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ABSTRACT

This keynote address by a native Vietnamese speaker who did not learn English until he was college-age, through the now obsolete "grammar-translation" method, recounts his difficulties in learning to converse orally in English. He stresses the need to teach conversational English to English Language Learners (ELLs) in addition to academic English, as well as a great deal more about everyday American culture. (KFT)

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Keynote Speech by Dr. Phap Dam
at the Texas Education Agency's Sixth Annual
Conference for Diverse Learners in Secondary Schools
June 28 and 29, 2001
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Hindsight of an English Language Learner

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Distinguished colleagues:

I have come a very long way in the process of acquiring American English since the day I was a "limited-English-proficient" freshman at Miami University in Ohio in the Fall of 1959. But this achievement has been a life-long effort whose beginning stage was quite daunting. I am gratified that my passion for English and a few other foreign languages has turned me into a dedicated language educator at the University of Saigon from 1965 to 1975 and now at Texas Woman's University.

I was the product of Tran Luc Junior High School and Chu Van An Senior High School, which were reputable government-run learning institutions in Saigon. The instructional language in these schools was Vietnamese, my emotional language, which I used so easily and safely, without any fear of mispronunciation or bad syntax at all! I started learning French in elementary school in Hanoi, and I continued to learn it with passion until my graduation from high school. But I had to wait until junior high school for the pleasure of learning English.

In my culture, teachers have always been revered, and few (if any) students dare to criticize or challenge their teachers. But in retrospect, I must say that my teachers of English back then were extremely unqualified because of the circumstances: English was too unfamiliar to us in the mid-1950s, and teachers taught it mostly "by default." They tried their best to teach us, but they themselves had problems with pronunciation and lacked fluency in spoken English. English was taught as a written language only, with total focus on grammatical rules and

English-Vietnamese and Vietnamese-English translation activities. Only much later on, when I became a graduate student in linguistics at Georgetown University, did I find out with joy that the method used by my teachers of English back then actually had a very apt name: the "grammar-translation method"! Thanks to this method, I did become a pretty good translator and grammarian whose written English was both grammatical and correctly spelled. To tell the truth, even at that young age, I could, for example, thanks to excessive rote learning, describe the structure and exemplify the usage of the future perfect progressive tense. That is a pretty sophisticated tense even native speakers of English seldom use, as in the sentence "By this time next week, we will have been living in Paris for two days." In light of a leading current theory on second-language acquisition, at that time I was making maximal use of the third processor named Monitor, which is among the three processors enabling us to acquire languages that Stephen Krashen and collaborators (1982) identified to interpret Noam Chomsky's concept of "language organ" in the human brain (1965). The Monitor enabled me to consciously learn and master the rules of English grammar and long lists of English words, but it did not help me acquire fluency in spoken English at all. I had no opportunities to activate the second processor named Organizer, whose function is to help learners to subconsciously acquire fluency or automatic speech in an incidental manner, much like the way we all effortlessly acquired fluency in our native tongues. As to the first processor named Affective Filter, which serves as a gatekeeper for the language organ and determines the amount of language input to be admitted for processing based on the learner's motivation level, it was in full cooperation with me: this sensitive and subconscious processor knew that I was a passionate student of languages!

My acquisition of English vocabularies was accelerated by my knowledge of French. These two languages share thousands of cognates, such as "république" and "republic" and "congrès" and "congress." I just transferred them from French to English, paying attention to the differences in spelling and pronunciation and watching out for possible false cognates (known in French as "faux amis"). An example of false

cognates between French and English is "demander" and "to demand": the French verb "demander" actually means "to request" in English. Practitioners of English-Spanish bilingual education all agree that cognates (known in Spanish as "palabras afines") are indeed a blessing in the classroom, in spite of a number of false ones, for example, while "constipated" means "having difficult evacuation of the bowels" in English, "constipado" means "suffering from a cold" in Spanish!

I graduated with honors from senior high school in the Summer of 1959 after having passed, with high scores, a battery of rigorous written and oral final examinations administered by the government. And right after that, without any vacation at all, I competed with hundreds of other high school graduates in a national all-English contest (similar in content to today's SAT) conducted by the Saigon government and the USAID office to select 15 recipients of a prestigious four-year national "leadership scholarship" to study in the United States. Winning that national scholarship has been one of the proudest moments in my life, as it made my family extremely proud.

