

«Learning is person» :

An experience with community language learning  
in the teaching of arabic

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## 1) INTRODUCTION

The main purpose of this paper is to suggest that success or failure in learning a foreign language depends far less on methods and materials than on the harmonious interaction of learners and the counseling support of the teacher. Besides the traditional vertical dimension between teacher and student, a horizontal, group-centered dimension among learners themselves must be established before any creative learning can take place.

This paper is organized as follows. First, I will sketch the underlying concepts of Community Language Learning (CLL) and show their relevance to foreign language acquisition and learning. I will then give a personal account of how CLL may be used in a classroom situation. Finally, I will try to reflect upon what I have learned from this experience.

## 2) COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LEARNING (CLL) AND COUNSELING-LEARNING (CL)

Community Language Learning (CLL) was developed as an approach to the study of foreign languages by Professor Charles A. Curran of Loyola University, Chicago, and his associates. It emerged from a broader educational model called Counseling-Learning which Curran had based

on his experiences in counseling and psychotherapy as well as on recent personality theory (Curran, 1978).

One of the basic concepts underlying the Counseling-Learning model is that human learning is a "personal self-investment" endeavor, in which the "whole-person" in the psychosomatic sense, is involved. In an adult learning situation, the student usually feels threatened by what he does not know. The inherent resistance to new knowledge he carries with him often begins to show against the teacher/knower whenever "communicative competence" is stressed (Hymes, 1972, 1974). Many adult students in a language class feel resentment towards the teacher simply because he carries the body of knowledge they wish to share. And in order to share this knowledge they have to consent to a certain regression from their adult self-assertiveness to child-like submission. Quite often this regression is at the center of the discomfort that pervades the early stages of language learning. When the fears and apprehension of the learner are not "consciously understood and controlled, they can be self-defeating and seriously impede or block the learning pursuit" (Curran, 1976 : 2). In this case the teacher needs to be attuned to what is going on inside the learner, hence the special role of "language-counselor-expert", the CL model has assigned to him.

He has to be the accepting, supportive "understander" of the learner who is in the position of the client, "the understandee". This relationship can change as the learner shares more and more of the expert's knowledge and moves from total dependency to assertive independence (Curran, 1976 : 11).

What the Counseling-Learning model offers, therefore, is a means of understanding "these Personal learning conflicts in such a way that learners as well as teachers may deal constructively with negative as well as positive feelings" (Rardin, 1976 : 21). As a result, both can make genuine investments in the learning relationship and so experience less discouragement with one another and the material to be internalized or learned. Such a creative affiliation between teacher and learners came to be called Community Language Learning.

## 2.1) The Basic Elements of CLL

Community Language Learning is a group experience of foreign language study. In order for it to be a learning experience, the following conditions or principles must be observed. The first and most basic is SECURITY. The average student entering his language class for the first time is usually full of apprehension and anxiety. He is asking himself questions such

as : Who is the teacher ? Will he like me? Who are these students? Do they know more than I do? How Should I behave in order to insure their acceptance and approval? Will I be able to pronounce the foreign sounds to the satisfaction of the teacher? This host of questions and many others need to be addressed and assuaged in the counseling manner mentioned above, until the student feels understood and secure. "This does not mean that the learner is pampered and coddled, it simply means that his feelings of inadequacy and dependence are recognized" (Ryding-Lentzner, 1978 : 11).

Once these fears are mitigated and understood we then expect the students to get involved, to INVEST themselves in the learning situation. Investment is the first of a series of classroom activities that students and teacher engage in. This activity initially takes the form of a learner-generated dialogue which is then elaborated upon in an orderly fashion by the entire group under the guidance of the teacher-knower. Each learner "sticks out his neck" and in turn contributes his foreign language share until the original fledgeling output becomes a genuine, albeit simple, reflection of his communicative competence. This process usually requires on the part of the student, a certain degree of ASSERTION and ATTENTION, both of which are exerted without upsetting the balance of the group.

