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Engaging students' imaginations in second language learning

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Abstract

Imagination is rarely acknowledged as one of the main workhorses of learning. Unfortunately, disregarding the imagination has some clearly negative pedagogical impacts: Learning is more ineffective than it should be and much schooling is more tedious than it need be. In this paper, we outline a somewhat new way of thinking about the process of students' language education. We focus on the kinds of "cognitive tools" or learning "toolkits" human beings develop as they grow up, which connect emotion and imagination with knowledge in the learning process. We show how employing these tools—indeed, how their central employment in all aspects of planning—can make learning other languages engaging and meaningful.

Keywords: imagination, cognitive tools, embodied learning, oral language, literacy

Games, drama, play, rhythm and rhyme, pattern, story, image creation, metaphor, personalizing objects, changing the context, a sense of wonder, a sense of mystery, and the odd (and not-so-odd) joke are all tools that com-

pose the pedagogical toolkit of most, if not all, second language teachers. Let us look at three such teachers.

Teacher one. It is not uncommon for a brand new teacher of a second language to emerge from her teacher education program with fully equipped pedagogical toolkits; the sun glints off, as yet, unscratched tools designed to smoothly teach the elements of a second language. She has games for everything. She may even have images and stories at hand, as well as songs and funky raps intended to make learning a second language fun, to creatively teach new vocabulary, to facilitate understanding of the subtleties of verb conjugation, to aid in memorization and, hopefully, to engage students' imaginations in the process.

Teacher two. Enter the classroom of a *seasoned* second language teacher. The same teaching tools pave the way for student understanding. There are games for every unit. The teacher may have pictures on the walls of different countries, evoking images of language and culture. The teacher plays music and shows clips of films and television as a means to connect the classroom a little more authentically to the target language. In this second language classroom—it happens to be French—the teacher throws out one of his best jokes, "How many eggs does Johnny eat in the morning." No answer. A few eyes roll and a couple of sighs and groans are heard. "Just one – one egg is enough" (*un oeuf* – get it? Ouch!). In this classroom, learning a second language is described as a voyage; a voyage into uncharted territory where the unfamiliar, and yet familiar, characterize the land. The tools of the seasoned second language teacher are worn, scratched, even dented, but still do the job. They aid in memorization and make learning all the more palatable for students and teacher alike. The students enjoy the process.

Consider now a third kind of teacher. She has been trained in *imaginative* second language instruction. While she enters the classroom with the same tools as those described above, she understands that these tools are in fact features of her students' thinking. She has many other tools at her disposal for teaching a second language, as well as a thorough training in their use and application to second language acquisition. We look now at what characterizes the classroom of the *imaginative* second language teacher and practical ways in which any second language teacher may more thoroughly engage their students' imaginations in learning by employing cognitive tools. Watch the story structure and narrative understanding, personalizing objects, metaphor, image creation, abstract binary oppositions, games, drama and play, rhyme, rhythm and pattern, extremes of experience and limits of reality, the sense of wonder, and the sense of mystery render second language acquisition meaningful for students.

In this paper, we will outline a somewhat new way of thinking about the process of students' language education. We focus on the kinds of "cognitive

tools" or learning "toolkits" students develop as they grow up. In schools and institutes for training language instructors and in most currently dominant psychological theories of development, from Piaget's and Vygotsky's to information-processing and more recent forms of evolutionary and ecological theories, short-shrift is given to some of the most powerful learning tools students have available to make sense of their world and experience and of the languages that surround them (cf. e.g., Miller, 2009; Shafer & Kipp, 2013). Often, it seems, educators think of the imagination as something of an educational frill—something to try to engage after the hard work of learning had occurred. In this article, we will try to show that focusing on central features of students' learning "toolkits" makes it clear that the imagination is one of the great workhorses of learning, and that we ignore it at the cost of making learning more ineffective than it should be and much schooling more tedious than it need be. Rather than continue to think about these tools as "tricks" or "hooks" for learning, we indicate how their routine use—indeed, how their central employment in all aspects of planning—can make learning other languages engaging and meaningful. Before looking at the individual tools and how we might deploy them in teaching, let us begin with an example that can give a clearer impression of what we are suggesting in our introduction.

