

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGE IN TEACHING VOCABULARY

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Within the time allotted here I will try to present and illustrate just one phase of the overall problem of teaching English as a foreign language. I should like to make a few comments on the importance of the native language in teaching vocabulary, using Spanish and English as the languages involved.

When reference is made to the importance of the native language of the learner of English, examples and illustrations most frequently seem to be taken from the phonology or grammar of the native language. In the phonology, we remember the Cantonese speaking Chinese who wanted "flied lice" for dinner, not "fried rice," and the Chinese who requested a "lewolowel" instead of a "revolver." These examples point up the differences involving *r* and *l* in Chinese and English. Spanish speakers have no initial *sl*, *sp*, or *st*, hence "Estanley espoke eslowly" frequently results when they are talking English. In grammar, the Spanish speaker is likely to say "Went you to the store?" where we would say "Did you go to the store?" because there is nothing in Spanish comparable to the English function word *do*.

However, consideration of the lexicon of Spanish is also important in teaching the lexicon of English. We cannot assume that there are exact lexical word-for-word equivalents in any two languages. A situation which is described by one word in Spanish may be represented by several in English. Conversely a situation which in English is described by one word may be represented by several in Spanish. A form may have a lexical distribution in Spanish different than its partial equivalent in English. To illustrate: *Banco* in Spanish is equivalent to English *bank* only in certain situations. *Banco* 'Establecimiento publico de crédito' can be said approximately to equal *bank* 'an institution for receiving and lending money'. But *bank* 'the slope immediately bordering a stream course' does not equal

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*banco* but rather *orilla*. Similarly, *banco* ‘asiento de madera’ does not equal *bank* in English, but *bench*. This is easy to understand, for we consider *bank* in English as having these two distinct meanings, one associated with rivers, the other with money. The differences between these two situations in which the word *bank* is used are vast and describable. Frequently, however, the differences between meanings of the same word are less discernible. As naive speakers of the language we are usually not conscious of the differences in meaning of the verb *to be*. Yet when the English speaker learns Spanish, he immediately comes face to face with the problem of “He is hungry” — “Tiene hambre,” “He is here” — “Está aquí,” “He is a doctor” — “Es médico.” And, as virtually any Spanish teacher will testify, teaching these distinctions presents no small problem.

On the other hand, while the difference between *until* and *as far as* in “They traveled as far as San Francisco” and “They traveled until six o’clock” is perfectly clear to English speakers, there is no reason to assume that Spanish speakers recognize a difference or the same difference. As a matter of fact, the Spanish speaker can use *hasta* in both situations.

Viajaron hasta San Francisco

Viajaron hasta las seis.

We would thus expect to hear, and we do hear from Spanish speakers attempting English “He went until the drug store,” “They traveled until New Orleans,” and less frequently “She went as far as noon.” In short, Spanish *hasta* is used in both time and place situations, whereas English divides these situations between *until* and *as far as*.

Mistakes in the choice of lexical items in English, then, are associated with a different distribution of lexical items in Spanish. Knowing this, the teacher can explore and compare the lexicons of Spanish and English to discover, predict, and be prepared for difficulties that the Spanish speaker will have in English.

Let’s follow the small part of the lexicon we have here — the difference between “as far as” and “until” — through its presentation and practice in order to demonstrate one way to teach it. It is assumed that the students have studied the other lexical items and grammar that will be used. It is also assumed

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that *as far as* and *until* are presented as part of some larger area and not alone.

The teacher can first present two groups of examples in appropriate contexts, one containing the place illustrations, the other containing the time illustrations. From these comes the generalization that *as far as* (as a unit, and not as a regular pattern of comparison) is here used before expressions of place (destination) and *until* before expressions of time, denoting the end of a period of time.

When the students grasp this point, an exercise designed to make automatic the correct use of *until* and *as far as* is instituted — for a solely intellectual understanding, of a lexical, pronunciation, or any language point is not enough — as those of us know who have compared our ability to say “*servus, servi, servo, servum, servo*” with our fluency at chatting in Latin.

Such an exercise could take the following form. The general approach here is that of taking as a base sentence one in which both types of expression can appropriately appear, a sort of minimal pair. For example, we may use the pair already cited:

They traveled as far as San Francisco.

They traveled until six o'clock.

The teacher then asks the student to repeat the first sentence. He then substitutes for *San Francisco* other place words with which the students are familiar — cities, towns, buildings, so that the exercise runs something like this:

Teacher: He traveled as far as Chicago. (New York)

Student: He traveled as far as New York.

T: He traveled as far as Chicago. (Detroit)

S: He traveled as far as Detroit.

The teacher then introduces the sentences with *until* in the same manner, introducing time words known to the student:

T: He traveled until six o'clock. (noon)

S: He traveled until noon.

T: He traveled until six o'clock. (Midnight)

S: He traveled until midnight.

The exercise may be continued. Now the class is ready for a mixture of the two, where the student must choose between *as far as* and *until*.

T: He traveled until six o'clock. (Chicago)

S: He traveled as far as Chicago.

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T: (midnight)

S: He traveled *until* midnight.

Then, widening the scope of the substitution:

T: (as far as)

S: He traveled as far as Detroit.

T: (until)

S: He traveled until 7:45.

T: (New York)

S: He traveled as far as New York.

T: (noon)

S: He traveled until noon.

With these small points I have endeavored to illustrate the advisability of giving attention to the native language of the speaker, not only in the pronunciation and grammar, but in the lexicon of the language as well. Every language has its own unique ways of chopping up experience into its lexicon, and an understanding of the ways in which two languages diverge lexically helps the language teacher in the efficient preparation and presentation of teaching materials.