Another principle in CLL is that of REFLECTION. In this modality, reflection means essentially three things. First, it means that the learner is given time "to breathe" by requiring him to contemplate for a few minutes the generated material. This hiatus provides him with the "learning space" he needs as an individual to make this material gradually his own (Curran, 1976 : 8). Second, it means that the teacher-counselor reflects back to the learner what he has invested in the foreign language. This is usually done in a supportive, non-evaluative manner that allows the student to feel that he is accepted and his contribution is appreciated. An example of this may be the casual repetition or paraphrase by the teacher of the student's utterance while addressing himself to the group as a whole. This presumably gives the individual the opportunity to see for himself in the teacher's correct rendition the errors he may have made without feeling singled out. Finally, reflection refers to the limited period of the language class where every student is asked to share his feelings about what has been happening inside and outside his learning space. Every comment as it is understood or elaborated upon by the teacher becomes the property of the entire class. More often than not the students realize that any frustrations they may have encountered as individual learners are in fact shared and experienced by others. This realization

usually contributes to cementing the group into a community. During this reflection period, the teacher may clarify some points of grammar or pronunciation but rarely engages in any extrapolations or uncalled-for grammatical explanations that might jeopardize the nascent learning. In other terms, he has to resist projecting himself as the expert teacher who knows it all.

Reflection usually leads to RETENTION, the fifth strategy of this model. After the initial investment, the attentive, dialectical reflection upon the structure of the language comes retention which is "the final process of absorbing what is studied into oneself and being able to retrieve and use it later with ease" (Curran, 1976:8). The final principle of CLL is DISCRIMINATION. It is the process of identifying, categorizing and sorting out all the meaningful parts of the conversation. This classroom activity takes different forms. It may start with the silent contemplation of the generated material written on the board. The teacher then, with the help of the students, segments the sentences and assigns meanings to the various elements. In small groups, the learners may want to check their generalizations about the grammar of the target language. In the case of disagreements, ambiguities or uncertainties, questions and clarification may be addressed to the teacher-counselor in the reflection session.

These six inter-related principles which Curran represents with the four-letter acronym SARD (security, assertion-attention reflection, retention, discrimination) offer a pedagogical as well as a "psychological measuring stick" for any learning situation. "They can help us determine the quality and effectiveness of a particular learning experience" in which the whole-person of the teacher and the students are deeply engaged.

Curran's philosophy in counseling-learning and the practical guidelines that have emerged from CLL seem to be in line with the findings of recent research in second language acquisition and learning. Krashen (1976, 1977) for example, tried to show that adult second language performers have access to both subconscious language acquisition and conscious language learning. Classroom teachers should tap both processes. He argues that the reason adult language learning is seldom successful is because it is often equated with conscious mastery of linguistic rules and error correction. In order for the adult to perform in a second language, we must activate in him the subconscious creative process and use the learning only as a monitor.

In order for the adult to communicate like a child he must feel secure and understood. Taylor (1973) argues that adults are not al-

ways as successful as children in language acquisition because affective, psychological variables are not taken into consideration in classroom teaching. Evidence from Gardner and Lambert (1972) Nida (1971) and Stevick (1976) indicates that a positive, supportive attitude with respect to affective variables may not only be necessary to language acquisition, but it may actually function independently of factors such as aptitude and intelligence (La Forge, 1975). Terrell (1977) like Brown (1973) suggests that the primary factors that influence the acquisition of the target language are affective, not cognitive. She feels that the overriding consideration in adult learning must be to make the student feel at ease during activities in the classroom.

### 3) COMMUNITY LANGUAGE LEARNING : AN EXPERIENCE

#### 3.1 Procedure

The following is not meant to be a typical illustration of community language learning. It is, rather, a personal account of what happened when a teacher and a dozen students came together for an introductory, intensive weekend of Arabic. Since at this point I am still investigating the value of CLL for general use in the classroom, my account is more descriptive than experimental.

### 3.2 Preliminaries.

The time was Friday evening, 5 : 30 p.m. The participants in this particular group were mostly American government employees and businessmen and other professionals with special interests in the Middle East area. Their familiarity with Arabic ranged from the ability to write one's name to the casual knowledge of a few expressions in one dialect or another. The first task that I set for myself was to make of these twelve disparate participants a group of learners with a common goal : learning as much Arabic as creatively as possible given the limited time, an estimated fifteen hours. During my brief introduction of the language and the culture, I tried to present my own language learning experiences and the difficulties I was encountering with the Spanish language which I was studying at the time. My purpose in doing this was to make them feel at ease, to express the fact that in learning a foreign language we are all equal.

