ON HOW ORAL STORYTELLING DEVELOPS THE TOLERANCE FOR AMBIGUITY NEEDED FOR ADULT SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

The difficulties concerning adult second language acquisition are well-known. One aspect that deserves attention is that of the role of tolerance for ambiguity. Adult language learning is facilitated by rich and intentional use of oral storytelling which fosters a renewed tolerance for ambiguity. This paper presents the fieldwork of Originateve carried out over a 2-year period time and delineates a path towards second language learning that strongly suggests a re-enchantment with the long forgotten oral tradition.
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INTRODUCTION

Though Lenneberg's (1967) theory of the critical period for language learning (ages 2-13 years) may be discouraging for adult learners in need of acquiring a second language, all may not be lost for the proverbial "old dogs". David Singleton (1992) points to a hopeful 5 percent of adults who "master a second language even though they begin learning it when they are well into adulthood—long after any critical period has presumably come to a close". To what extent are the biological changes that take place following the argument of the prime-window irreversible or not continues to be one of the high points of the debate. What measures can be taken to ameliorate the disadvantaged disposition of the adult brain towards language learning? This article will address how tolerance for ambiguity (TA) is a viable pardon to the biological guillotine using oral storytelling in adult ESL classrooms as a controlled environment empowering the adult learner towards a thorough and authentic acquisition of a second language (L2).

Tolerance for Ambiguity (also referred to as Intolerance of Ambiguity) is described as "the tendency to perceive ambiguous [i.e., novel, complex, or insoluble] situations as sources of threat" (*Budner, 1962*). Since its coining in the early sixties, the term has been used mostly within the realm of psychology. In recent years, however, more and more language experts are investigating what can be learned by employing TA as an asset to language acquisition. "In second language learning a great amount of apparently contradictory information is encountered…successful language learning necessitates tolerance of such ambiguities" *(Brown, 2007)*. In order to absorb the dense swamp of new language adults beyond their critical window of language acquisition must regenerate that child-like sponge, porous with

exceptional TA. Children, proven to have high levels of TA, when learning a new language, easily cope with the ambiguities while adults check-out in hopes of more amicable approaches to learning. The ESL industry caters to these difficulties by delivering an abundance of what is *tolerable*: clear direction, predictability and instant gratification.

Standard in the ESL industry are heavily scripted courses that pace learners through linear modules achieving the business goals that come with high retention rates yielding cash flow even while falling short of reaching the linguistic aptitude promised by a surfeit of marketing. This trade-off is perhaps best witnessed in the vast testimonies of L2 learners who, upon toiling through lengthy courses, graduate from "Advanced" levels only to find themselves in situations with native speakers feeling absolutely lost. Bley-Vroman's *(1990)* exhaustive and critically acclaimed research on the failure of adult language acquisition posits the feelings of frustration and utter disillusion towards the faux-sense of success previously felt, seep in and then overwhelm the learner. The source of this frustration can be attributed to the overconfidence that comes with comfortable and predictable environments that fail to challenge a learner's TA to a degree that authentically approaches that of normal, unscripted native communication. Subtle changes, such as the use of non-native concepts, uncommon vocabulary and sentence structures, trump *all* sense of communication. Even the most determined learners break, when plunged into the beautiful ambiguities of a native speaker at play with idioms, slang, and variance of vocal inflections. Compounding the problem may be technological platform challenges (choppy calls for instance), a noisy street or a group dialogue comprised of L1 members tongue-twisting and sub texting through their own renditions of English all in concerto. For this reason, an L1 toddler with sparse grammar and far more limited vocabulary can understand what the advanced-level L2 adult learner cannot. The toddler has a naturally heightened TA and does not need to understand every word for communication to take place. Ambiguity playfully permeates the child's landscape, where for the adult it is a paralyzing obstacle.

The link between storytelling and entertainment, no matter the age, is easy to trace. Yet much more elusive is the power of storytelling. This skill is an intrinsic cornerstone for language acquisition, specifically in its ability to foster: tolerance for ambiguity. One of the leading proponents of this link between storytelling, tolerance for ambiguity and successful language acquisition is Originateve, an international NGO dedicated to holistic education and regenerative practices. Founding researcher, Ron Green, states that, *"storytelling delivers content in a form that is hard-wired in the cultural brain. Linear plot–beginning, middle and end–is a reliable construct of information that the brain identifies as important simply for occupying this form. Even learners, who speak little or nothing of a language, can identify the theatrics of a story when delivered live. Body language aids in context and repetition is drawn out of sentence strings deciphered as important even if the entire meaning remains obscure." (R. Green, personal communication, October 13, 2005)* For the past four years, Originateve certified mentors have been carrying out field research that demonstrates how the narrative of story fosters TA in those who have lost it and is a powerful asset to learners still carrying it.

