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Bridging the Cultural Divide: An Insider's Guide to the Re-Creation of Self in Second Language Acquisition

- For second language learners everywhere there is a conflict between acquiring the target language and culture and pressure to maintain the primary culture and language identity. Second language acquisition (SLA) techniques from the voice-based business process outsourcing (BPO) field are outlined to help learners and teachers find cultural and linguistic balance while effecting the kind of holistic change needed for full, second language acquisition.

As an ESL teacher working in the voice-based business process outsourcing (BPO) industry in India's Silicon Valley, my job was to help support engineers (SEs) reduce their accents so that they could better assist North American customers. A frequent result of this work in accent reduction was the creation of a telephone alter ego. With the SEs, as often happens with ESL students in other locations, there was a conflict between acquiring the target language and culture and pressure to maintain the primary culture and language identity. Within just such a push-pull environment I found myself responsible for ensuring that each member of my team of engineers could strike a balance between the current self and the new one I was supposed to help emerge. What follows is a summary of the best techniques from the BPO field designed to help find this much-desired cultural and linguistic balance while effecting the kind of holistic change needed for full, second language acquisition.

A Global Perspective on Change

The first step in effecting holistic change is to prepare one's students for the change to come. In this way, the groundwork for the creation of a new identity is carefully laid out as fears about the loss of the old self are (one hopes) laid to rest. The next step is an analysis of the learners' linguistic and cultural resources and current abilities via an oral diagnostic test. It is meant to give them what may be the first accurate picture of themselves as second language learners. Without this honest appraisal, learners will not see the need

for the steps that follow. This ego-deflating step is followed by an opportunity to identify with a more experienced, advanced learner who shows the others that change is possible. Because ego permeability, identification at depth, and mutual assistance were the principles that guided our work in the BPO environment, it is appropriate to use them as a basis for this discussion.

I. Ego Permeability

Alexander Guiora's multidimensional quantitative study on ego permeability—in which the effects of alcohol on the ability of college students to pronounce words and phrases in a foreign and totally unknown language were examined—found that the more porous the ego, the more empathetic one will be and the more authentic pronunciation will become (Guiora, 1972). The implication of this study—affectionately known in SLA circles as *tying one on in Thai*—is that if the learner is to develop authentic pronunciation and a clear sense of identity within the target culture, language ego must be made permeable.

The first step toward the deflation of the ego and the eventual reinflation of a new language ego is a recorded oral diagnostic reading and analysis. The diagnostic reading aims to identify specific sounds that impede intelligibility while complementing the holistic score for fluency given by the Speaking Proficiency English Assessment Kit (SPEAK). The SPEAK is used in the BPO industry and in universities alike to measure the ability of nonnative speakers to communicate in spoken English in areas such as narrating, apologizing, and recommending.

As the oral reading and assessment of spoken English set the stage for the individual, out-of-class exercises that follow and that are designed to develop learner autonomy, so does the videotaped part of the SPEAK lay the foundation for later exercises on the nonverbal correlates of pronunciation. In this way, learners are given a complete, accurate portrait of themselves as second language learners, a means to measure development of their English speaking personality, and a taste of the rather unconventional procedures that follow.

II. Identification at Depth

Calling upon support engineers who have had a cultural and linguistic transformation to share their story with other SEs was integral for identification at depth. To encourage this integrative motivation, learners would listen to 15-20 minutes of testimony from support engineers who had gained in communicative competence. The SE chosen would relate what it was like, what happened, and what it is like now. By identifying with the other SE's struggle, learners will—just as our support engineers did—come to believe that it is possible for them to achieve communicative competence and, with language, to re-create themselves in the new target culture. In addition to having members come to believe, the testimony was a means by which our SEs selected a mentor to assist them in their language-contract work.

Inside-Out and Outside-In Change

Before they met with their mentors, however, two key concepts from neu-

rolinguistic programming (NLP), *inside-out* change and *outside-in* change, had to be explained to our support engineers.

Inside-out change deals with the relationship between internal, emotional states and pronunciation accuracy. When a person is agitated, nervous, or worried about speaking correctly, these emotional states manifest themselves through speech. This relationship is not only the principle behind most voice training but also the theoretical basis for the lie-detector test (Horvath, 1978). By having our learners monitor their emotional states, as Acton (1984) recommends in his article on changing fossilized pronunciation, our learners were better able to deal with the stress that comes from speaking a foreign language and could begin to make “immediate, perceptible changes which [were] interpreted by members of the target language culture as changes in personality” (p. 75).

