immersion can be effective for more experienced second language learners, not to mention native language learners, is no excuse to introduce it for adult beginners.

These instructional recommendations flow directly from cognitive load theory. They contradict many current instructional practices that routinely ignore most of what we know of evolutionary educational psychology and human cognitive architecture. It needs to be emphasised that instructional recommendations based on cognitive load theory have been extensively tested using randomised, controlled trials and have been demonstrated to be effective. Details, along with many other instructional effects may be found in Sweller et al. (2011).

References


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**Author Bio**

Professor John Sweller, Ph.D. is an Australian educational psychologist who is best known for formulating an influential theory of cognitive load. He has authored over 80 academic publications, mainly reporting research on cognitive factors in instructional design, with specific emphasis on the instructional implications of working memory limitations (e.g., Sweller, Merrienboer & Paas, 1998) and their consequences for instructional procedures. Sweller is a Fellow of the ASSA (Academy of the Social Sciences in Australia), and is currently Professor Emeritus at the University of New South Wales.
THE ART OF CONVERSATION
Why it’s harder than you might think

By Antje S. Meyer and Svetlana Gerakaki, Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics and Radboud University, Nijmegen, The Netherlands

Most people like to chat. It’s pleasant to talk to your family over breakfast, and at work, you might go to the coffee room or water cooler mainly because you hope to bump into someone and have a little chat. These observations are consistent with scientific findings: As far as we know, conversation exists in all cultures (Levinson & Torreira, 2015). It is the most common form of using language and it is, of course, where children acquire their language.

What are conversations? A defining feature is that they consist of turns. As Levinson et al. put it, speakers adhere to a “one-at-a-time” principle: Speaker A says something and then B, then A again, or perhaps C, and so on. As the order of the speakers and the length of the turns are not fixed, these sequences cannot be pre-planned, but appear to evolve quite naturally. Importantly, the turns are tightly coordinated in time. Analyses of corpora of natural conversations in many different languages have shown that the most common gap length (the period of silence) between turns is around 300 ms. Thus, a turn by speaker A is usually followed by a turn from B or C within a third of a second. Occasionally, longer gaps are observed or speakers may talk simultaneously, but by and large, speakers tightly coordinate their utterances in time. This may contribute to the pleasant feeling of having a fluent, effortless conversation.

How do we manage to create this fluent succession of turns? Planning a single word, for instance the word *dog* to name a picture of a dog takes roughly a second. Approximately half of this time is needed to identify the picture, and remaining time, half a second or so, to retrieve the word from the mental lexicon (the speaker’s store of the words they know; Indefrey & Levelt, 2000). Planning a full sentence, such as *the dog is chasing the boy* can easily take several seconds. Given these planning times, how can conversation be so fluent? In part, this is because we often do not say full sentences but use particles such *hm* or *oh* or just nod to signal consent or interest. Such back-channelling requires little or no linguistic planning but contributes much to the perceived fluency of conversations.

However, often a verbal answer is required. A waiter asking *What can I get you to drink?* needs more than a *hm*.... How do we respond quickly enough? Levinson and Torreira propose that we are highly pro-active. We often need little verbal information to guess the intention of a speaker and even the content of their utterance. Seasoned restaurant goers know that a waiter starting a question with *What*... will probably ask about their wishes.
(rather than, for instance, their holiday plans) and might anticipate that the question, posed at the beginning of the meal will concern drinks rather than, say, desert. Levinson and Torreira propose that we use the utterance and context to begin to plan a response as early as possible. As soon as we have understood the speech act (whether it is a question, statement, etc.) and the gist (the broad content) of an utterance, we begin to plan our response. Sometimes, we may even have fully planned what to say before the end of the preceding turn. In such cases, we store the plan in working memory until we feel that the end of turn is imminent and then launch it. This proactive planning allows interlocutors to minimize the gaps between their turns.

**Experimental Support**

This proposal is based not only on casual observation and analyses of corpora of utterances, but also on experimental findings. For instance, in a study by Boegels, Magyari, and Levinson (2015), participants heard sentences such as *Which character, also called 007, appeared in the famous movies?* or *Which character from the famous movies is also called 007?* The critical information needed to answer the question (*007*) appeared about 1.5 second earlier in the first than in the second question. If participants begin to plan their response as soon as the relevant information is available, the gap after the end of the question should be much shorter after early-cue than late-cue questions. This result was indeed obtained. Responses were faster by nearly 300 ms when the cue appeared early than when it appeared late. (Real quiz masters know about early planning, as they always formulate their questions in such a way that the clue to the answer appears at the very end of the question). Thus, the participants indeed began to plan their utterance as soon as they could. In this study, the participants’ brain activity was recorded while they were listening to the answers. The recordings suggested that they not only began to think about the answer but actually retrieved the words as soon as they could. Other research has confirmed the general conclusion from this study: Speakers often begin to plan their utterance while still listening to the other person (Sjerps & Meyer, 2015).

**Speaking and driving**

These conclusions are in-line with our intuitions about conversation. However, we know from many studies that both listening to speech and planning speech require attention. Thus, carrying out the two tasks simultaneously should be quite difficult. For instance, studies using driving simulators have shown that producing simple utterances, such as route descriptions, interferes with indicators of driving performance, such as lane keeping and braking. Listening to such descriptions has similar, though sometimes less pronounced, effects. This shows that some of the attention required for optimal driving is absorbed by the linguistic tasks. Other studies have shown that people who differ in their attention skills (being more or less able to concentrate on the task) differ in their performance in simple linguistic tasks, such naming pictures or identifying words in noise (Jongman, Meyer, & Roelofs, 2015). Thus, speaking and listening both require attention. Importantly, it has...
been shown that attention is not only required for thinking about the content of utterances, but also for the processing of individual words and grammatical structures.

**Planning while listening**

In these studies, speaking and listening tasks were combined with non-verbal tasks, such as driving a car. What happens when two linguistic tasks, listening and speaking, are combined? As both tasks require attention, one would expect them to interfere with each other. In fact, similar tasks interfere more with each other than dissimilar ones. As listening and speaking are similar in many ways, they should strongly interfere with each other (Meyer & Huettig, 2016). And this is indeed the case. For instance, speakers are slower to name pictures when they simultaneously hear words compared to hearing stretches of noise. This interference effect increases when the name of the picture and the heard word are related in meaning (as in cat – dog) rather than unrelated (as in spoon – dog; Schriefers, Meyer, & Levelt, 1990). These findings show that the spoken word competes with the word the speaker plans to say.

Similarly, in the quiz study by Boegels et al. speakers responded earlier when the cue (007) appeared early in the sentence than when it appeared at its very end. But the saving in response time was only 300 ms, whereas the time interval between the appearance of the cues in the early and late condition was much longer, 1.7 seconds on average. Clearly utterance planning after the end of the question, in silence, was far more efficient than planning during the question.

**Listening while planning**

Thus, speech planning is hindered by concurrent listening. The reverse also holds: Listening is hindered by concurrent speech planning. To illustrate, in a recent study in our lab, participants named pictures while hearing distractor words, which they were told to ignore. In a control condition, they only listened to the distractor words, without planning speech. After an intervening task, participants were unexpectedly tested for their memory of the distractor words. They heard a mixture of “old” distractor words and new words and had to decide whether they had heard each word before. Overall, the participants did not perform very well on this task. But importantly, the performance in the no-planning condition was above chance, while the performance in the planning condition was no better than chance. In other words, the participants did not know whether or not they had heard these words before. This pattern was replicated in a second study where participants were warned about the memory test. Again, performance was much worse for the planning condition than from no-planning trials. In short, planning to speak hampers memory for what is heard while planning.

Another study in our lab has shown that the mental processing of utterances is also affected by speech planning. For instance, listeners hearing a sentence such as *She spread her sandwich with...* expect words such as *jam* or *butter*. They are surprised when they hear
socks, and this can be seen in recordings of their brain activity\(^1\). But when participants hear these odd sentences while at the same time preparing to say something, the surprise signal is much reduced. This demonstrates that listening is disrupted by concurrent speech planning. In sum, we can plan utterances while listening to others, but this comes at a price: Both speech planning and listening are less efficient than they are when done by themselves.