Imagine inviting your students with you through the creaking door of the dilapidated old shed hidden in the woods of a nearby park. Inside, through the moonlight that manages to penetrate the solitary window, thick with dust, mildew, and cobwebs, you can see shelves of rusted tins and glass jars of all shapes and sizes. In the corner, slowly rocking back and forth, twisting her hands, is a grizzly old woman wearing a long, torn, black cloak. Her face is shrouded with thick layers of greasy grey hair, her face deeply lined and covered with black and brown moles each sprouting three or four coarse black hairs. And yet this repulsive person has the magic spells required to move through time. For those who have the nerve to enter her lair—a shed, you might add, that is only visible on certain cycles of the moon and at exactly six minutes before dawn—she can provide the spell required. The spell required to move back in time is a little more complicated than most. It requires a steady hand and a sober head. She throws three items into the cauldron that bubbles in the centre of the room—a subject of some kind, either *avoir* or *être*, and a verb in past form. When cast in the proper way, this spell allows one to express the past—to in effect move in time.

This example hints at how to engage students' emotions and imaginations in learning about a verb tense—something that, perhaps, does not seem particularly imaginatively engaging. While our example is for French language teaching, it could easily be adapted to any other foreign language. The key is

that imaginative teachers will try to engage their students' sense of wonder around the "tool" that is the past tense—to give some sense that what is so commonly taken for granted that it is just a chore to learn is in fact an astonishing human achievement. The use of the imagination brings out again that sense of wonder at the achievement, rather than focus entirely on the routines of everyday translation. Teachers might engage their students' sense of mystery in this particular feature of language learning by creating a Harry Potteresque story line. This example shows one way to begin to engage students' imaginations with the sense of mystery lying at the heart of a structure of language that symbolically moves us through time. It also teaches students the knowledge they need to properly write the past tense but it does so in a way that leaves them *feeling* something for the topic; they are intrigued, and possibly a little spooked, by the power of the tense.

Some Theoretical Background

We begin by sketching the main ideas that have accumulated historically into our current conception of education, in order to indicate what is distinctive about the approach we are recommending. The first and oldest educational idea is that we should shape children to the norms, values, and beliefs of the adult society around them through socialization processes. We recognize this idea of education when items in the curriculum are justified on the basis of their future social utility. So, for example, reading, writing, computing, sex-education, consumer-economics, basic common knowledge, teaching other languages, and so on, are all justified in terms of their importance for someone to get on, get a job, and be a good citizen in today's society.

The second educational idea was largely Plato's. As he chatted with the best and brightest of Athens, he concluded that well-socialized citizens were more or less contemptible. Their ready acceptance of the conventional norms and values of the society they grew into seemed to him appalling. He showed that such beliefs were typically a collection of confusions, illusions, stereotypes, prejudices, and dogmas that did not bear much scrutiny. Plato conceived of education as the process of seeking the truth about reality. For Plato, the mind is made up largely of the knowledge that it accumulates, and accumulating a lot of the right kind of disciplined knowledge can turn the mind from its easy acceptance of whatever conventional rubbish happens to be fashionable to an austere and disciplined search for what is true, good, and beautiful.

The third idea is largely derived from Jean-Jacques Rousseau. He shared Plato's view that early socialization generally taught children a lot of nonsense that was immensely difficult to dislodge once learned. However, he thought Plato

was wrong in his view that children's minds were shaped largely by the knowledge that they accumulate. He argued that the mind has an internal, spontaneous, natural developmental process through which it grows, and proper education is the process of furthering its fullest development. So, for Rousseau, education became a matter of facilitating the fullest development of a natural psychological process, and thereby fulfilling as far as possible the potential of each individual student. This has become the anchoring idea of "progressivism."

