

Reading a Foreign Language: Similarities and Differences between English and German

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This presentation is focused on the teaching of reading in foreign languages, with specific reference to English and German. Having been dealing with learning and teaching both languages for several years, the author states two main problems that the speaker of another language must struggle with when reading English or German: the mastering of the writing system of those languages; and the processing of the signals of the cumulative meaning for the reading materials. The relationship between English and German and some teaching methods of those languages in Thailand are also presented. Two major problems experienced by Thai students in foreign language reading classes are: students' inability to pronounce foreign words and their inability to understand what they are reading. Causes of these problems include the total difference between Thai and the target language, unskilled native teachers, lack of foreign teachers, inadequacy of vocabulary that affects reading comprehension. However, the similarities and differences between English and German affect reading skills in a positive way; both languages do reinforce each other when one knows them well and reads.

1. Introduction

Foreign Languages: A foreign language is a language which is not one's mother tongue and which is associated with a country or countries whose mother tongue it is. Learning to speak or write a foreign language means acquiring the ability to express oneself in different sounds with a different rhythm of speech, using different words (and perhaps a different script), different grammar, different idioms, and

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different phraseology in differing styles which are appropriate to different situations. Learning to understand a foreign language entails learning to decode the sounds, rhythm, and meaning of words and sentences. It also requires one to interpret the cultural associations of these utterances in both speech and writing (Dunlop, 1985).

2. Foreign Languages and Reading

In today's world, more and more students need to be literate not only in their native language, but also in a foreign language. The question, then, that faces teachers is how best to teach students to read in a language other than their own. It is to be understood that the reading population is made up of people who are not only proficient readers in their native language, but who have also mastered the fundamentals of orthography, basic vocabulary, grammar rules, and syntax of the foreign language. Of course, it is well known that many readers have difficulties with comprehension, even if the reading material is written in their native language.

Reading has been included in courses of study that aim at the greatest possible efficiency in learning a foreign language, both for the purpose of supporting and supplementing the basic oral practices, and for the purpose of teaching the student how to read the language he is studying.

This presentation concerns itself with the teaching of reading in foreign languages, with specific reference to English and German.

Since I have been dealing with these two languages for more than ten years, the ideas and procedures suggested here are largely based on the experience gained while studying both languages and preparing teaching materials within the Thai school system.

3. The Need for Foreign Languages in Thailand

Thailand struggles to overcome the linguistic barrier-the need to know English, Russian, German, or French in order to obtain technological information - that impedes its access to technology necessary for development. It cannot rely upon its own educational system to generate new knowledge. In 1968 the Universities Development Commission was founded with the initial task of formulating a strategy for overcoming this handicap. It assigned top priority to Thailand's achieving a reasonable level of self-sufficiency in the basic sciences and economics and to greatly improving the quality of English language instruction in the nation's schools (Neff, 1977).

The other importance that Thailand attaches to foreign language learning grew as the need to communicate in the modern world became more insistent and as the provision of secondary education increased.

The importance given to different aspects of foreign language learning changed from an emphasis on writing, reading, and translation skills to include oral facility as communication between countries improved.

In Thailand, especially after the Second World War, there has been a foreign language teaching policy which emphasizes practical measures to fulfill the country's needs for people who know foreign languages. The need to teach citizens to understand and use a foreign language arises from language contacts both within the country and with other countries.

Teaching foreign language in Thailand is not easy. The most important reason is that all Thais speak Thai, our native language, which is spoken and used mainly in Thailand. Language teaching is also not the activity of individual teachers only. It is a system of activities at several levels. In order to understand language teaching in all its complexity, it is necessary to be aware of its various levels and subsystems

and of their interrelationships. It is also necessary to relate language teaching to its broader educational and societal context.

4. Learning Foreign Languages

As I have been dealing with learning and teaching both English and German, I can see two problems that the speaker of another language must struggle with if he would read English or German:

1) In order to read modern English and German at all, the student must master the writing system of those languages. All the basic writing systems of the languages of the world have as their purpose the representation of a language, as that language is used to carry on the affairs of a society. To read any writing efficiently, one must develop high speed discrimination and recognition responses to the graphic signs as representations of significant language parts.

2) In order to read modern English and German efficiently, the student must process the signals of the cumulative meanings for the materials he is reading.

When a student studies a foreign language, he has to memorize hundreds of new words for the concepts he wants to talk about. He usually buys a dictionary and spends hours looking up and memorizing words; but words alone do not make a language. He must be able to combine a given group of words into a statement, a question, or a command, as his intended meaning requires.