After several perfunctory orientation sessions on American culture and language at the newly-established Vietnamese-American Association in Saigon, I flew to America to start my college education at age 18. When the plane had a stopover in Honolulu for a couple of hours, I decided to take a walk in the terminal to stretch my legs. Alas, as soon as my feet hit the Hawaiian ground, I was overwhelmed by homesickness! I had never had that awful feeling before. And when I heard people around me speak nothing but English for the first time in my life, I felt eerily insecure. And just a few days afterwards I arrived at the university that I was to attend the next three years. Miami University had a breathtakingly beautiful campus, but I felt like a stranger in paradise. My homesickness became more intense in that gorgeous environment. And to my chagrin, it dawned on me that there was a vast difference between spoken English and written English, which was my forte. I also found out very soon that the textbook dialogues between two people in different real-life situations (at the post office, at the barbershop, in the

hospital, and so on) that I had memorized "just in case" were of little help simply because there were no Americans around that had memorized those same written dialogues! Using Jim Cummins' popular terminologies for second-language proficiency to characterize my situation back then, I would say that my "basic interpersonal communicative skills" (BICS) or "conversational English" was very weak and that my "cognitive academic language proficiency" (CALP) or "academic English" also needed to improve very quickly so that I might be able to compete against native speakers in the classroom.

I did not even know how to respond when friendly Americans said "hi" to me; they must have thought I was either egregiously unfriendly or totally deaf. The embarrassing truth was that I had not been taught that "hi" was just another way of saying "hello" in America. My spoken English at that time was idiosyncratic, archaic, flowery, unnatural, and therefore "un-American." It was the product of my translation skill and my use of anachronistic vocabularies and prescriptive grammatical rules which did not lend themselves to conversational English at all. In the terminologies of Ken Goodman, my way of learning English then was a total "personal invention" that had so little in common with "social convention" or the authentic way Americans use their language. My roommate Dick Welday was very friendly and sincere. A short time after we moved in, he said with a smile, "your English is unusual, but I still understand you." That evening Dick invited a couple of friends to our room to meet me. (I guess he had told them about me and my idiosyncratic speech). After he had introduced them to me, he said, "Phap, tell us about the weather in Saigon when you left a few days ago." Invoking my translation skill and my command of flowery vocabulary and textbook grammar, I responded, "My friends, when I took leave of my beloved fatherland, which is situated near the equator, the weather was scorchingly hot." They looked puzzled but seemed to be intrigued by what they had just heard from a fellow freshman from Saigon. I felt uneasy, so I asked Dick to express what I had just told the group "the American way." Laughing, he said, "when you left Saigon, it was hot like hell!" My goodness, he had just taught me a fantastic lesson in colloquial

spoken American English: use "leave" instead of "take leave of" and the bold and powerful expression "like hell" as an intensifier! All the good stuff that I had never been exposed to before. Dick's sentence is much more natural and expressive than mine, don't you agree?

My first few weeks at Miami were daunting, as I had to cope with an agonizing homesickness and an inexplicable sense of vulnerability. I felt like a fish out of water, with everything around me going topsy-turvy. I also suddenly realized that my skin color, my height, my weight, and my accent made me stand out wherever I was on that virtually lily-white campus. In today's educational jargon, I was suffering from "culture shock," which is the painful stage of the "acculturation process." I am sure many of you in the audience have also had this unpleasant experience. Learning is difficult when culture shock bogs you down, right?

Attending classes was no picnic for me throughout the first semester, either. It was impossible for me to take notes from the professors' lectures because they spoke too fast and my listening comprehension ability left much to be desired. My face would light up whenever they wrote something on the chalkboard which I read and jotted down easily. I really dreaded the first library-research assignment because I had never had that kind of experience before. I envied my American classmates who had done this many times in their secondary schools. Fortunately, the library staff was so kind to me and helped me with my needs. The first essay I wrote in my English Composition class taught me a big lesson, and that was "do not mess with English punctuation!" I did everything right for that piece of writing except punctuation. I almost fainted when the paper was returned with a "D" in red ink on its front page. I spoke to the professor after class about my poor grade and he said, "you have murdered English punctuation." He recommended that I take English punctuation much more seriously. Indeed, my innocent use of a much less standardized and enforced Vietnamese punctuation system to write that paper in English led to numerous "comma splices" and "run-on sentences," which are serious

violations of English rhetoric. In those days American professors were probably never trained in "contrastive rhetoric," so they did not tolerate exotic writing styles and punctuation systems displayed by culturally diverse students.