Pretty well all modern conceptions of education, from the most radical to the most conservative, are compounded from these three ideas. Nobody subscribes to one of these ideas exclusively. We all believe in each of them to some degree but we tend to differ in the balance. So the more radical conceptions tend to combine a large amount of Rousseau with a small dose of socializing and are very sparing with the Plato. The conservative tends to stir in a good measure of Plato, a healthy dose of socializing, and go light on the Rousseau. The average politician throws in a very large dose of socializing, is very sparing with Rousseau, and sprinkles in just a little bit of Plato.

How else can we think about education? We can think of it as learning to use as well as possible the cognitive tools developed in our evolution and cultural history. We think we can reconceive education as the process whereby we acquire as fully as possible the major symbolic tools invented or discovered in human cultures. Each major set of tools generates somewhat distinctive kinds of understanding. We now briefly outline these main sets of tools and describe the kinds of understanding to which they give rise.

But what does a "cognitive tool" look like? Imagine you are on the plains of Africa 75,000 years ago. It is mid-day and very hot. Ahead of you is a large lean-to built around a thorn tree. You can wander inside the shelter, and can see and hear the small tribe work and talk. At the back of the lean-to, on the most comfortable skins, a corpulent gentleman lies snoring. He is clearly held in high regard by the tribe. You discover that he is held in high regard because a dozen years earlier he invented the past tense.

Everyone is using the past tense now, including neighbouring tribes, through whom it is passing like wildfire, and your tribe is receiving much praise for its invention. The past tense adds to people's ability to articulate features of our experience with greater clarity and scope. But, you learn, the corpulent gentleman at the back of the tent has twin daughters, and it was actually the daughters who invented the past tense, and their father has since taken the credit. The daughters are now young adults and, more sensitive to intellectual property rights, plan a launch of the subjunctive in the following week.

Well, someone invented the past tense and the subjunctive. They did not just happen. The invention and elaboration of these features of our language adds

to our ability to make sense of our experience and to articulate it to others. When we learn a language, we pick up endless "tools" of this kind, which become for us tools for thinking, learning and communicating. In the 75,000 years since our scenario on the African plains, human beings have invented a huge array of cognitive tools that can enhance our ability to think, to learn, to communicate, and to understand our world and our human condition. The simplistic scenario is designed to illuminate a little Lev Vygotsky's (1962, 1997) conception of development as picking up sets of cognitive tools as we grow up in a society. The theory of "imaginative education" we describe here, then, is a conception of education that sees the aim of schooling as *maximizing for us the array of cognitive tools we pick up as we interact with the cultural world around us* (Egan, 1997).

The Body's Toolkit

The first tool we have available for understanding the world is our body. If you have a body—you might want to check this now—you have a set of sense-making and learning tools available to you; these are tools that remain with you for the rest of your life—though they change somewhat over time. The potent role of embodied learning is increasingly being recognized (cf. Bresler, 2004; Kaparo, 2012; Katz, 2013).

Senses: The inescapable elements of our body's toolkit are our senses—our sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell, which we value more or less in that order. These senses are stimulated in our earliest years, and babies take a particular delight in games that combine a number of them: plops, clicks, and squeaks that create, then follow, patterns that involve sight, touch, and hearing. Our senses are necessary for our initial understanding of the world and allow us to perceive and deal with a certain range and scale of the phenomena of our environments.

Emotions: A central feature of our bodies' meaning-making toolkit is its emotional nature. These emotions will persist and develop as the most basic orientors and organizers of our cognition throughout our lives. The way in which we respond to the physical and social world around us depends, importantly, on our emotions: From an early age, we experience profound emotional patterns such as expectation and frustration, or satisfaction of the expectation.

Indeed, the way we interpret events, including our later ability to critically analyse them, will always be shot through with emotions. Delight, distress, elation, horror, satisfaction, anger, compassion, or fear constitute elements of the underlying matrix that shapes our responses, and thus even rationality itself. If we recognize the foundational development of our bodies' emotional core, we will be less likely to see cognition, and cognitive tools, as somehow separate from our emotional lives; however sophisticated our think-

ing becomes, it will always be oriented and shaped by the emotions of the body within which it occurs (cf. Benesch, 2012; Swain, 2013).