It is pointed out in the research about foreign language interference and reading skill acquisition that the use of foreign language interferes with the acquisition of reading skills in every way. First of all, the learner can understand only the most rudimentary type of instruction when his teacher speaks in a foreign language. His acquisition of the decoding skills is greatly hampered because he cannot hear many of the sounds and words of the foreign language; he cannot perceive

the letters and visual configurations by which the words are represented; and he can seldom link the sounds and the symbols meaningfully. What he learns, he learns by rote. The lack of vocabulary and unfamiliarity with grammatical structures greatly impede his comprehension of what he does read. All of this gives rise to strong feelings of frustration and often of failure - feelings which only serve to further impede the acquisition of reading skills and which tend to alienate children from school (Laffey and Shuy, 1973).

5. Some Teaching Methods Mainly Used in Thailand

In Thailand, the first two to three years of foreign language teaching are devoted to the presentation of the basic grammatical resources of a language; its categories of form and meaning; its fundamental inventories of syntax, lexis, and verbal functions; and their development into practical skills in listening comprehension, speaking, and writing.

There are also some instructional methods which teachers favor in our country, which I'd like to mention here:

1) The Grammar-Translation Method: The emphasis is placed on memorization of grammatical rules and analytic translation of texts. Textbooks contain definitions of rules and exceptions, lists of paradigms and classes of words, passages for translation from and into the target language, and exercises. In this method, the main preoccupation of the teacher is correctness and not fluency. The teacher monopolizes the lesson, expounding texts, correcting answers, and testing students. There is little difference in the form of lessons in upper and intermediate classes. Teaching is deductive. Reading is done intensively. The teacher's aim is completion of exercises in the book. This method is based on traditional grammar, which is now widely regarded as unsystematic, arbitrary, and confusing. It is also considered ineffective for teaching students to speak the language, although it may be effective for teaching gifted students to

understand written texts. Students are taught about the language rather than how to use it. Teachers often lecture in the native language and may not be able to speak the target language.

2) Pattern practice: This method emphasizes the oral skills and techniques of memorization and systematic pattern practice or structure drills. Patterns will be drilled to a point of automatic response in the belief that the learner will then merely have to slot in lexical items appropriate to the conversational situation. A pattern is usually introduced to the learner in a dialogue to be memorized, or in a reading passage, before it is drilled. The subsequent practice is usually of two general types - substitution and transformation. Sometimes the pattern practice does not achieve the anticipated dramatic improvement in the learner's general command of the language. Some learners find the mechanical repetition of drills in the language laboratory boring. Others can repeat the patterns perfectly but are unable to use them in spontaneous conversation. Some pattern practice can be useful in the early stages of language learning, but patterns remain hollow until the learner uses them to express a personal meaning in conversation where spontaneous interaction and the social setting are important factors.

6. Relationship between English and German

English and German both belong to a group of languages called Indo-European languages. The Indo-European family of languages is the most widely distributed group of languages today. In the earlier stages of these languages, common characteristics are relatively apparent; but through changes brought about by time, they have developed wide differences one from another. Nevertheless, some structural features are characteristic of all current Indo-European languages.

(See Table 1 on page 141)

From the table we can see that English and German are grouped under Germanic, which is one of the Western groups of Indo-European languages. This Western subgroup consists of three principle dialects:

1) High German, with 85 million speakers, is spoken primarily in central Europe;

2) Low Franconian has 20 million speakers and consists of Dutch, Flemish, and the derivative Afrikaans in South Africa;

3) English has more than 280 million speakers, not including additional millions who use it as a second language.

The shared characteristics of the Indo-European languages are found in the phonology, the grammatical systems, and the vocabulary.

Phonology: All Indo-European languages have a relatively large number of well-structural stops, such as *p/ t/ k/ b/ d/* and *g/*, but few fricatives, such as *s/* .

Grammatical System: There are characteristic sentence patterns, a relatively free order of nouns and verbs, and the location of unaccented words in the second position in the sentence. In morphology, nouns are inflected for cases, number, mood, and tense.

Vocabulary: Many everyday words used by an agrarian society are similar in form and ascribable to an earlier common form. Systematic relationships, which are demonstrable through consistent differences, as well as through similarities, provide credibility for the reconstructed forms and for the assumption of an earlier common language (Lehman, 1977).

Within the Germanic Group the two most frequently spoken languages are English and German. They have several morphological, lexical, and phonological features in common. They are very much alike in respect of the form-classes which they contain; they have morphological categories called nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. English and German are composed of the same sort of building blocks. The most

significant point of contrast between the two languages is the different position of the verb. In English, it is surrounded by nouns and adverbs; in German, it mostly stands at the end of the sentence, and is often the focus and culmination of the entire clauses.