**Planning in L2**

These studies were carried out with adults using their native language. Speaking and listening in a second language are more effortful and require more time. This is true even for highly proficient L2 speakers. For instance, a fluent bilingual speaker of Dutch and English may name a picture of a cat in 800 ms in their L1, but require 1200 ms to name the same picture in their L2 (van Assche, Duyck, & Gollan, 2016). Understanding words also takes more time in L2: A native listener may be able to decide within 500 ms that the spoken word *cat* is an English word, but a fluent L2 speaker of English may require an additional 50 ms to do so. Combining listening and speech planning should therefore be even harder for L2 than for L1 speakers. Indeed, many L2 speakers will probably confirm that holding a conversation with L1 speakers is hard work. Understanding the other person is hard; formulating a contribution to the conversation is hard as well, and doing both things together is very hard indeed. In fact, they might not be prepared to speak soon enough as the typical 300 ms gap comes and goes, and somebody else may start speaking before they can.

**Implications**

Nevertheless, being able to hold a conversation is, of course, an important goal of many L2 learners. How might we support them in moving towards this goal? First, as L2 proficiency increases, as learners get better at understanding the second language and as their ability to express themselves improves, the ability to combine listening and speaking will improve as well. In other words, L2 learners need to practice listening to conversational speech in the second language (without participating in the conversation) and they need to practice producing everyday utterances, initially without the pressure of having to respond as fast as native speakers do in everyday conversations.

Second, it would be helpful to raise everyone’s awareness of the facts outlined here: that speaking and listening are effortful and take time, more so in L2 than in L1, and that combining them is cognitively challenging, even for highly proficient speakers of a language. Students might be encouraged to take their time in a conversation, and to separate listening and speech planning as much as possible. More importantly perhaps, teachers and employers

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1 Brain activity is measured with EEG. Surprise can be seen in a very specific change in the EEG. It is a negative signal, peaking about 400 ms after a stimulus. For this reason, it’s known as an N400.
should know that native speakers of a language often plan utterances while listening, but that expecting the same from L2 speakers might just be too much to ask. Teachers should get used to leaving uncomfortably-long silent gaps after asking questions to the class and guard against jumping in to rephrase or answer their own questions. Finally, we should all keep in mind that speech planning takes real time, in addition to thinking, and that a slow response to a question probably does not mean that the speaker is “a bit slow”, but that they need a little extra time to find the right words to express their thoughts.

References


Author Bios

**Antje S. Meyer (PhD, 1988, Radboud University)** is a professor at Radboud University and director at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics in Nijmegen, where she heads the Psychology of Language Department. Before taking up her appointments in Nijmegen (2010), she was a professor of psycholinguistics at the University of Birmingham UK (from 2000). She has worked on various aspects of psycholinguistics, and currently focusses on speaking and listening in dialogue and individual differences in language skills. Her work has been found by the DFG, British Academy, ESRC, BBSCR, Nuffield Foundation, and NWO. She has supervised more than 30 PhD students and is the author or a co-author of more than 100 articles in peer-reviewed journals. She has co-edited five books.

**Svetlana Gerakaki** is a graduate student in her department.
LEARNING THE **TOUGH CONSTRUCTIONS**

By Misha Becker, UNC Chapel Hill

*Tough* constructions are a special case of constructions where we find unusual relationships between the form of a sentence and its meaning. These include examples like *John is tough to please*. Although this might seem quite unremarkable to you, it’s actually been extensively discussed by linguists and others. To understand why, we may need to take a few steps back.

When children begin speaking in multi-word sentences in their native language, they typically start out by producing semantically simple messages: their words are nouns, verbs and adjectives, and the meanings of phrases are built up in a straightforward way by combining the meanings of adjacent words. For example, toddlers say things like *Mommy go* (*mommy* is the agent of going), *want cookie* (*cookie* is the object of wanting), and *big doggie* (*doggie* is the adjective describes the adjacent noun). Such sentences follow a canonical mapping between sentence structure (syntax) and meaning (semantics): typically, the subject is an animate agent (a “do-er”), the verb denotes an action, and the object is an inanimate patient (what is affected). These relations are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Prototypical syntax-semantics relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syntax</th>
<th>Semantics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subject</td>
<td>Agent (“do-er” often animate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Verb</td>
<td>Action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Object</td>
<td>Patient (affected; often inanimate)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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It is only later that children begin combining words in configurations such that semantic combinations cannot be computed from syntactically nearby words. The words can be separated, as in *I see a dog that is big*, where a relative clause separates the noun (*dog*) and its adjective (*big*). Conversely words that are side-by-side don’t always have a semantic connection. In *John seems to me to be working*, the subject *John* is next to *seem* but is not the agent of *seem* (rather *John* is the agent of *working*). The correspondence between syntactic and semantic roles can also take on an atypical character. In *the cookie was eaten by the girl*, the patient (the cookie) is the subject and the agent (the girl) is the object of a preposition, more or less the reverse of a typical sentence. Finally, in *this book is hard to read*, we find a situation in which the action and its patient are both separated and out of the usual order. These constructions involve what is known as *displacement*: a word
or phrase is pronounced in a different part of the sentence from where it gets interpreted semantically. These are not the first types of sentences children build, but by early elementary school, if not earlier, children grow into speakers who do build them. How does this happen?

**Tough Constructions**

In the late 1960s Carol Chomsky conducted an experiment using sentences like *John is tough to please* to find out whether children understood that the syntactic subject (*John*) is the patient of the verb in the *to* infinitive (*please*). As adult speakers, we can verify this interpretation by looking at the paraphrase of this sentence where *John* appears after *please*: *It is tough to please John*. We also know that *John is tough to please* doesn’t mean that John is tough, or that he is going to please someone else. But Chomsky wanted to know how children understood it. To find out, she presented elementary school aged children with a blindfolded doll and asked, “Is the doll easy to see or hard to see?” If children answered that the doll was easy to see, Chomsky further prompted them to “make the doll hard to see,” to which children often responded by placing the doll under the table. This is an adult-like response because it shows that children understood the initial question as asking whether it was easy or hard to see the doll (easy, if the doll is in plain view). Many children, however, answered, “hard to see,” and when they were prompted to “make the doll easy to see” they removed the doll’s blindfold. This indicates that their interpretation of the initial question was that it asked whether it was easy or hard for the doll to see (something else). This is not an adult-like interpretation.

It is not an unreasonable interpretation, however. English has a very similar construction, known to syntacticians as a control construction, in which the subject of the main clause is interpreted as the agent, not patient, of the infinitive as well. Compare the (tough) sentence *the girl is easy to see* with the (control) sentence *the girl is eager to see* (see Table 2). In the eager sentence the girl is the one who will be doing the seeing, not the one being seen. Chomsky’s result with children, namely that younger children appear to give the eager-type interpretation to sentences with easy, has also been found by other researchers, such as Cromer (1970) and Anderson (2005).

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1  It should be noted that some sentences involving displacement, namely *wh*-questions (with *who*, *what*, *where*, etc.) are produced quite early on. In *what do you see?* for example, the question word *what* refers to the object of *see* (*you see [what/the dog]*) but it is at the front of the sentence. Here I will focus on some of the non-question types of constructions involving displacement and the particular subset of these constructions known as raising and tough constructions.

2  Not all adjectives appear in the tough construction. Some that do are: difficult, easy, hard and impossible.
Table 2 Interpretations of *tough* constructions and non-*tough* constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Syntax-semantics relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The girl is eager to see.</td>
<td>She wants to see.</td>
<td>Subject is agent of <em>see</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The girl is easy <em>(for us)</em> to see.</td>
<td>We see her.</td>
<td>Subject is patient of <em>see</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Tough*-constructions are only found in a limited number of languages (Givón 1991), and they present some unique challenges for formal theories of syntactic structure (Chomsky 1977; Lasnik & Uriagereka 1994). In fact, given the formal constraints that syntacticians have proposed to account for how displacement works in human language, *tough*-movement should not be possible. We say that the position in a sentence where a noun phrase gets interpreted is where it “originates” or “moves from” if it is pronounced in a different part of the sentence. But according to the rules that govern such movements it should not be possible to move a noun phrase from the object position of an infinitive verb up to the subject position at the beginning of the sentence, which is what appears to happen in *tough*-movement. Holmberg (2000) went so far as to refer to these constructions as “unexplainable.” Thus, the fact that children are late in acquiring this construction should not be too surprising. Moreover, research on adult second language (L2) learners has shown that, like English-learning children, even advanced L2 learners can misinterpret these sentences as if the main clause subject were the *agent* of the infinitive verb (the one doing the pleasing, seeing, etc.; Cook 1973, Yip 1995), and they avoid producing these constructions with displacement (e.g., *the question is hard to understand*), preferring instead the paraphrase (e.g., *it is hard to understand the question*; Callies 2008). Yip (1995) reports production of what she calls “pseudo-*tough*-movement” (*I am very easy to forget*, meaning “it is easy for *me* to forget”) by Mandarin L1 learners of English, but it should be noted that Mandarin permits constructions of this sort when the subject is animate (Becker 2014).

