
Title	Stopping The Pendulum
Author(s)	R.B.Somerville-Ryan
Source	<i>Teaching and Learning</i> , 3(1)59-62
Published by	Institute of Education (Singapore)

This document may be used for private study or research purpose only. This document or any part of it may not be duplicated and/or distributed without permission of the copyright owner.
The Singapore Copyright Act applies to the use of this document.

STOPPING THE PENDULUM

A Review of the RELC Seminar on Interlanguage Transfer Processes in Language Learning and Communication in Multilingual Societies (19-23 April 1982)

R B SOMERVILLE-RYAN

Among the more predictable characteristics of Education as a whole and Language Teaching in particular is the tendency for topics in methodology and research to swing in and out of fashion. Interlanguage transfer and translation, the major themes of this year's RELC Seminar, reflect this pattern. Susan Gass used the image of the pendulum to describe the history of research into the effect of one language on the learning of another: initially all problems in learning a foreign language were seen in terms of the interference of the habits of one system on the new habits that had to be acquired. Gradually this "contrastive" approach gave way and various "approximative systems" were postulated. According to Gass, the pendulum has now stopped in the middle, and we can see theories about language transfer which are based on a cumulative build-up of knowledge and which give results. Researchers are developing explanatory theories rather than merely attacking the work of others.

If this is so, the spiral may be a better image than the pendulum; a pendulum doesn't go anywhere. In practical terms though, for the Singapore teacher, the results will be a little longer in coming. The Seminar indicated the need for wider data bases before immediate implications for classroom practice could be proposed. The reports on work by Anna Kwan-Terry, Dave Richards, Irene Wong and Lim Saw Choo, John Newman, Michael Sharwood-Smith, and others, gave participants a range of the areas in which this data could be collected. In Sharwood-Smith's view, the evidence indicates multiple causes of error. Errors which appear to be clearly caused by transfer from a learner's mother-tongue in one situation also occur consistently in situations where the mother-tongue would not lead one to predict such an error. This question was directed to the researcher and the teacher-trainer. It reinforced the need for a teaching and teacher-training force which is well aware of current thinking on second language acquisition.

More practical teaching suggestions were understandably not as readily available. While debate on “direct method and cognitive code approaches”, the importance of grammatical explanations, and inductive as opposed to deductive methods continued, realistically few definitive comments on such large topics were made; partisans of all persuasions found evidence for their views. The Seminar, though, did give some respectability to the use of positive transfer features, those elements which are similar and can aid learning. Catford’s paper on phonetic transfer emphasised functional load as a major criterion in the planning of pronunciation courses; and in suggesting the use of mother-tongue articulation skills and the concentration on important sound distinctions, he made a strong case for highly skilled speech teachers and indirectly for completely bilingual classroom teachers.

Naturally, in such situations, the status of Singapore English, and the question of the model we should adopt is always raised. Singaporeans engaged in vehement debate on this issue, notwithstanding last year’s seminar, and also discussed the complex question of teaching an interlanguage. Academic terminology has a way of generating a life for itself; interlanguage appears to be one such term. In discussions, it was frequently equated with a dialect, and participants often argued at cross purposes in consequence. The major question: whether the description of fossilized interlanguage features which make up part of the dialect of Singapore English should become a model for teaching and syllabus design, was not resolved, and one feels it will inevitably resurface at next year’s seminar on syllabus design.

Several papers did give practical advice and guidance to materials designers: for example, that of Richard Noss, and the paper on semiotics by Adejare and Afolayan. Noss’ paper, “Lexis Acquired with Insufficient Syntactic Information”, gave details of predictable errors based on an inadequate syntactic description of items used in the classroom. Using the example of the English “tea”, he noted that the word may have up to 8 equivalents in a given L1. More complete reference materials which go beyond traditional categories of syntactic description are seen to be necessary.

Nababan and Toukomaa presented cases for initial teaching materials which use the student’s mother-tongue as a

medium for instruction in the second language. These papers continued the debate on a pupil's self-image being linked to his mother-tongue, and implicitly criticised direct method approaches in which the second language is both the medium and target of instruction. The complexity of the situation in Singapore is such that this easier option may not be practicable. The range of teaching and teacher-supply problems will be greater in multilingual countries than even in bilingual situations as exist in Scandinavia.

The second major theme of the Seminar, translation, contributed to some lack of focus. Though important, the insights of those training professional translators, and the professional literary translators seemed of less immediate relevance to our situation. The potential of translation as a testing instrument was raised, however, and Das described the use of the technique in diagnostic and teaching work in India. While avoidance of direct word for word translation was seen as being necessary, descriptions of the back-translation process in which learners see a mother-tongue translation of a target text, and then write a second language translation of their own without looking at the text, finally comparing their version with the original target text, seem to offer valuable techniques to the teacher of second language classes.

The Seminar offered an interesting occasion when the state of the art could be reviewed. Such events are vital if the gap between theory and classroom practice is to be narrowed. This year's Seminar may have marked a pause in the pendulum; more practical implications of the insights into the process of language acquisition have a year to develop before the next seminar on new trends in syllabus design.

Editor's Note: The titles of the papers presented by the speakers mentioned in the review are as follows (in alphabetical order by speaker):

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--|
| O Adejare and
A Afolayan. | "Semiotics: the Unexplored Level of Variation in Second Language Use." |
| J C Catford. | "Phonetic Transfer and the Teaching of Pronunciation." |
| B K Das. | "The Use of Translation as a Self-Monitoring Device in Remedial Teaching." |
| Susan Gass &
Larry Selinker. | "Language Transfer in Language Learning." |
| Anna Kwan-Terry. | "The Simultaneous Acquisition of English and Chinese in a Three Year Old Child." |

- P W J Nababan. "The Role of the Native Language in the Acquisition of a Second Language."
- John Newman. "Hokkien-Mandarin Phonological Correspondences as Potential Transfer Strategies."
- Richard B Noss. "Lexis Acquired with Insufficient Syntactic Information: a Special Case of Transfer."
- David R Richards. "The Place of Transfer in Second Language Communication."
- Michael A Sharwood-Smith. "Transfer in Competence and Performance."
- Pertti Toukomaa. "Semilingualism and the Education of Immigrant Children: the Scandinavian Research and Debate."
- Irene Wong and Lim Saw Choo. "Language Transfer in the Use of English in Malaysia: Structure and Meaning."