How to Improve Your Foreign Language IMMEDIATELY

Foreign Language Communication Tools

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Preface

In learning and teaching second and foreign languages, teachers and students have a number of resources at their fingertips to work with both the "topdown" and "bottom-up" aspects of language acquisition. Textbooks and reference grammars provide us with grammar rules. These are very useful in understanding how the language works and in helping us to make our communication literate. Some textbooks, along with conversation guides and the like, provide us with scripts for generating various kinds of speech acts in various topical domains. We have the weather forecast script, the political meetings-and-greetings script, the professional reception script, the business meeting script, and so on and so forth. A very few textbooks (and then only at high levels of proficiency and only in some languages) provide us with the outlines for discourse structures for various kinds of genres: chit-chat, formal presentations on scientific topics, the narration of anecdotes, the preparation of a piece of literature (in one of many possible genres), news reports (written and oral), and so on. Each of these resources does one of two things: (1) it provides an overall structure (macro) level or (2) it provides the pieces that fit into the structure (micro level).

What current resources fail to provide, however, is set of guidelines that learners can use to control their use of language. The word, control, here is very important because, in general, current resources contol the speaker, not the other way around. Thus, a structure at the micro level gives students a format to use; it is, however, generally quite inflexible: the student fits his

output to the structure, not to the speaking situation or environment in which he finds himself. Likewise, structures at the micro level give students forms to use; they, too, are inflexible: in general, they are either right or wrong, and students piece them together syntactically either correctly and are understood or incorrectly and are not understood. Both formats and forms are language-specific.

Communication rules, however, are quite generic by nature. They transcend the linguistic and sociolinguistic aspects of language. They are not languagespecific. They are mechanisms for putting students in control of information flow, of idea exchange, of negotiation, and of any other communicative function, regardless of the language being spoken. They subordinate linguistic performance to social performance and sociolinguistic knowledge to psycholinguistic legerdemain.

Legerdemain, indeed, is an appropriate word because to many these rules of communication seem like magic. And, if it is magic to control one's environment, then it would be hard to argue otherwise.

In essence, though, these rules of communication are just what they are labeled. Shekhtman has analyzed social performance through speech and discovered the keys (rules) to being in control of a conversation.

There are many positive aspects to having such tools at one's ready and being able to use them well. First, they allow one to enter into a conversation with a native speaker and successfully stay in that conversation by regulating the conversation in such a way that it remains on a proficiency level that is both manageable by the student and comfortable for the native speaker. Second, it allows a student to accomplish his or her goal in entering into the communication, whether that be to impart information, negotiate a deal, or impress an audience with a brilliant presentation. Third, they allow speakers of a foreign language to use that language to their advantage, not disadvantage. These, of course, are only some of the positive aspects of learning to use Shekhtman's communication tools. Other advantages are identified within the various chapters of this book.

It is very popular nowadays to talk about learning strategies. It is only slightly less common to teach learning strategies. Shekhtman's rules of communication are strategies, and they form an important part of a students strategic competence. Individual learning strategies, however, are generally limited, and it is the choice of the right strategy or combination of strategies at a particular moment that predicates whether or not a student will be successful in learning or using a bit of language. Communication tools go beyond learning strategies; they are not strategies for learning but for organizing, fostering, controlling, and learning from whole communications. While they can be taught

and practiced in the classroom, they go far beyond it and allow the student to live, work, and play successfully in the foreign-language environment.

The question, then, is for whom are such tools intended? The answer is very simple: for everyone. I have seen teachers successfully teach these tools to students at every level of foreign-language proficiency from raw beginner to near-native speaker. I have seen students change from being tongue-tied and incoherent to impressive language users without an additional day of foreign language study. As Natalia Lord (see Chapter Notes at the end of this volume) points out, these rules make any communication more effective, even in one's native language, although, of course, they were intended for the foreign-language student trying not only to survive but also to accomplish a variety of goals in communications with native speakers.

The toolbox that the author presents here and the instructions for the use of each tool are without parallel in the second language literature. Whether you are a teacher or a student, take time to learn how to use each of these tools. I guarantee that you will not regret it; it will be some of the best-spent time you will ever have in teaching and learning a foreign language.

Betty Lou Leaver
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To the Reader from the Author

The book which you, dear reader, have picked up was written approximately twenty years ago. However, the reasons that brought it to the light of day then remain as important today as ever. The first of these reasons is the survival of foreigners who are living entirely surrounded by native speakers of the foreign language. I came to the United States with a decent level of English, but, naturally, I did not feel myself to be on a par with Americans. I am certain that a great many people are suffering and have suffered from this feeling of "linguistic inferiority." Some people come to accept this feeling. Others try to improve their foreign language. Still others--and I belong to this group--try to find a set of strategies to help them to use the language that they have acquired more effectively. Back then I had already begun to realize the strategic significance of simplifying thoughts in order to be understood; after all, it is better to express a thought simply than not to express it at all or to express something that the native speaker either cannot understand at all or perceives as nonsense.

The next step forward in the development of a system of strategies for using a foreign language came at the time of my teaching at the Foreign Service Institute of the U. S. Department of State. Students enrolled at this institution take a test at the end of their course of study, the results of which have a strong impact on their career. This is when I noticed that students who intuitively possess good strategic competence do better on the test than those who do not even if their level of knowledge of the language is practically the same. So, it was

then that I developed my system of commnunicative rules and began to teach them to my students. The results were astonishing. Using military terms, the weapon of the student taking the test with no knowledge of communicative strategies was equivalent to a bow and arrow, whereas the weapon of the student who had at his or her command a set of strategic rules was a missile. The students simply went crazy over these rules, as they understood these rules to help them in the best sense to show what they knew of the language.

There was something else that had a strong impact on my desire to write this book. I came to the United States from the Soviet Union. At the time, the U.S.S.R. had a planned economy, which completely subverted the market processes. In the country where I lived for almost forty years, the prices of goods were fixed by the government. So goods there, for all practical purposes, were not sold but given out or distributed, but suddenly, here in America, exposed to the nature of a free market, I saw for the first time that the essence of a normal economy is that everything is for sale, that everything can be considered a good. I also understood what the essence of the sale of any good was. The essence is that the seller always shows the attractive aspects of his goods and does not highlight the negatives. Whether one is selling an insurance policy or a book, a car or a house, a legal ruling or a political program and whether a real estate agent or the president of the country is doing the selling, the sales approach is always the same: talk up the positive attributes as much as possible and downplay the negative ones as much as possible. Likewise, speech is your good, which you sell through the process of communication. Sell it right. Show its positive sides, not its negative ones. It is precisely this that the strategic rules of communication will help you to execute.

Nonetheless, the fact that this book was written many years ago makes it a little outdated. During this time, the system of strategic rules for the effective use of a foreign language that are described in this book became more developed and solidified. The strategic rules were codified in accordance with the type of communication; their significance was shown in re-

lation to the aggregate of forms and content; their dependency on proficiency level was examined; and, most important, the possibility of using these rules as a teaching method was demonstrated.[1] Indeed, the rules described in this book can be of considerable assistance both to students studying a foreign language and to teachers teaching it.[2]