While the errors in producing and interpreting *tough*-constructions in both L1 and L2 learners are not surprising, they underscore the need for an explanation of how these constructions are acquired at all. There is an unusual feature of *tough*-constructions, however, that I have argued makes them entirely learnable, and which sets them apart from more typical syntactic structures: they permit inanimate subjects. Notice that while an adjective like *eager* requires an animate (and sentient) subject (*John is eager to read, but #The book is eager to be read*), *easy* and *tough* can take any sort of subject (*The book is easy to read*). This is precisely because there is no semantic relationship between the main clause subject and the *tough* adjective, while there is a semantic relationship between the main clause subject and a control adjective like *eager*. In psycholinguistic studies of adult language processing, an inanimate subject triggers adults to interpret the subject as a patient, rather than an agent (Ferreira & Clifton 1986, Truesdell & Tanenhaus 1994). My experimental work with children has shown that children make the same interpretive shift.

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3 Linguists use the # symbol before a sentence that is semantically ill-formed, and the * symbol before a sentence that is syntactically ill-formed.
given an inanimate subject. If I present children with a sentence such as \textit{The apple is daxy to draw} (as opposed to \textit{The farmer is daxy to draw}), they will interpret \textit{daxy} as meaning something like “easy” or “hard”, but not as “eager” or “afraid” (Becker 2014, 2015).

**What Seems to be the Problem?**

If we broaden the scope of inquiry to other constructions involving displacement, we find the same absence of a semantic relationship between syntactic neighbors in what are called raising constructions. These are sentences such as \textit{John seems (to me) to be tall} or \textit{Flowers tend to bloom in spring}. While the main clause subject in these sentences is not necessarily interpreted as a patient, its semantic role is determined entirely by the predicate in the \textit{to} infinitive (...\textit{to be tall} or ...\textit{to bloom in spring}; see Table 3), and there are paraphrases that help us see this: \textit{It seems that John is tall}; \textit{There tend to be flowers blooming in spring}. Just like in the case of tough-constructions, raising verbs easily permit inanimate subjects. And, just like with tough-constructions, there is a parallel type of sentence that looks the same on the surface but in which the main clause subject is semantically related to its neighboring verb: in \textit{John claims to be tall}, we can say that John is the agent, the one doing the claiming.

Table 3 Interpretations of raising & non-raising constructions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Interpretation</th>
<th>Syntax-semantics relation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>\textit{John claims to be tall}.</td>
<td>John says so.</td>
<td>Subject is agent of \textit{claim}</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>\textit{John seems (to us) to be tall.}</td>
<td>We think so.</td>
<td>Subject is not agent of \textit{seem}</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Raising constructions are not as rare among the world’s languages as tough-constructions, and the various languages that have them allow inanimate subjects just like English does. In addition to many Indo-European languages, several Austronesian languages (Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, Chamorro, Maori) contain raising constructions and all of them permit inanimate subjects in just these constructions. Inanimate subjects in these languages are ungrammatical in sentences without raising verbs (e.g. \textit{John claims to be tall}). The psycholinguistic effects of inanimate subjects we saw with tough-constructions are observed with raising verbs as well: adults assume that a nonsense verb paired with an inanimate subject in a sentence like \textit{The building gorps to be tall} has a raising type of meaning (“seem”, “appear”, etc.), but they don’t make this assumption when the subject is animate (\textit{John gorps to be tall}; Becker & Estigarribia 2013).
(In)Animacy: What is it Good For?

Typical sentences have an animate subject/agent that performs some action which possibly affects something or someone else. An influential idea about how children even begin to decipher the syntactic structure of their language is that, children assume that the syntactic subject is the part of the sentence occupied by the most animate noun. Armed with this assumption, children can exploit this regular mapping between semantic role and syntactic position to figure out which word or phrase in the sentence is the subject. When a child hears the girl is eating peas, she can figure out that the subject must come before the verb and object in her language, because girl is more animate than peas, and it also comes before the action word eat. This procedure is known as semantic bootstrapping (Grimshaw 1981, Pinker 1982). Since word order varies across languages, this is something children have to figure out about their own language.

Semantic bootstrapping only gets you so far. One of the marvelous aspects of human language is that its syntax permits us to create expressions in which a semantic relationship holds between words that span a long distance. The allowable distance is determined not by the number of words that intervene, but by hierarchical relationships among the words and phrases that make up the sentence. Learning how to compute those hierarchical relationships is what it means to acquire a grammar. What I have argued is that, while an animate subject can provide a good stepping stone in the early process of learning basic word order, an inanimate subject can provide crucial information at a later stage for deciphering more complex structures: an inanimate subject can’t be an agent, and its semantic interpretation is likely to be found elsewhere in the sentence. In other words, it is very likely to be a displaced noun phrase.

This is one way in which (in)animacy is important for language acquisition. A second way involves the clues it provides about the meanings of verbs and adjectives that permit inanimate subjects. Across languages that have raising verbs, for example, these verbs have a rather narrow set of meanings. In English raising verbs have meanings relating to appearance (seem, appear), aspect (tend, used to, gonna), likelihood or happenstance (be likely, be certain, happen). Other languages’ raising verbs generally have these same meanings. Languages with tough-constructions (e.g., Finnish, Niuean, Bahasa Indonesian, Labrador Inuttut, Chinese) have a similarly restricted range of meanings, typically having to do with ease and/or difficulty. Such meanings are quite abstract and are unlikely to be learnable straightforwardly by observing events in the world. (Compare Show me running! with Show me seeming! Or, Draw something furry! vs. Draw something difficult!) Thus, inanimate subjects not only provide a clue that the syntax of the sentence is complex, with the subject most likely displaced from another part of the sentence, but they also provide a clue to a narrow range of meanings for the main verb or adjective which, it seems, would be otherwise difficult to learn.
ARTICLES

References


Author Bio

Misha Becker is a Professor of Linguistics at UNC Chapel Hill, where she has taught since 2002. For most of her career her research has focused on children's acquisition of syntax, including the acquisition of the copula (be), and the sentence structures of abstract predicates like seem and tough. In recent years her research program has branched into two different directions: children's development of emotion vocabulary, and the revitalization of endangered languages, especially Eastern Cherokee.
Learning English as a Second Language comes with its usual predicaments and involves a lot of effort, systematic study, mentoring, and use of technology. It just adds another layer of complexity when a learner has vision impairment or any other learning difficulty or limitations. In Canada, it is not unusual that people with visual impairment are learning English in schools specially equipped for them where they are provided with a set of arrangements catering their needs. In most of the cases, the learners use braille and get help from specially trained instructors. But learning English in a mainstream program like English for Academic Purposes is not that common in public colleges where there is little or no special infrastructure for a blind student.

The teaching can also come with added levels of complexity, especially for a teacher who has never done it before. In this interview, Brett Reynolds, Professor of TESL and EAP in Humber College’s English Language Centre, and Wajiha Naqvi, a blind student who has recently completed her EAP program at Humber College, share their experience of the teaching and learning respectively. Wajiha is the first blind student Brett has had in his class in more than 20 years of language teaching. On the other hand, for Wajiha it was old hat. Below is our conversation.

Pankaj: Wajiha, would you mind telling us the extent of your vision?

Wajiha: I cannot read and write and I can see in the day but I cannot see in the night.

PB: What have you studied so far?

WN: I haven’t finished any degree so far. EAP is the only degree I have. I started (another program) but I couldn’t finish. Right now, I am doing general arts and science at Humber. It’s a college transfer course and I want to do computer programming in the future.