### 3.3 Investment : (Conversation)

The members of the group were seated on simple folding chairs arranged in a tight circle. On the floor in the center of the circle was a small cassette recorder with an on-off

switch on its microphone. I was standing outside the circle. I asked the students to engage in a conversation for about ten minutes. A student who had something to say another took the microphone in his hand, thus signaling to me that he was initiating the conversation. I went and stood behind him placing my hand lightly on his shoulder. When he gave me in English what he wanted to say to the other person, I gave him the equivalent expression in Arabic as slowly as possible, in parts and loud enough so the others in the circle could hear. As I gave each part of the Arabic sentence, the student turned the tape recorder on just long enough to record his own rendition of it and then turned it off. When he finished repeating the whole sentence I increased the pressure of my hand slightly as a supportive signal that his turn was over and that it was time for someone else to take the initiative. Ten minutes of this type of interaction produced a tape of about one minute, entirely in the voices of the students and entirely in Arabic.

#### 3.3.1 On the making of the tape : some thoughts (1)

a. The closed circle is meant to foster the sense of community among learners.

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1) I am deeply indebted to Earl Stevick of the Foreign Service Institute for taking the time to help me see more clearly into what I was doing during these weekend sessions. The organization of this experience is largely inspired by manuscripts he kindly shared with me.

the Arabic sentence was treated as if it were properly recorded. This did not seem to interfere with the succeeding steps of the procedure.

d. The target language sentences were broken into chunks to facilitate accurate pronunciation. When the learner made an error it was generally ignored as it usually cleared itself up in the succeeding steps of the procedure. I have found that too many corrections interfered with the spontaneity of the conversation and jeopardized the security of the learner, thereby inhibiting any further investments.

### 3.4 Reflection

a. **Listening to the tape.** We listened to the tape twice, once without interruption and once stopping after each sentence for someone to recall the general meaning of the Arabic sentence or phrase. Occasionally, when the English equivalent could not be provided I supplied it in a casual way and went, on to the next sentence on the tape. This step was meant to be a review of their conversation while the teacher refrained from any verbal or non-verbal comments about the performance.

b. **Understanding the learners' reactions.** I seated myself in the circle and invited the learners to voice any reactions or comments

they may have had about their experience so far. Most learners were surprised about how well they sounded. They even praised each on their pronunciation. One particular learner felt he was already speaking the language. During this phase my verbal as well as non-verbal responses were intended to tell them that I understood what they had said, thus conveying my acceptance and confidence in them. Whenever a question of fact arose I provided a short answer without elaboration.

c. **Writing the conversation down.** Playing the tape a third time, I asked the students to select the utterance they wanted to learn first. I deliberately wanted them to feel once more responsible for what they were learning. I then wrote down the sentence in the Arabic script as slowly as possible on a sheet of a large lecture pad. As I wrote down the sentence I sounded out every syllable. Once written, the Arabic sentences were segmented into their meaningful parts. Using a contrasting color I wrote under each morpheme its English equivalent. I then asked group to sit back and reflect silently for a period of three to four minutes. Announcing the duration of the silence presumably contributed towards the learners' confidence in the knower-teacher, as it was a subtle reminder that behind the loosely structured activity the teacher remained the one in charge. This time-limited period was meant to allow the student to

attentively sort out, at his own pace and free of interference, the organization of the sentences and recognize patterns and maybe formulate questions for later steps of the procedure.

### 3.6 Discrimination : (Group Analysis).

In the next step I broke the class into groups of three and told the learners they had three minutes to ask one another for clarification of anything they did not understand. When possible and where group security permitted it, I inconspicuously placed an "advanced" learner in each small group. By making him available to others, I tacitly recognized his relative advantage and enabled him to constructively channel his "power-inadequacy" into useful solidarity. This strategy was meant to have two desirable, concurrent effects. First, to relieve this advanced student from any impatience he may have been feeling while his peers were going over some material that was already known to him through previous language instruction. Second, to foster the feeling of community by providing a secure atmosphere in which learners could depend on each other and voice any tentative conclusions they may have had about the workings of the language relatively free of the scrutinizing presence of the teacher-knower.

Stevick (1976b) mentions an additional advantage of having students answer each other's questions. Namely, that students are more likely than we are to phrase the answer in a way that the questioner will understand. In later reinvestment this interdependence proved to be valuable for both learners and teacher.

### 3.7 Discrimination : (Verification of Conclusions).

At the end of this group analysis period I invited the students to share with me what they had concluded thus far about the structure of Arabic. Most of what they came up with was accurate. On the few occasions where a conclusion was wrong I gave sufficient information without unwarranted new information. When a question not directly related to the task at hand arose, I briefly answered it with the same succinctness. I felt that any inappropriate grammatical elaboration on my part would have enhanced my superiority as knower and reminded the learner of his inadequacy, thus shaking what little confidence he had felt up to that point about the language.

