

A. BELIEFS ABOUT LANGUAGE LEARNING

1. Read the accounts of the two learners of English below.
2. Compare the learners and decide what their respective beliefs about language learning are.

You may also like to note down the following:

- a. Their strategies for learning vocabulary.
- b. Whether they pay attention primarily to meaning or to form.
- c. Their respective language problems.
- d. Their strategies for practising language.

1. *Miguel was majoring in economics in Spain. He had not studied English in high school or in college, so he did not know any English previous to his visit to London.*

I spent ten weeks in the south of England with a British family. I didn't want to live with other foreign students. I think that's the best way, especially if you're accepted as part of the family. I had a close relationship with the family. We spoke at dinner time and while watching TV, we talked about what we saw. Everything was natural. I could practise what I learned in school. That was good because my problem was using and understanding English outside the classroom. Sometimes I tried to make sentences using words the landlord used. I also read the papers every day. I read news about Spain. I decided I would not use a Spanish - English dictionary. I guessed the meaning by looking at the words I knew. I didn't think about grammar. I tried to catch the meaning. Everything was natural. When I went into a restaurant, I had to order. So I looked at the menu and learned words that way.

In the summer of 1978, I decided to go to Berkeley. The class was a disaster. It was not organized by the university. There were only Spanish students; they did not divide the students according to their levels, and the teachers had little method. After one month, I enrolled as an auditor in a university course and attended two seminars. The summer in California was very satisfying. My English was much better than it was in England. I understood more and I talked more easily. I had made progress, but I couldn't measure it. It was all unconscious. But I was always trying to get information in a conscious way. I read the ads, listened to radio commercials, and watched TV.

I still had a problem using words, so I took every opportunity I had to practise. That's the secret. In a conversation your partner speaks to you and you have to answer. You become very interested in the subject and you remember words you learned. You learn new ones. In this way you understand better. Of course, I did not like making mistakes, especially in the seminars. But if you don't speak and if you don't write because of your mistakes, you'll have to wait twenty years before you say something. It's better to talk.

I returned to the United States the next spring and spent 16 weeks at a university in Connecticut. The problem was that the campus was far from the city and after the first semester, all the American students left. There was no opportunity to practise. I didn't like that. So I decided to come to New York and to enrol in courses at the university. In that way I could discuss with American classmates and read books in my field. You have to practise English. Talking and reading English are the key. I took two courses in business micro - economics and accounting. That was a very good

experience. I read, studied, listened to lectures, and took notes in English. I thought about the meaning of the subject. I did not think about the language. I was trying to learn English the natural way'

2. *Eun Jin came to the United States from Korea with her husband, who was enrolled in a graduate programme. She had studied English in high school and college in Korea and, after receiving her BA degree, she had continued learning English in language institutes and on her own.*

`In Korea I studied English for ten years in high school and in college. We learned a lot of grammar, so when I came to the United States, I knew grammar and I could read, but I couldn't speak easily. But grammar background is important. Without it, you can't improve. You will be limited.

`Before coming to the United States, I studied on my own. I bought a grammar book and attended classes at a private institute. I took a course in listening. It was awful. I couldn't understand. They spoke fast and their pronunciation was different. We had learned British pronunciation. After one month, I quit and read short stories in my grammar book. I consulted my dictionary and my grammar books to understand. I have studied many grammar books.

`Later I took a reading course. We used Time and Newsweek magazines. I found it very difficult. The articles were heavy. I could not understand what I read. I spent three hours and could only read half a page. That class was very frustrating. I realized it was important to learn grammar and vocabulary first. It was the turning point. I quit the class and studied grammar and vocabulary on my own.

`When I first came to the United States, I took an English course in a community language programme. I had time, and Americans were closed to foreigners if they did not speak fluently. I also decided to take the TOEFL test to push myself to learn grammar and vocabulary. During that time, it was very hard to understand what people said. I guessed the meaning by using the vocabulary I knew. Now I understand more easily, and so I try to catch the grammar. When I read, I also pay attention to the grammar. I feel uncomfortable if I can't get it exactly. Learning grammar is fundamental. If you concentrate only on the meaning, you can't improve.' (*1.)

Appendix:

Learn the natural way

This is Miguel's belief. He believes that language is best learned by using it to communicate in the social contexts in which he finds himself. In these situations, he does not usually think about language form or the purposes of learning. His emphasis is on communication. Moreover, he feels he should take every opportunity to practise and not care about making mistakes. As much as possible, he avoids thinking in his native language. For Miguel and other learners like him, language learning is an unconscious process.

Learn systematically

This is Eun Jin's belief. She believes language should be learned 'step by step ... from easy to hard', and so advises taking formal language courses. Learning step by step also means starting with grammar and vocabulary - the building blocks of the language. In other words, to learn a language means to learn about it - to understand how it works. Using the language to communicate is secondary. Of course, she does not discount the importance of practice, but her emphasis is on learning - practising will help her to remember the grammar and vocabulary she has learned. Finally Eun Jin, and other learners like her, believe that language learning is a conscious process. Therefore they advise always being open to 'receive' information about the language. They emphasize the importance of being mentally active -manipulating or transforming in some way new words, sounds, structures in order to understand and remember them. (*2)

Notes (for Section A)

*1. Extract, from Wenden A. 'Helping language learners think about learning' p.172-3. in Currents of Change in English Language Teaching ed. by Rossner and Bolitho 1990, OUP.

*2. Wenden op. cit p. 162