Outside-in change is the influence of external activity on internal, emotional states (Bandler & Grinder, 1982). By focusing on the outward manifestations of inner states such as breathing, posture, body tension, and rate of speech one can control inner, emotional states by monitoring their outward manifestations. Along these lines, in the world of the BPO, the adoption of target-culture behaviors such as gestures, facial expressions, and even style of dress were encouraged because when SEs looked and acted like North Americans, it seemed to make it easier for them to take on the qualities of the personality they were trying to create. In short, external activities affect a learner’s internal states.

Some BPO employers go so far as to encourage their agents to not only adopt gestures, facial expressions, and style of dress, but American names, hobbies, and interests. One SE on my team of engineers who had been adopting a more American style of dress and speaking confessed to me that as a result of his efforts he felt more comfortable talking to North American clients than he did to his Indian coworkers. His struggle to strike a balance between who he was and who he was becoming was normal. The key to finding the equilibrium he so desired was to accept his feelings and to know that it was not always going to be like this; it was just part of the process. My empathetic response to his situation was reassurance enough for him to continue with the internal/external process of the transformation.

When learners internalize, through conscious application, the idea that pronunciation specifically, and speaking in general, are both the cause and effect of internal, emotional states, they are ready to integrate what they can do in isolation with specific sounds in connected spontaneous speech. To do this, a new vision of themselves must be created.

Mirroring, Tracking, and Shadowing

To help our SEs create this new vision of themselves, practice with the nonverbal correlates of communication was necessary. The techniques we used to help our learners make those changes that were interpreted by others as personality changes were *mirroring*, *tracking*, and *shadowing*. *Mirroring* is repeating simultaneously with a speaker (in person or on video) while imitating all the speaker’s gestures, eye movements, and body posturing. *Tracking* is when a student repeats simultaneously with a speaker but does not mirror the

speaker's movements. *Shadowing* is the same as tracking only the learner repeats just slightly after the speaker (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 2004). All these techniques force the learner to focus on intonation contours, stress, and rhythm independent to some degree of lexical content. We had to experiment with these techniques and combinations of video recordings to find which best suited our SEs' learning styles and communicative needs. In the BPO field, the TV show *Friends* was by far the favorite.

Guided Imagery

Once the learners were kinetically familiar with native speaker conversational styles through the application of mirroring, tracking, and shadowing, a technique from psychology—popular with athletes and professional performers—would be introduced. Guided imagery is a relaxation technique designed to lower the affective filter so that learners will be more open to the change they want to effect. In our case, our guided imagery exercise consisted of a text written with the input of our SEs. Common aspirations and goals made up the body of the text.

With a consensus and with our learners gathered, we would remind them of the text we had written together and of its purpose. Before we proceeded, they were all well aware that we were going to lower the lights, play some relaxing music (mantra music was popular in India, but baroque works as well), and read the guided imagery text we wrote together. We would often repeat that this technique was designed to help them visualize the goal and put them into a relaxed mental state that they could access anytime before they began to field calls from across the Pacific.

For our learners, guided imagery meant having them visualize themselves as a person with a completely nonforeign accent. SEs often visualized the person they had mirrored, tracked, or shadowed in earlier language-training sessions. For a certain amount of time each week—usually on-call with a Western client—our SEs would assume the role of their English-speaking persona. At first, they could keep it up only during the opening of call. After the opening was complete—or if they got flustered—they tended to slip back into the intonation patterns of their first languages. However, by using the guided imagery technique in conjunction with anchoring—a technique described in the following section—the time gradually extended until they were “in character” for the duration of the call (and some calls were 8-12 hours long!) Some American clients were, in fact, surprised to learn that the voice on the other end of the line was coming all the way from India. Successes such as these played no small role in motivating our SEs to continue with the hard work of creating a new cultural and linguistic identity for themselves.

Anchoring

The kinetic counterpart of guided imagery is anchoring. Once the desired state is achieved through guided imagery, our learners would “anchor” this state for future recall by marking it in some manner. This was accomplished by asking them to associate a certain state (e.g., relaxation, attentiveness) with a particular location—their cubicle, for example—or by a physical action such

as putting on their headsets, clasping their hands together, or squeezing their wrists. Our SEs chose their own way of marking this state of consciousness because the neurological pathway to change needed be as unique as their own fingerprints. Once anchored, the desired state could be recalled at will by activating the trigger mechanism. With our support engineers, this was usually done right before they got into the queue for incoming calls.