### 3.8 Reflection : (Copying).

After listening to the text, reading, understanding and talking about it with each other and with the teacher, the students were asked, as a last activity of the first day to copy the text. This constituted the ultimate step in ap-

propriating their foreign language investment and the beginning of its retention. This copying process was done carefully, attentively, and with a pleasant hand since I had emphasized the artistic value of good calligraphy in the Arab world. Once finished, I had them exchange papers to check one another's copying errors. This last step in later experiments was sometimes omitted when I felt that the feeling of community among learners was not solid enough.

### 3.9 Playing Cards : (Reflection, Discrimination and Retention).

The next day, after an initial counseling period, the students were divided into three groups in which the members had been rotated. A series of pairs of 3 by 5 inch cards prepared the previous night were distributed among the groups. On each pair of cards I entered an Arabic Word or morpheme and its English equivalent. Each group shuffled its set of cards and placed them face down on the small table placed at the center. Each student in turn was to pick up a card and find its equivalent. Initially the game moved rather randomly since no student knew where the matching English or Arabic card was to be found. As the game progressed students developed a mnemonic sense of which cards carried which words since every card that had

been removed but not matched was to have been put back in its exact place. If the chosen card was in Arabic the student had to study it at his own pace (reflection), pronounce it to his co-learners in the group (discrimination), and possibly recall its meaning (retention). At any stage of the game the students were instructed to seek each other's help and, if necessary, the teacher's. When a match was achieved the student got another turn. Once all the cards were matched, the students in each group were asked to remove the cards carrying the English equivalents and try collectively to pronounce and recall the meaning of the Arabic ones. This last cognitive step provided further practice of discrimination and retention among the members of each group.

In the next step each group of three students was asked to make up three sentences. The sentences were to be a communal effort but each student in turn wrote one down. Each sentence was checked by the students with the help of the teacher. Once the final product was agreed upon and rewritten, the sentences were exchanged among the groups. Each group was to discriminate and understand the creations of the other. The cards were then set aside in a small box we called the "bank" for use in later reinvestment.

Although in appearance the procedure described above had all the characteristics

of a "concentration game", it implicitly engaged every student in an intensive, organic community language learning in which every element of SARD was enacted. This game and its many variations (2) provided the student with the necessary atmosphere for retention. It gave him, for example, the opportunity to figure out for himself and in the privacy of his own group whether the Arabic card he was holding was right-side-up. It also forced every individual to cooperate since as a group they had to observe a certain contract which the rules of the game had tacitly established. In such a group work the relatively advanced beginner usually felt he had to show his competence in a solidary rather than a competitive manner if he was to be a part of the learning experience.

### 3.10 Monologue : (Comprehension, Self-verification).

At this point of the procedure, the students had completed a series of reflection activities which had given them, at least temporarily, a fairly good grasp (retention) of the new material. In order to allow them to verify for themselves how much they had retained in their short-term memory, I engaged in a two-minute monologue. During this monologue the

student was asked to put his mind in "neutral", so to speak, and try to get the gist of what I was saying rather than attempt to understand everything I said. All the material generated up to that point was incorporated including some of the sentences they had just made up. Although at the end of the monologue I did not ask any questions to check their comprehension, those who volunteered to check with me what they had understood were surprisingly accurate. I casually acknowledged their understanding without any evaluation, and thus ended the first cycle of our learning experience.

## 4) CONCLUSION

CLL is a group experience of foreign language learning. The class activities revolve around a language speaking period and a reflection period. In this modality the teacher-counselor is intensely involved in the learning experience but does not dominate the learning process of the individual student. His control of class activities and their sequence must be done subtly without depriving the students of the responsibility for their personal development.

The early stages of the language experience

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2) See C-I/CLL Newsletter, Vol. I, No. 2, December 1977.

rience are particularly critical. The teacher must resist his teaching impulses (i.e., suggesting conversation topics, expanding on grammar, evaluating, etc.). He should aim at establishing a horizontal, group-oriented learning atmosphere in order to supplement and check any competitive, vertical dimension that may develop between an individual learner and himself. It is this horizontal dimension that accounts for most of the learning that takes place in the classroom (Rogers, 1970).

This paper does not deny the benefits derived from cognitive and intellectual approaches to language study. Nor does it claim to be the last word in language teaching and learning. It is merely an introduction of CLL for possible use in the classroom. This recounted personal experience made me aware that teaching is more than a technique and that "learning is persons."

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