PB: And, what made you interested in learning English?

WN: I started my university and found out that I had some problems in writing essays and all that stuff and that’s why I thought of coming to college and starting EAP.

PB: And that’s where you met Brett. So, Brett, what difficulties did you face to incorporate a visually impaired student in the mainstream EAP program?
Surprisingly, few. When I first found out that Wajiha was going to be in my class and that she was blind, I was sort of nervous. I didn’t know how some of the activities were going to work. Moreover, I assumed that there would be some need for braille and I had no experience with it. So, I anticipated quite a number of issues but surprisingly it turned out that there really was very little involved.

PB: Did you complete any needs analysis for Wajiha?

BR: Well, sort of. The college notified me that she was in my class and I got a letter of accommodation. If a student self identifies to the accessible learning services, they’ll draft a letter of accommodation, and that’s a type of needs analysis. Later on, I wrote an email to Wajiha and I asked her a number of things about braille and stuff like that and she wrote back and said, “no braille, it’s just too old fashioned.”

WN: (laughing) You have to move ahead with the times.

PB: So, if you don’t use braille, what do you do?

WN: I use a screen reader. It’s called JAWS. It talks and you listen to it. It’s an audio software.

PB: And what about writing? I mean, how do you write and edit your writing?

WN: I type and it reads what I type to me. After I’ve written something, I go to the writing center if I need help for the academic stuff. I do write for an organization. I write articles for them. So, I write and then I proofread. JAWS lets me jump around quickly and listen to different parts of the document.

PB: I see. So, Brett, with that taken care of, what were Wajiha’s other special requirements in terms of attending classes and facilitating study?

BR: The main thing was that any handouts or anything that needed to be read in the class. She needed to get those before class in order to prepare. As she said, she has this software that helps her by reading those handouts out to her. I was supposed to send her the materials the night before so she could prepare them. Occasionally, I forgot or I was late and I would send her the materials during the class from my laptop.

In class, she has her computer open all the time and she often has an earbud in one ear. But, whenever I handout something to everybody else I would just let Wajiha know which handout that was. She’ll pull it up, and yes, it worked. I guess, sometimes she needed to move because her battery was dying and needed to be plugged into the wall. But that was about it in class.

Another issue was testing. Normally, in a case like this we would refer the student to the test center but my tests involve dictations and a live lecture. The
test centre would have needed recordings, and it was easier just to keep it live. So, we just booked a room, and I did the dictation for her and then she spent rest of the time working on it.

One other thing that I modified a little bit was, as part of the class, we watched a number of lectures. And some of the lectures used slides with graphs and things like this. Often, I would pause the lecture, and I would do this normally, explain some words or some difficult concepts. In Wajiha’s case, I sometimes described the graphs if it was important so that she would understand. So, I had to be aware that there were important elements that everybody else was getting that she wasn’t seeing. But it wasn’t a problem.

PB: Anything particular about editing her writing or giving feedback?

BR: This is something I had to do a little bit differently because when I correct essays I use MS Word’s track-changes function. And what that does is it displays the changed text, like if you strike something it shows it in red and strike through and if you enter something it shows it in green. But, JAWS (the computer software) doesn’t tell you the color of that. It would just read everything. So, I had to put in the text comment here and then I would put the comment and then it would say end of comment, just so that she could differentiate my comments from her text.

PB: Wajiaha, is there any other equipment and device you use to study?

WN: Laptop and headphone; that’s all.

PB: Are there limits on how you use a computer?

WN: No, not really.

PB: Brett, what is your observation regarding her use of technology?

BR: Basically, from what I could perceive, Wajiha was obviously very proficient in using her computer. She has it with her all the time. She would write me email, and we’d write back and forth. She was reading the material on computer, writing assignments, and sending them to me. I did notice that she doesn’t use a cell phone. That’s one big difference: the other students use cell phones to look up words and record themselves speaking and things, but Wajiha doesn’t have one. However, she has her computer open so much that she doesn’t need a cell phone. Actually, I’m the same. I always carry my computer and I don’t have a phone.

The only technology issue she had was using the learner management system that we have here at Humber, Blackboard. It wasn’t working well for her. I guess something about JAWS. So rather than submitting assignments through blackboard she just emailed them to me.
At the end of the course students do presentations and some students use PowerPoint and Wajiha didn’t. It wasn’t a requirement but it was something that some students used, but it’s a minor thing. In the end, there is not a lot technology in the class.

**PB:** While using visuals (e.g. PowerPoint, slides, pictures etc.) in class how did you support Wajiha?

**BR:** She is very proactive about asking, not shy. When I would write something on the board I would have to make sure to read it out, to say what it was. For example, if I was describing the form of a question or something and drawing arrows and circling things, I would have to be conscious to say what I am doing rather than just writing it on the whiteboard and assuming people were following. But, by and large, whatever visuals there were, were reasonably easy to describe or were not entirely necessary and, you know, you and I, probably we rely on visuals lot more than Wajiha does. She has accommodations she makes to the world.

**PB:** Wajiha, do you need someone to help you in a classroom for taking notes or any other purposes?

**WN:** Yes. I have an accommodation in my letter for a notetaker. They are for me to help me out taking notes in the class in case the teacher is giving lecture and if I have to take notes, note taker can help me out. Somebody from Humber volunteers for me in this job. Right now, I am not getting this service so I use Note Express, some software, which is something similar. It records the lecture and then I download it and the software transcribes it to notes.

**PB:** That’s great. So, Brett, what was the general classroom environment when Wajiha was there? How were the other students?

**BR:** I think Wajiha is a very outgoing, happy person; she’s just a normal person. She makes a lot of friends in class. People would cooperate with her and help her. I wasn’t aware of anybody being particularly surprised or treating her really differently. She fit into the class well. The classroom environment was, I would say, just a very normal classroom environment. These students have had eight months together and they developed a quit a good relationship.

**PB:** Did she interact with other students and the vice versa?

**BR:** Absolutely, yes. Sometimes, we do activities where people move around the classroom to find a partner and things like that and Wajiha has a white cane and she just knows the classroom. She moves round by herself. I mean, it was a nice group of people. My classes also have a lot of speaking and Wajiha would participate in groups or in pairs. When I was asking questions, she would often volunteer her opinion or give an answer. So, yes complete participation.
PB: Wajiha, so far, what are the most challenging factors for you in terms of your study?

WN: Well, thanks to Humber, they gave me all the facilities. In the beginning, when I came to Toronto, I started at University of Toronto. I wanted to do a degree in Computer Science but they didn’t have the facilities I needed and that was the major challenge I faced. Consequently, I had to leave U of T and after I came here and started EAP. (U of T) didn't help me. Even though, they knew I was visually impaired, before we left Nigeria we told them we were visually impaired (me and my sister), they didn’t comply. But, Humber is OK, they help us. If I have problem, they suggest me what to do.

PB: Wajiha, what about the role of your family in your study?

WN: My family supports me a lot. They are really good. They help me out. My mom actually, she, wants us to study.

PB: What’s your future plan?

BR: I don’t have a future plan yet. Too early to think about this. But I have thought of taking TESL or studying computer programming in the days ahead.

PB: As a learner of English what has been your overall experience? In particular, have teachers and students accommodated your needs?

WN: Yes, everybody accepted me well. It was good. It’s like a good memory. And my English is better now and I am confident for my degree in terms of language.

PB: Brett, what is your overall experience of having Wajiha in your class?

BR: It was really good for me because she’s a wonderful person, but also because I had never taught a blind student before. At the beginning, I was quite anxious. I did not know what to expect. I thought, it was possibly going to be a lot of extra work—which I was willing to do—but I needed to think about planning and that kind of thing. With the technology, though, and with Wajiha’s experience using her computer and just with her general personality, it really turned out that it was much easier than I’d expected. I learned something and I am very glad I did. And, the next time I have a blind student in my class, I think, I will be much more prepared than I was this time.

Author Bio

Pankaj Bhattacharjee is an ESL Teacher and a recent Humber TESL graduate. Before migrating to Canada in 2016, he has taught English literature at Metropolitan University, Bangladesh for five years. He is currently enrolled in MA in Applied Linguistics program at York University, Toronto for upcoming fall semester.