I faced another linguistic handicap, and that was that Americans used too many idioms in their everyday speech whose meanings I frequently failed to get. I tended to give such idioms a literal meaning, which was of course almost always wrong. How on earth could I ever have understood that " break a leg" actually means "good luck" and "kick the bucket" is a colloquial way of saying "die"? One beautiful Sunday morning I made a (Vietnamese-style) unannounced visit to a charming classmate whom I was very fond of at her dormitory. Lisa met me in the lounge and she was not too cheerful. Without make-up on, she looked older, pale and sickly. She blurted out, "Phap, I wish you had given me a ring before you came this morning." I thought she was talking about an engagement ring as a pre-requisite for that visit, so I pleaded innocently, "Lisa, we are both only 18. Why should we get engaged at such a young age?" Her face lit up because of my gross misunderstanding of her words, and smilingly she "taught" me, "Phap, you silly boy. What I meant was simply that you should have telephoned me before you stopped by this morning." Needless to say, I apologized profusely for that terrible social blunder. Lisa was my chief source for colloquial American English and she also patiently explained to me the meanings of such American cultural notions as Valentine's Day, Homecoming, and Dutch treat. That background knowledge (now known as "schema") about American culture was absolutely important to me. I owe her a great linguistic and cultural debt. Through that fortunate experience, I am convinced that a second language is acquired effectively with the help of someone who speaks that language natively and who really cares about the learner. With that someone the lucky learner is never too shy or too tired to practice the new language. Affection is certainly helpful in second-language acquisition! Using today's educational terminologies again, I would say that thanks to my frequent conversations with Lisa I gradually "revised" my "personal invention" of English to make it more and more

like Lisa's language which authentically represented the "social convention."

Those of us that have taught English in Third World countries know that the "grammar-translation" method is not quite dead. Students in those countries are still going through what I went through decades ago. And many of these students are now attending secondary schools and colleges in Texas. What should we do to help them if they are having language-related academic difficulties?

Convinced that making use of hindsight should be beneficial, let me suggest that we do for them what I wish had been done for me. We should understand their anxieties, their feelings of inadequacy and vulnerability. We should be their advocates, especially during their culture shock period. Each lesson should contain activities that promote both conversational English (BICS) and academic English (CALP). BICS should be developed through meaningful practice of indispensable language functions like greetings, expressing congratulations, offering condolences, declining an invitation, apologizing, and so on. CALP can be enhanced by formal instruction focusing on vocabularies and structures that are specific for each and every content area. For instance, in mathematics, such vocabularies as "square root" and "least common denominator" and such structures as "five times as high" and "x is defined as a number greater than 7" ought to be taught to them until mastery. We should help develop their schemata of American culture. Encouraging them to talk and write about their native language and culture in English is a wonderful way to reassure their self-esteem, which is conducive to academic achievement. Writing in dialogue journals should be a regular activity, and we should faithfully respond to their journal entries. They will appreciate and value what we write back, as a form of personalized communication: our responses allow them to access "social convention" through our conventional spelling, diction, punctuation, and syntax. We should teach them the meanings of popular idioms in American English. To prevent them from making errors caused by rhetorical differences, we should teach them how to use the "writing

process" in producing a text; this will keep them from writing English the "circular" way or ignoring the highly standardized and enforced American punctuation. And finally, let's not penalize them for making errors caused by negative transfer in their early stage of developing English literacy; as a matter of fact, we should all have some knowledge about contrastive rhetoric so that we may help them more efficiently in the classroom.

Texas, like the rest of this great country, is educating an ever-growing number of English language learners. Our role as language educators is thus more and more crucial. I would like to close my remarks today with a Chinese proverb, and that is "liang shi xing guo" or "good teachers make the country prosperous." Thank you for your attention.

NOTE: Dr. Phap Dam currently teaches linguistics and directs the bilingual and ESL education programs at Texas Woman's University. The conference in which he delivered the above keynote speech was attended by over 500 language educators from school districts and universities throughout Texas. His email address is <PDAM@TWU.EDU>.

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