Table 1
Indo-European Language Group

Eastern		Western	
Group	Where Spoken	Group	Where Spoken
Albanian	Albania, Italy	Celtic	France (Brittany), Great Britain (Scotland and Wales), Ireland
Armenian	USSR		
Baltic/ Slavic	Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, USSR, Yugoslavia		
Indo- Iranian	Ceylon, India, Nepal	Germanic	Austria, Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Faeroe Islands, Germany, Great Britain, Iceland, Ireland, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, South Africa, Sweden, Switzerland, United States
(Indic)			
Indo- Iranian	Afghanistan, Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Pakistan		
(Iranian)			
Anatolian	(extinct)	Greek	Greece
Tocharian	(extinct)	Italics (Romance)	Argentina, Belgium, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, France, Guatemala, Haiti,

Honduras, Italy,
 Mexico, Nicaragua,
 Panama, Paraguay, Peru,
 Portugal, Romania, Spain,
 Switzerland, Uruguay,
 Venezuela

(Lehmann, 1977)

English and German do have many similar words; for example:

English	German	English	German
father	vater	water	wasser
mother	mutter	drink	trinken
son	sohn	she	sie
uncle	onkel	six	sechs

Grammatical forms may seem more complicated to a foreign student learning German; for example, there are differences in gender and case. But on the other hand, spelling is much less difficult to learn in modern German than it is in British or American English. More specifically, in relation to learning to read the language, the grapheme-phoneme relations in German are rather regular in comparison with English (Biglmaier, 1973).

The German language is more consistent phonetically than the English language, which may account for the superiority of children in learning to read (Preston, 1952). In learning to read English, children may not be able to expect phonetic consistency. As a result, they often develop insecurity and uncertainty.

Grammatical gender plays an important, almost pervasive, role in German which is not matched by a comparable importance in English. The main difficulty is that English simply does not have gender

in the grammatical sense of that term. Gender in German has nothing to do with meaning: it is a grammatical classification of nouns. Every noun must be referred to by one gender. In studying German, we have to learn the gender together with the meaning of every new noun we learn, for the gender of a German noun is not predictable. It is also perfectly understandable that we have to overcome an emotional barrier in learning the gender of nouns, since to us it is a completely superfluous feature. To the student of German, there seems to be no logical reason why he should burden himself with this unnecessary information. But in learning German the student simply cannot use a noun unless he knows its gender, since the choice of every modifier or relative will depend on this knowledge.

Another important difference between English and German is word order. In German it is freer than in English; and German has movement rules affecting word order rearrangements which are without parallel in English. Students have to be very accurate, however, with regard to the rules of word order in German. The most important point is the position of the verb. Some words in German sentence can change their positions; but the determiners, which show case or gender, can help identify the subject or object of that sentence.

Another remarkable point is that our students always use the method of translation in reading, and mostly in writing too, of German texts. Because we have learned and known English longer than German, we always have that language in mind and are more familiar with it than with German. Translation plays a big role for our students. They always try to translate German sentences into English, and sometimes vice versa. They may assume that when a sentence means something in German, it must also mean the same in English. However, the student must be aware of the grammatical rules.

7. Problems

There are some general problems experienced by Thai students in foreign language reading classes. Two big problems are students' inability to pronounce foreign words, which directly affects speaking and oral reading; and their inability to understand what they are reading.

The main cause of both problems is the total difference between our native language, Thai, and the foreign languages we study. Our students have to work very hard to memorize grammatical rules and vocabulary, and try hard to pronounce words correctly. The Thai, English, and German phonological systems are not the same. Most Thai students are shy to pronounce foreign words correctly, because the way we control the mouth and tongue to pronounce a Thai word is much different from the way of controlling those organs to pronounce an English or a German word. Students always laugh, feel uneasy, and think it is ridiculous to pronounce words whose sounds don't appear in Thai.

Foreign language teachers have to work hard to encourage and practice with their students to enable them to pronounce words correctly and put the proper stress and intonations into sentences. However, the teacher has to master the skills first. There are some teachers who can do very well in teaching writing or reading comprehension, but they are poor at pronouncing foreign words. This may be because of their physical problems, or because they did not practice oral language enough to be familiar with foreign accents and sounds.

The lack of foreign teachers in our country causes disadvantages in learning foreign languages and greatly affects the listening and speaking skills of students. Unfortunately, there are very few foreign teachers in Thailand. Most students learn foreign languages from their Thai teachers, who usually speak and read those languages with a Thai accent. Only a few of those teachers have been educated in countries

where English or German is spoken. They are able to pronounce foreign words much the same way that a native speaker pronounces them.

An inadequate vocabulary affects reading comprehension. Because there is no correlation between Thai and English or German vocabulary, the student has to work very hard to memorize foreign words that come up every time he attends class. He also has to be accurate in the spelling and meaning of those words to be able to comprehend a text, or even a sentence.

In conclusion, I want to say that both English and German are very interesting and fascinating foreign languages. Before I studied German, I found English very hard; but after studying German for a couple of years, English became much easier. Even though German grammar is much more difficult than English, it is not too hard to learn, and it's really challenging. The similarities and differences between English and German affect reading skills in a positive way, rather than in a negative way. From my experience, I am convinced that both languages reinforce each other. If you know English well, you will have less trouble reading and understanding German texts; and if you know German well, you will find reading and understanding English texts much easier than before.

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