III. Mutual Assistance

During their late-night shifts, either before or after they had spent their time on the phones, we met with each support engineer to discuss the results of his or her SPEAK test and diagnostic reading to determine the direction of his or her language-contract work. This language-contract work was usually carried out onsite with the assistance of a nonnative but more experienced SE. With the personalized language-improvement plan outlined with their assistance and living proof before them in the form of a more advanced learner, SEs often came to believe that the kind of holistic change needed for full second language acquisition was finally within their reach. Here is a case in point. A newly hired SE, after hearing one of our more advanced learners share his experience, confided in me that he had known the speaker previously at another call center. "His accent was so thick that we made fun of him because of it. The change in him, in his accent, is almost unbelievable." This new hire's experience with his mentor, the more advanced learner, underscored the importance of this step in terms of integrative motivation and the willingness to take responsibility for learning. The next step for him, recruiting a cultural informant, only fueled his growing excitement and commitment to the change he had seen in his coworker.

Cultural Informants

In addition to their mentors who would help them fulfill the terms of their language contracts, we had our SEs recruit their own cultural informants from the workplace. The informant's role is to help learners compile oral-reading texts, develop professional word lists, gather speech samples for analysis, and become a sort of at-work mentor so that the work environment would come to accept the new person emerging from the old. As the perceptions of others shape our view of ourselves, they determine—in no small part—who we become. Thus, much of the work of changing coworkers' and clients' perceptions of our SEs was *outsourced* to the cultural informant who tried to interact with them in a more American fashion. For example, instead of the traditional Hindi salutation of *namaste*, colleagues of ours began to overhear the support engineers greeting other team members with the decidedly more American greeting of *What's up?* The SEs' adoption of American interactional routines in the office not only assisted in the creation of their telephone alter egos but raised many cultural questions as well. The cultural informant was there to help the SEs to make sense of their outsourced world, to encourage the new self to emerge, and to guide them toward full cultural participation.

Triads

An integral part of cultural participation is empathy. To build empathy and give our SEs a clear picture of their progress at our weekly team meetings, we would—after we had shared communicative strategies, successes, and failures from the past week with one another—normally split our SEs into triads to practice what Ivey (1971) called attending skills. Each learner would assume a role and alternate until everyone had a chance to play each part of *speaker*, *attender*, and *observer*. In this controlled environment, the *speaker's* job is to refine and practice the techniques learned in previous sessions. The *attender* helps the speaker along by back channeling and providing developmentally appropriate assistance, while the *observer* provides feedback to both so that all learn how to actively apply self-monitoring strategies through peer correction.

For developing post hoc monitoring strategies and interlocutor empathy, the triad is crucial. While the observer's role in the triad may seem extraneous, it is essential in developing the ability to review one's speech just after the fact without suffering the affective consequences that come from immediate self-correction. Because the observers are most likely to notice areas in *others* where they *themselves* needed improvement, the triad enabled our learners to make this transition.

Oral Readings

While attending skills in the triad focus primarily on fluency, the focus of a recorded oral reading is on accuracy. To have a context in which they would concentrate solely on accuracy, to further develop the habit of analyzing their own language, and to help them develop better control over the melody and rhythm of English, SEs made a recording of themselves reading a passage twice a week. The texts were usually their own e-mails or instant messenger (IM) conversations of between 200 and 300 words. Before making the recording, we read the text with the SEs and corrected the grammar. We would then read the text *to* the learners while they marked it for pitch jumps and thought-group boundaries. The SEs then read the marked text back to us to ensure that these suprasegmentals were marked appropriately. Finally, they would record the text in their cubicle or at home for practice and bring it with them to the next meeting for further review and analysis.

Oral Dialogue Journals

In addition to the recorded readings, our learners were expected to keep oral dialogue journals (Duke-Lay, 1987). At home or in their cubicles, we would have our learners listen to the opening remarks we would make for them on a sound file. Each week after the initial recording, the SEs would record a 5- to 7-minute response to our remarks on the linguistic and cultural challenges they had faced through the week. After their responses were e-mailed to us, we would provide recorded feedback on aspects of accuracy and/or fluency and would answer any questions they might have. Oral dialogue journals encouraged self-reflection and examination, raised linguistic awareness, and promoted higher-order thinking skills in our SEs through the most ancient of all teaching techniques, the dialectic.

Synthesis

In the beginning of our language training, we played a central supervisory role to make sure the concepts and principles were understood enough to be applied and passed along from learner to learner. As the support engineers took hold of the ideas we presented to them, we slowly withdrew until they were sustaining each other in their own efforts with us, the teachers, available as needed. By interacting with more capable peers, and using the techniques outlined in this paper, learners bridge the gap between current and potential development.

The techniques we use in the BPO industry to assist our support engineers in creating a new linguistic and cultural identity can be used by other ESL learners to effect the holistic change needed for full second language acquisition. Deepening our understanding of the re-creation of self in different SLA contexts will not only transform us as students and teachers but help us to make better sense of the world as it continues to transform into the next millennia.

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