I’m Wajiha Viqar Naqvi, a visually-impaired girl but I am so motivated to become a source of support for the humanity. Currently I am doing certificate in general art science from the Humber College. The problems which I often face increase my experience in different fields and teach me new ways to survive in this beautiful planet earth. Writing and volunteering are my passions. I write articles for a Pakistani organization empowering the differently abled persons www.facebook.com/empowering.tdp
Whenever I talk about Indigenization, I recognize that it’s often customary, in an Indigenous paradigm, to ‘situate’ myself in the work (Wilson, 2009)—I might talk about where I’m from, or my family, but I’ll give you the Coles Notes version. I’m originally from Newfoundland, traditional territory of the extinct Beothuk people. I grew up in Nova Scotia on the edge of a Mi’kmaq community; the Mi’kmaq are considered the founding people of Nova Scotia and are one of the signatory nations to the Peace and Friendship Treaties of that area. I’m living in Treaty 6 territory, which is a traditional gathering place for diverse Indigenous peoples; the Indigenous peoples of the Cree, Nakota Sioux, Dene, Blackfoot, Tsuu-t’ina, Iroquois, Ojibway, Salteaux, Anishinaabe, Inuit, Métis, and many others who reside in Edmonton whose histories, languages, and cultures continue to enrich our community. I teach and develop curriculum with a community college that also acts as a regional steward.

I also recognize that I am likely writing for a Western readership, and so I am mindful that it is customary to begin with some background or a rationale for my topic: Indigenization in the ESL classroom.

Indigenization is rooted in the emergent consciousness of the detrimental effects of colonization; this has increased the demand to decolonize education. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)’s Calls to Action (2015) urge institutions to address the issues inherent to colonialism and systemic racism. Many educational institutions, like mine, have responded by developing Indigenous strategies. Our strategy is founded on the Seven Sacred Teachings and, as an ‘organic’ document, will grow with us. Some of the fundamental ideas include making the infrastructural, curricular, and pedagogical changes required to promote the balancing of Indigenous and Western worldviews, values, and ways of knowing as an act of Reconciliation.

ESL programs do not ostensibly serve Indigenous learners, but we should not be exempt from Indigenization. My college’s language training program began Indigenization with questions: What would an Indigenous Strategy look like for us? What are the opportunities? I recently authored an in-house report that sought to answer this; 94 recommendations for program leadership, curriculum developers, and instructors were generated, including a recommendation to “take it slow”. There is much in the literature describing failure when the human element of policy change is neglected, when policy is written and curriculum is changed without considering the instructors who will be responsible for living the policies and using the curriculum.
For example, in South Africa, policy changes were implemented to “cleanse” education of racism and sexism. However, there wasn’t enough information on how to implement the changes and teachers lacked both pedagogical and content knowledge. The instructors resisted the policy and adhered to familiar teaching approaches and content, even though they knew this would perpetuate the systems of sexism and racism they desired to disrupt (Chisholm, 2005). Case studies like this underscore the prudence of conducting a needs analysis prior to drafting new policy. Instructors should inform policy, not the other way around.

So, as a graduate studies research project, I conducted a needs analysis of ESL instructors to explore the interrelationship between instructor knowledge and beliefs (including what they believed were sound teaching practices or beliefs about Self), unconscious bias, self-efficacy, the impact of training and professional development, Indigenous ways of knowing and TESL congruence, intercultural communicative competence (ICC), and policy implementation.

**What Did We Learn From This?**

There are several things to consider when it comes to ESL instructors and Indigenization. We learned that instructor beliefs are largely established by personal experience(s) before entering teacher training (Pajares, 1992). Interestingly, stated belief does not always align with practice (Basturkmen, Loewen, & Ellis, 2004; Farrell & Lim, 2005; Phipps & Borg, 2009). What this means is that instructors may already espouse beliefs about Indigenization, and these beliefs may affect engagement with this policy. For example, some are reluctant to include Indigenous content because they believe it “subordinate material which detracts from more important information” (Dewar, 1998, p. 17).

We also learned that professional development doesn’t always lead to the desired changes in what instructors believe or how they teach. In many cases, PD about social justice or Indigenous cultures results in (or reinforces existing) attitudes that perpetuate stereotypes, especially with teachers who did not have a habitually reflexive practice. Such classes or workshops are often a study of content/subject matter and don’t often have a reflective component or any mechanism for ongoing learning and reflection in professional practice—the PD is a “one-off”. In PD related to social justice or Indigenous cultures/histories, instructors sometimes have difficulty confronting unsettling subject matter and defend behaviours or entrenched beliefs, or become blind to them. Some want to give the “right answer” rather than reflect on Self or explore the possibility that they have participated, however unknowingly, in systems of privilege or marginalization. Sometimes, knowledge gained in PD leads instructors to conclude they have reached a level of “mastery”, which precludes any need for further reflection or growth. Many construct an image of themselves as a “helper”, someone who perceives themselves as innocent of perpetuating racism, as being well-intentioned, and as being atypical of most Canadians (who were presumably more racist than they perceive themselves to be).
The reasons for this outcome are complex and hard to pin down, yet what the research is clear on is that more knowledge without reflective practice can result in the inability to identify various forms of oppression, and an inability “to see how [teachers’] own biases and stereotypes...perpetuated... inequities” (Castro, 2010, p.203). Ultimately, knowledge alone leads to less self-reflection, and that can lead to bigger blind spots. Instructors who are not reflective or supported in a reflective practice might unintentionally participate in more othering or have difficulty shifting perspective. Many deny may deny the experiences that are informed by differences, like systemic racism (Schick, 2000).

Let me give you an example. Two employees (of an organization I'll keep anonymous) were part of educational program planning for children. They wanted to incorporate Indigenous content into the programming. The two weren't Indigenous and had no first-hand knowledge of Indigenous cultures or histories, only a theoretical knowledge from a Native Studies class, which had provided them with information, but not understanding. They wanted to choose the Indigenous content and provide their own interpretations of the cultures. Some of the symbols and artifacts they wanted to include were sacred, and they wanted to conduct ceremony or wear traditional regalia in what can only be called an act of, albeit unintentional, appropriation. As well-intentioned as they were, the two did not recognize any of this as an act of othering or as a kind of silencing or neocolonialism. As my colleague Roberta Bear reminds me, “Never [teach] about us without us.”

Having developed intercultural communicative competence can help instructors shift perspective or be more self-aware in cases like this. This does not mean we must approach Indigenization through an intercultural framework, even though we can (Ermine, 2007; Nakata, 2007). It means instructors who have developed ICC are more effective at noticing the things necessary to decolonize practice than those who haven’t developed ICC. In an ESL classroom, we already occupy an intercultural space. More interculturally-competent instructors can negotiate that space with more dexterity.

We learned that, as language teaching is a political act, we need to consider that power dynamic in our classrooms. We must recognize ourselves as powerful (and political) change agents. We are integral in the transformation of Canada as a more intercultural, inclusive, equitable society; the transformation of learners to recognize and dismantle systems of inequity; and, the transformation of learners’ abilities to participate in a multicultural/pluralistic society (Courchêne, 1996). We must teach versions of Canada that include accounts of both overt and systemic racism, such as excluding minority groups and perspectives. Including this could create a culture that “reflects the existing and historical contexts” (Courchêne, 1996, p. 6). We should not provide representations of Canada as “an unproblematic and inevitable progress towards our status as the world’s ‘best place to live’” (Fleming, 2003, p. 76) but rather as a complex and dynamic land with histories and stories that span thousands of years and only recently intersect many cultures and experiences. We must avoid generalizations and static, monolithic representations of Canadians, cultures, or histories.
Something we learned in the needs analysis is that ESL instructors want learners to be more open minded: “[My students] see First Nations as the low of the low, and I don’t think that’s right... And [my students] seem to be more hateful than other Canadians when they talk about [First Nations people]. I don’t like it. I want to put a stop to it in my practice if I could.” However, I also heard comments like, “My learners aren’t interested in Indigenous stuff,” an assumption I take issue with on many levels.

I would argue that our learners are more than ready to engage with the stuff of our Indigenous peoples and Truth and Reconciliation. Many learners have come from countries have been colonized, or have experienced cultural oppression, or are presently in the process of decolonization. Some come from countries that have their own Truth and Reconciliation Commissions. Many learners have been waiting their whole lives to engage in these kinds of conversations and find that Canada, or the right teacher, is giving them the space to do so.