These studies began in early 2011, at the pilot language learning studio of

Amerikanoestudios, in Esparza Costa Rica where Originateve mentors, imparting interdisciplinary ESL lessons to mixed classes of learners of all ages, observed firsthand the struggles of adults compared to elastic young learners. In some cases, the students were entire families learning in the same session. Storytelling was a standard group activity for all ages. While the adaptability of the youth was expected, mentors quickly noticed that storytelling empowered the adult learners as well with very noticeable language acquisition skills not typically easily developed: enriched vocabulary, aural comprehension, fluidity, intonation and tolerance for ambiguity. These gains were then viscerally reinforced with a collage of hands-on, open learning, direct instruction, and expeditionary learning moments that purposely alluded to the stories when possible and relevant.

Elizabeth Bernhardt (*Bernhardt 1992*), explores at length the advantages of immersion programs presenting the argument that the immersion approach is successful precisely because its focus is not on language acquisition in and of itself rather on the learning experience. Originateve's approach to language acquisition is immersion through story. The operating thesis is that submerging language learners into the rich, diverse and ever changing situations guided by a constellation of stories will allow, first and foremost, for all attentive listeners to develop their TA by buttressing the obscurity of new language input with reliable narrative forms and the visual and aural aids inherent in theater.

In a specific experiment that was carried out over the course of eight weeks in 2013, a story was told to a multi-age group of L2 beginners (4 adults, 4 teens and 4 children). Four of these were a family: mom, dad, daughter (age 5), and son (age 9). The duration of each telling was no more than 15 minutes. 3 weeks into the study, the adults spoke out their concerns about "not understanding anything". Mentors encouraged them to push through with the new-experience and explained a bit of the theory behind why it was working already despite their feeling no change. That same day, on their way home, they heard their daughter speaking out a very particular part of one of the stories: "knock on the door". This alone, was reason enough for the adults to continue with the program. The children in the program were reported to maintain themselves positively engaged even to the end of each story. It became evident that the in-born TA children still actively relied upon in their L1 was being used also for their L2 language experiences. The 2 adults (parents) that pushed through with the program were then asked to speak back the story in their L1. Listening comprehension of the story varied between 50-65%. This is especially remarkable when considering that the equivalent of 2 hours in a standard L2 language class would at best cover greetings and basic information. Furthermore, mentors reported that in some cases learners couldn't find certain words in their own L1 and used gibberish from their L2 instead. This is an astonishing quality of language acquisition very present in child language acquisition but typically unseen in output from adults. In later cases, mentors focused on assisting the recognized gibberish and brought about the proper word and pronunciation.

One example of this was when telling the story of Three Languages by Brothers Grimm. The son of the count was ordered to go and see a guru. Learners struggled to find a word for guru in their L1 and therefore relied on a gibberish-sounding attempt at the difficult to pronounce word: guru. Further extrapolation revealed that

often times the gibberish, refined alongside the assisting mentor made for the learner's first words in their L2 to be uncommon to the average learner and sometimes non - directly - translatable. When a novice exhibits a spectrum of higher order vocabulary alongside their learning of the basics (such as greetings, numbers and lists of nouns) it is evident that a much broader and more comprehensive synthesis of language learning is taking place. Mentors concluded from these first studies that fostering TA through live-storytelling produced immediate measurable results in terms of aural comprehension, measured by the retelling of the story in their L2, but also in the output, measured in the use of gibberish.

From 2013 to 2015, Originateve-mentors continued to work exhaustively, developing the storytelling techniques that would allow adult learners to experience the development of tolerance for ambiguity through storytelling while reducing the numbers of frustrated participants that preemptively abandoned the approach. Three key elements were determined to allow adult learners to experience the benefits of storytelling. First, when working with adults being regenerated back into receptivity to story, it is key to offer a healthy dose of the theory of why it works whereas with younger learners the less one moves away from the story the better. Secondly, adults still enjoy "traditional language learning approaches" such as vocabulary lists. For the first several storytelling sessions, new vocabulary is given to the adult learners in a sort of "road map" fashion as a way to help them get through the story similar to how books for young learners have pictures to accompany the texts to aid them and draw their interest. Thirdly, as noted in the case study mentioned above, some adult learners do benefit from being challenged to retell the story in their

L1 language as a way of self-realizing the acquisition that has taken place despite the feeling of being lost.

In light of Singleton's daunting 5 percent, the research being carried out by Originateve is promising: Oral storytelling can regenerate a tolerance for ambiguity in the adult learner and allow more thorough and rapid acquisition of second languages. The ancient world was renowned for its multilingualism. How could this be carried out with such ease? Undoubtedly, a strong oral tradition was the driving force. Socrates forewarned of the folly of straying from the spoken word, "...*writing will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls*". The evidence for how storytelling can enable second language acquisition by developing a strong tolerance for ambiguity is hopefully compelling enough for some instructors to put down the scripts and start delivering their lines by heart.

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