But it’s really the word stuff that I’d like to deconstruct.

Stuff means, “things”. It means subject matter. It means, “what we study about,” not “what (or who) we engage with.” Many misunderstand Indigenization as adding more content. Understandably, nobody wants too much “stuff” on top of all the other “stuff” we as instructors are accountable for. Yet, if we see Indigenization as “stuff”, we fail to understand that Indigenization is about people and relationships, relationships with our communities, relationships with our shared histories and the Treaties, relationships with the land, and how those relationships are communicated in language.

That’s not to say we should ignore content. The truth part of Truth and Reconciliation means there are things that we must learn: the legacy of the Residential Schools, about Treaties, or the Indian Act. We must also engage in the stuff of contemporary relevance, like water security, Steven Harper’s claim that Canada has never experienced colonialism (Wherry, 2009), or Idle No More (n.d.). But we can’t stop at stuff.

Where Do We Go From Here?

Indigenization could mean making explicit how language reinforces established power relationships. Many language learning outcomes already support building a critical awareness of these relationships. Looking at the Canadian Language Benchmarks, decolonizing goals are already embedded in the outcomes from a very low level where learners should be able to identify mood or tone or reader/writer relationship, up to the advanced outcomes where learners should be able to identify values and assumptions or infer biases and motives.

Not everyone possesses an innate lens to readily identify bias or language that empowers or marginalizes. To support this, I developed, for lack of a better term, a ‘noticing instrument’ that helps instructors approach existing materials like textbooks with that critical eye. It’s
a monocle, but it’s a start. The instrument guides a noticing process by asking questions that help instructors make decisions about how to use the materials they teach with. I’ve even used it in class with my learners. For example, something it asks is, “How are different perspectives included?” and offers this checklist:

- There are pictures of people from visibly diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds
- There are audible voices that reflect a diversity of language backgrounds
- There are characters or people who self-identify as being from diverse cultural or ethnic backgrounds
- There are texts written by authors of various cultural or ethnic backgrounds
- There are characters or people who behave, think, or talk in ways that they identify as being rooted in their cultural or ethnic, etc., origins
- There are texts or audios describing different perspectives, written or narrated by someone who is not of that background
- There are texts or audios describing different perspectives, written or narrated by someone who is of that background
- Other: ___________________

When my learners applied some questions from the noticing instrument to a textbook chapter (from a widely-used ESL textbook series...), they noticed a lot: Indigenous languages were described as “dying out” or “endangered”, which implied that languages were disappearing naturally rather than deliberately threatened. Learners noticed the article author (a White European, according to their Google search) claims Indigenous cultures are dying out because Indigenous peoples “refuse” to assimilate. Learners identified dichotomous comparisons between “civilized” and “savage”, “modern” and “primitive” and noticed frequent usage of passive voice, which learners described as a strategy for those responsible to avoid accountability for oppression. Based on their observations, it was possible to develop supplementary lessons on vocabulary or grammar like the passive and incorporate notions of (dis)empowerment.

Indigenization should also mean a shift in teaching processes. An Indigenous teaching/learning cycle is sometimes compared to an inquiry cycle (Kanu, 2011), and there are parallels between this and a task cycle in task-based teaching and learning (TBLT). The strength in the Indigenous model is that the task must be authentic, must engage the community, and must be reflective. It’s holistic in nature. It’s exciting, because for an immigrant learner, the addition of an Indigenous paradigm could mean the exploration of identity development, empowerment, and citizenship within a Canadian context in addition to the language acquisition, or rather, as an integral part of it. What this could mean in language training is seeking out ways for production tasks to extend beyond the confines of the classroom. My learners, for example, began an inquiry process by visiting an LRT station with art that celebrates (!) a Residential school on one wall and a mural by an Indigenous artist on the other. (There is quite the tale of Reconciliation behind the Grandin
Station artwork, for those interested in seeking out the story—check out Samantha Power’s 2016 online article *The Art of Reconciliation*. I just dropped them off on the second day of class and asked them to return to the college with a notebook full of observations and questions. Their (many) questions led to an exploration of the art grant application process, in which they identified systemic barriers excluding Indigenous artists and other marginalized groups from participating. The task? They have written the mayor and to the arts council identifying the issues and providing recommendations. More than this, they have come to see themselves as participating citizens of their city, and as empowered advocates. I could write another article on the emotional and spiritual journeys some of the learners took in the process of this community engagement, but those things aren’t in the outcomes I’m supposed to assess.

Of course, there are simpler ways to include Indigenous ways of knowing in TESL practices. My peers and I have transformed traditional talking circles (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009) into reading and listening circles. Storytelling, also widely regarded as an Indigenous approach, is an established way to engage in language learning (e.g. Atta-Alla, 2012; Kim, 2010). We can include more visual or experiential learning in our TESL practices, or can look for more critical ways to deconstruct the grammar and vocabulary we’re ‘studying’ with our learners. I have developed lesson plans that ‘decolonize’ grammar and explore the power relationships embedded in forms like the passive or the present perfect. There is space for our Western-rooted teaching and learning approaches to coexist, in equity, with the holistic approaches of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning. The possibilities are, truly, endless.

We must also work on ourselves, not just classroom practices. Accumulating knowledge is insufficient to support Indigenization. While ESL instructors should learn more about Indigenous cultures, holistic teaching/learning practices, and our shared histories, it is more important that, as we do this, we develop a deeply reflective practice. My colleagues and I regularly engage in teaching triangles, for example. When we do this, we must be willing to ask ourselves some hard questions. What is my worldview? How was it shaped? How does this affect the way I teach or what I believe about learning? To what extent does my teaching align with my stated beliefs or with research? We must also prepare ourselves to reflect, no matter how uncomfortable the reflection is. We must acknowledge that Indigenization will always be a work in progress. We must accept that we will always be learners, not masters, in the journey. If we wait to become masters, we will never begin.

Ultimately, Indigenization is an opportunity to become a part of a solutions framework. It’s a chance to become active in nation-to-nation relationship building. Indigenization creates a community of problem solvers; I am grateful for the many relationships I may never have established without jumping over some proverbial fences. My community of practice is growing. Any steps we take for ourselves or our learners, no matter how small, will be towards Truth and Reconciliation and a vital contribution to a Canada that includes all its peoples.
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**Author Bio**

Amy Abe is an ESL instructor and curriculum developer with sixteen years in the field; she has completed her TESL Master’s with the University of Alberta, conducting research into the interrelationship of instructor knowledge, attitudes and beliefs towards Indigenization of ESL programs. Currently teaching with NorQuest College, Amy’s areas of interest include intercultural communicative competence (ICC) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP). Amy has participated in the development of NorQuest College’s Indigenous Strategy and is partnering with members of the College to explore Indigenization in language training.
THE PRIVATE REFUGEE SPONSORSHIP EXPERIENCE IN KINGSTON

A panel group discussion

By Lorraine Hudson, TESL Kingston

Since late 2015, the Kingston area has welcomed more than 100 privately sponsored refugees (PSRs), mostly from Syria and Eritrea. TESL Kingston has been involved in this community effort as a link between local ESL/LINC programs and a provider of professional development. In February 2016, TESL Kingston hosted a workshop on refugee mental health and its impact on education and settlement. As a follow-up in May 2017, the affiliate chapter presented a panel of local sponsors reflecting on the successes, surprises and challenges after a year of private refugee sponsorship.

The three-member panel featured a representative of the Frontenac Refugee Support Group, a community sponsorship group which partnered with the First Baptist Church, and representatives from two groups under Anglican Diocese of Ontario Refugee Support (DOORS): The Sanctuary Project, St. Paul the Apostle Church and faculty at Queen’s University, administered by St. James Anglican Church.

Language, Sponsorship, and Settlement

Focussing their remarks on language, the sponsors also addressed mental and other health issues, family reunification challenges, and uncertainty around supporting refugees’ autonomy, during and after the sponsorship period. They generally expressed limited knowledge about how best to help with language development while emphasizing its importance. In one sponsor’s words, “Language is the key to everything!”

Language topped the list for another sponsor of what he described as “anchors” ensuring that people will settle into life in Canada and want to stay, even if it becomes safe to return to their home country. Other anchors were having a stable home, a positive experience at school, a sense of acceptance, gaining employment, having friends, being engaged in the community, and having hope for a better future. Language clearly has an impact on many of these additional anchors.

This is a report of a panel discussion at the TESL Kingston Spring Workshop & Annual General Meeting.
Language Learning Successes and Challenges

The sponsors related the intense desire of the refugee families to learn English and their delight in using newly acquired language. They also cited volunteer work opportunities as helpful to integrating the newcomers into the community and facilitating language acquisition. One sponsor shared the story of a 25-year-old currently studying on a bursary in an intensive English program at St. Lawrence College. The young person plans to transition to full-time college studies in September 2017.

In terms of challenges with language learning, the sponsors expressed uncertainty about whether slow progress might relate to post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, low mood, loneliness, or learning disabilities. They also struggled with addressing the frustration of newcomers whose spoken English swiftly surpassed their reading and writing skills. Other challenges included parents learning more slowly than children, especially for parents who were keen to find employment, and adjusting to the routine of school and classes. Irregular attendance at language programs for the first few months was attributed to adults having been away from school for a long time or having little formal education, as well as family roles and responsibilities. Similarly, some children initially had trouble settling into ESL and other classes at school.

Language Tutoring and Coordination

The three sponsor groups shared a commitment to supplementing formal language training with volunteer tutoring. One sponsor, a former teacher and principal, described creating a personalized ESL curriculum and lesson plans for individuals who could not or did not want to attend formal language classes, and to keep others moving forward with their language development during the summer.

All of the sponsors underscored the importance and challenge of managing volunteer tutors and working toward interconnected language support with instructors. One sponsor group structured tutoring by posting a volunteer job advertisement through the Queen’s University Faculty of Education. Tutors were interviewed and trained, submitted reports, and received extensive support. The sponsor also shared an example of coordination with instructors: a practical resource provided by an instructor to an inexperienced tutor, building on an in-class lesson.

During the discussion portion of the panel, instructors and sponsors alike expressed a desire to further share resources and coordinate their efforts. For example, it would be helpful for instructors to receive advance notice of special events (such as special settlement-related information sessions) which affect class attendance. This type of coordination would help instructors plan lessons accordingly. Additionally, instructors voiced a commitment to incorporating key settlement topics such as financial literacy, including fraud prevention, into their lessons.
Responding to sponsors’ desire to learn more about language instruction techniques, TESL Kingston presented a volunteer tutor training session later in May facilitated by a local ESL instructor. Additional sessions will be held to continue building skills and relationships.

Month 13

At the end of the one-year sponsorship period, the panellists noted that most of the refugees opted to remain in language classes rather than seek full-time employment, although a number are already employed. Most sponsors have continued to provide assistance informally with language learning and other areas. Some of the refugee families now receive income support from Ontario Works (OW) in order to continue language studies. They have shared with their intention to access OW for up to one year with the goal of sustaining themselves thereafter through employment.

All three panellists agreed that sponsorship has been a wonderful, rewarding experience. They expressed gratitude for incredible community support and sincere thanks to the language instructors and other service providers who have helped them and the refugee families during and beyond the sponsorship period. One sponsor highlighted the insight that we both teach and learn from newcomers while another recommended building relationships with senior members of cultural communities to further support newcomer settlement.

Broader Refugee Resettlement Effort in Kingston

In addition to welcoming PSRs, Kingston became a Resettlement Assistance Program (RAP) centre for government-assisted refugees (GARs) in May 2016. One of the panellists is drawing on her private sponsorship experience as team leader of a GAR support group. The volunteer teams are acting much like sponsor groups in assisting GAR families with their settlement process. As of May 2017, about 125 GARs had arrived in Kingston.

Beginning in 2015, before Syrian refugees started arriving in Kingston, there were proactive efforts in the community to share information, laying the groundwork for as smooth a transition as possible. Cross-sectoral collaboration continues through the Kingston Immigration Partnership (KIP) which convenes regular refugee service provider meetings. For its efforts to connect local agencies in order to better serve refugees, KIP received the 2017 Family Advocacy Award from Family and Children’s Services of Frontenac, Lennox and Addington.

Author Bio

Lorraine Hudson (B.A., M.Ed., OCELT) has taught English in Canada and France in a variety of contexts. She has been a LINC assessor, instructor and administrator. Lorraine enjoys learning languages herself and is fluent in French and Spanish. She currently works for Kingston Community Health Centres and OCASI – Ontario Council of Agencies Serving Immigrants.
THE TEACHING OF SUPRASEGMENTALS WITHIN A TASK-BASED OR COMMUNICATIVE ESL CLASS

By Mike Tiittanen, Toronto District School Board

As reported in a survey of Canadian ESL teachers’ pronunciation practices, many ESL students appear to have problems with suprasegmental pronunciation, which is commonly interpreted to include word stress, rhythm and intonation (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011). Word stress refers to the length, loudness and pitch of syllables within a word, relative to one another (e.g., Ca-na-da). Rhythm refers to which syllables in an utterance are more prominent (e.g., I’m co-ming on Sun-day.). Intonation refers to the pitch patterns in utterances. For instance, I’m coming on Sunday would normally have a rise-fall pitch on Sunday while are you coming on Sunday could have a rising pitch on on Sunday. Such problems can lead to communication difficulties (Hahn, 2004). Fortunately, however, research indicates that regular instruction of suprasegmentals may help ESL learners to be more easily understood by English-speaking listeners (Derwing, Munro & Wiebe, 1998; Derwing & Rossiter, 2003). Unfortunately, many ESL teachers do not feel confident in their ability to teach pronunciation (Foote, Holtby, & Derwing, 2011).

Presently, Canadian ESL instructors in government-funded ESL classrooms are required to teach according to the guidelines of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (2012) and to use task-based teaching within these classes involving authentic language use. Part of real life use of English involves the use of appropriate intonation, stress and other suprasegmental aspects of pronunciation within various real life contexts such as phone calls and job interviews, to name just two obvious contexts relevant for task-based teaching. I offer my suggestions for teaching these elements of pronunciation in the classroom, largely within the framework of CLT/task-based teaching.

Word Stress

Primary stress is crucial in lessening comprehension problems for the listener. There is a good rule of thumb for primary stress, which can be used within a task-based or communicative lesson. Many suffixes pattern with specific types of primary stress assignment on words (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992; Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010). For example, words with -tion invariably have primary stress on the syllable immediately preceding this suffix (e.g., syllabification, education, transportation). This stress pattern also holds for -ic (e.g., –economic, fantastic, romantic). Other suffixes pattern differently, and stress falls two syllables to the left of the suffix (e.g., -ate in compa.ssi.ona.te) or, uncommonly in English, on the suffix itself (e.g., -ese in Japanese).
Questionnaires are useful activities for practicing correct primary stress within a communicative or task-based format. A useful rule of thumb for creating such a questionnaire is to do the following: a) select a suffix that you wish to practice the stress pattern for (e.g. -ic); b) from a given list of words with this suffix, choose semantically similar words (e.g. adjectives that describe a person such as energetic); and then c) create a questionnaire for these semantically-related words. For example, you might require the students to ask one another in pairs, “How (energetic, romantic, optimistic etc.) are you?”.

Such an activity could then be used to allow for communicative practice of the adjectives in questions as part of a lesson on, for example, descriptions of people’s personalities.

Rhythm

A useful thing to teach one’s ESL students is sentence focus, which is usually, but not always on the last content word within a sentence (Avery & Ehrlich, 1992). Sentence focus can be taught in virtually any communicative/task-based class because such classes frequently have discussion questions. For instance, in a lesson on job interview questions, students could be asked to identify the key word/phrase in a question. For example, in the following question, experience is the focus of the question: How much experience do you have?

In any such lesson, the students could be asked to first underline/highlight the focus of the question. Next, they would circle the stressed syllable. By doing this before the task, role play, or communicative practice, their attention would be on the stress, and they would be more likely to practice it accurately.

It may also be useful to show the students that function words have reduced pronunciations in most contexts. Examples of function words are prepositions, conjunctions, articles, pronouns, and positive helping verbs (Lane, 2010). Even though it is not crucial that students reduce these words, they need to be able to perceive the reduced versions. In a communicative/task-based lesson, the teacher should give the sentences a real life-like purpose. One example might be a restaurant worker taking an order, where the task is to ensure that the order is correct. As a follow up, the teacher could repeat the order as a dictation. For instance, a sample sentence might be: “I’ll have the spaghetti and a cup of coffee”. In this sentence, will, the, and, a, and of would be pronounced in their reduced form, and these reduced words would be blanked out. The students would listen for these reduced words and write them in the blanks.

Intonation

Intonation in English plays a crucial role in how the speaker’s feelings or attitude is interpreted. For instance, intonation higher than a speaker’s normal intonation is often interpreted by English-speaking listeners as conveying an attitude of professional politeness. A speaker with a low, flat, monotone intonation may be interpreted by listeners as being bored or tired (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010), especially if the speaker is in a formal, professional context. Sudden, falling intonation may sound brusque to an English listener (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010).
A useful way of practicing intonation is through the task of conveying or perceiving a particular attitude in a dialogue. As the teacher enacts the dialogue, the class decides which attitude/emotion they perceive. It’s important that the class not be able to see the teacher so that visual clues would carry the information. A natural productive follow-up activity for such a listening activity would be a role-play. The students performing the role play would be tasked with conveying a particular attitude and once again the class decides which attitude they perceive. The role play is successful if the class perceives the attitude as it was intended.

Feedback to Students

Regardless of the topic, it is helpful for the teacher to provide students with specific corrective feedback on their suprasegmental perception and pronunciation. Such feedback appears to heighten students’ awareness of the correct pronunciation and to contrast the correct pronunciation with their own mistakes and those of peers (Havranek, 2002). Nevertheless, it is important to give a balance of both positive and negative feedback to avoid discouraging the students. In addition, in order to minimize the likelihood of hurting students’ feelings in giving feedback, it may be useful to ask for volunteers to demonstrate their pronunciation, rather than picking students to pronounce the target utterance. If you have a particularly shy class, another option is for the teacher to listen to the students working in pairs, and to give feedback in their pair settings. Pair settings are less likely to make students feel embarrassed by their mistakes as the entire class is not paying attention to their pronunciation.

Conclusion

The integration of the teaching of the many facets of suprasegmentals within a task-based/communicative framework is quite doable. One of the keys to such integration is designing activities that allow ESL learners to practice the use of stress, rhythm, intonation etc. in a way that matches the natural use of these suprasegmentals in real life. Such a match between one’s language teaching and a real-life, authentic activity surely fulfill key criteria of teaching in a task-based, communicative manner. Classroom practice with suprasegmentals may play an important role in helping your students to produce more understandable pronunciation, aid them in their listening and help them, in some real-life situations, to use more sociolinguistically appropriate pronunciation.

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Author Bio

Mike has been teaching ESL pronunciation part-time for 20+ years. He has a PhD in Applied Linguistics and is the author of “Brain Waves”, an ESL activity book (Oxford University Press).
Recently, my father’s telephone stopped working. Picture an old timey, push-button lifeless landline and one old timey, annoyed senior. Since my dad has no interest in techno-gadgets, the most cutting edge equipment he ever owned was somewhere on the Human Advancement Timeline between electric can opener and a lawnmower.

This necessitated a trip to Home Hardware where I asked the store clerk several head-scratchy questions about the replacement I was planning to purchase: “Will this work if I just plug it into the wall phone jack thingy?” and “Is there something special I have to do?”

“Noooo.” The young woman spoke slowly. “It’s just a regular phone.”

I nodded like I knew what she was saying. I’d insisted my father let me pick up the replacement so he didn’t buy himself a cheap contraption. My dad is famously thrifty when it comes to his own needs and generous to a fault when dealing with others.

Arriving at his place, I noticed a minivan parked next to his building and a phone company employee standing next to a cable box, splicing into a bunch of wires. This fellow assured me the lines were not down.

Inside, we admired the sleek, cordless-complete-with-answering-machine receiver. My father grumbled lightly that the voicemail was unnecessary and wondered how much his service provider might ding him for additional costs.

“Nothing. It comes with the phone.”

After plugging in all the doohickeys and thinga-ma-bobs (stop me if I’m getting too technical), it didn’t work. I unplugged and replugged all the parts. I went outside and asked the fellow if he was certain the line to my dad’s place wasn’t down; he suggested we call customer service and they would send someone else (someone like him but not him, especially not him at that particular moment in time) to deal with it. I mused that maybe the battery had to charge for sixteen hours because the User Manual noted that would be the amount of time required in the event of a power failure.

I left and kept calling my dad that night and into the next morning, getting a busy signal every single time.
This was no good: Pappy likes to talk to me every day at five. I could, and have, set my clock to his calls. When he got through to me the next morning from his sister’s house, he asked me to call his phone company. I agreed and as he was about to hang up, head home, retrieve his phone bill to give me his account details, I remembered the flaw in this plan. I wouldn’t be allowed to speak on his behalf without putting him on the phone and getting him to say that I was allowed to sort out the issue for him.

I started scrambling through my mental “To Do List” to figure out how to get back to the burbs.

“Is okay. No worry,” my dad tried to reassure me. “I can makes myself be understand.”

And therein lay the crux of my fretful state. As a child, I frequently translated for my parents in multiple scenarios—at the doctor’s office, in the checkout line, at the pharmacy counter. Occasionally, I observed my parents increase their volume in an effort to be heard, no doubt frustrated that their welfare was in the hands of a chatty eight year old.

From that early training, I learned listening is not a skill everyone has. Interruption, repetition, offering unwanted advice in lieu of being attentive witnesses—humankind appears to excel in those categories. (I’m making a sweeping generalization, I know, but one that is based on hours and hours of childhood research.) Patient listeners are a resource the world could use in abundance. The ability to listen is the quality I most admire and the one I work at the hardest.

Some say it is our weakest competence. I tell this to my students and promise not to talk too long; we’re not able to absorb spoken information for lengthy periods of time any more. Tangent alert: Every time I watch a Merchant Ivory film with a character attending a three hour lecture, I yearn to have the rapt attention span of a pre-internet world. But that’s it, that’s all I want. Hello, women’s rights and decent hair care products. Thank you, Future, you’re the best. Of course, I’m cherry-picking celluloid history chapters. The quote attributed to the stoic philosopher Epictetus, “Nature gave us one tongue and two ears so we could hear twice as much as we speak,” would indicate we’ve been battling this lah-lah-lah-I-can’t-hear-you issue for a long time.

Now add accented speech to the mix, and consider what a boring world it would be without the multitude of accents, the lost vowels, the clipped endings, and the musical phonetic fracas in mispronounced letter combinations.

I think back to my early student-living-away-from home days. The first few roommates I had would say a variation of the following: “I think your mom called? A woman kept shouting at me. I couldn’t understand her at all.”

I’d find out later that my mother simply kept repeating my name—a moniker that sounds quite different in Italian. I was surprised and then realized none of my friends had met first generation immigrants like my parents. They were completely unused to hearing the
cadence and inflection of *Italish*. They all found my mother’s anxious-tone-threaded-with-mistrust too tetchy. Combined with her volume, well, what can I say? She was trying to make herself heard across four provinces.

My mom, oblivious to the way she sounded, would ask, “Don’t your roommates speak English?”

In those years of being removed from everything familiar, I would comfort myself with memories of teachers who had supported and encouraged me throughout high school. The quality they all had in common: they were excellent listeners, even after twenty plus years of teaching, even though they’d heard it all before. They are the role models I still turn to when I’m uncertain how to proceed. They remind me to focus and listen, to ensure the other individual feels heard. Many misunderstanding can be avoided by taking this route.

My Pappy story has a happy ending. The phone company sent out a guy who found there *was* a problem with the line and he fixed it for free.

“You believe? The phone no was broke.”

“Sounds like. But you needed a new one anyway.”

“Sure. This I can take with me everywhere I go inside.”

Pappy acts like for all intents and purposes, this newfangled telefono is a cellphone. Our next adventure will involve lessons in turning on the answering machine component.

Listening is a remarkable talent, an art form waiting for a renaissance. When someone really listens to you, you feel respected, connected, validated and worthy—this is an incredible gift to give a student.