Pattern and musicality: Stephen Mithen's *The Singing Neanderthals* (2007) has helped to show how profoundly we are musical animals. Our musicality seems a central feature of our body's toolkit, perhaps, as Mithen suggests, from early in our evolution as modern humans. We look for meaning in patterns from our earliest years of life, even when what we see, hear, or touch may be quite random. We begin to construct that uniquely human kind of meaning on the back of these patterned regularities our senses deliver to us. There is, of course, a huge amount of recent research showing the importance of pattern recognition in infants' learning, in language learning and visual recognition of their world (see, for example, Kirchhoff & Schimmel, 2005; and the multitude of studies from the Stanford University Center for Infant Studies: http://www-psych.stanford.edu/~babylab/index.html).

Humour: Another prominent component of our bodies' toolkit is humour. While educators have typically neglected humour, or treated it as some relatively casual frill, the presence of humour in our earliest interactions suggests that its stimulation and development might be profoundly important to us, and consequently should be considered as a constituent of any adequate program of education. It is useful to remember that humour, in many of its forms, is based on incongruity (Clossen, 2007; Gordon, 2013; Monro, 2012). An ability to deal easily and pleasurably with incongruity contributes to flexibility of mind, which is an important component of an educated person. Humour is important for many things, not least the delight it can give to experience, but it has a distinctive educational importance in its contribution to flexible, imaginative, and creative thinking.

Our bodily sense of humour becomes evident in such early activities as the mutual sticking out of tongues, tickling, the hiding and revealing of peek-a-boo, and other forms of pretend that so delight babies and elicit laughter. All our behaviors seems accessible to a sense of humour, both to enrich the experience itself and to recognize it as parts of contexts that we can also transcend. There is a range of research now available showing a number of dimensions of learning that are aided by humour (see Garner, 2005, 2006).

Many other learning tools of the body could be explored (Egan, 1997, 2006). But these few examples suffice to suggest how we might see the body as providing a set of important "tools" whose development can properly be seen as appropriate for an educational program. Their value to all learning, perhaps especially learning languages, is, we hope, evident.

The Toolkit of Oral Language

When we become fluent users of an oral language, we acquire a further toolkit for sense-making. These tools will remain with us throughout life and can be drawn on for imaginative teaching of adults no less than children. All people who can use an oral language, or some other form of language, such as signing, will have the following tools available in varying degrees.

Story form: One implication of being an oral language-user is responsiveness to stories. All oral cultures that we know of have developed and used stories. Shaped by logical and psychological constraints, the invention of language seems to imply the inevitable development of stories.

But what are stories? How are they distinguishable from other narratives? If we were to say "He shot Tom," you will likely have no particular or precise response (unless, perhaps, your name is Tom). If we elaborate this narrative and add that "he" is a handsome, well-groomed young man who loves his grandmother, and that Tom is generally scruffy, bearded, picks his nose in public, and uses foul language in front of children, you may begin to feel glad that he shot Tom—given the conventions of fiction today. But if the narrative is extended further, telling you that "he" and the grandmother are leaders of a drug-pushing operation who specialize in selling to kids outside schools, and also that Tom, despite his unprepossessing exterior, has a heart of gold and is taking terrible risks to stop the grandmother's and her grandson's nefarious operations . . . Well, you will probably begin to feel sorry that he shot Tom. When we know securely how to feel about "He shot Tom," we know we have reached the end of the story.

Stories, then, are one of the forms of narrative, but a distinctive form that uniquely can fix our emotional orientation to the elements that make them up. No other narrative form can do this. We ascribe affective meaning to events, and to people, and to our own lives, by plotting them into provisional or partial stories. The reason we might reasonably consider the story as the most important social invention is that they orient the emotions of their hearers to their contents. We can, of course, make sense of our experience in a number of other modalities, but to whatever degree our emotional orientation is involved, then the plotting of events into partial or provisional or overarching stories will be involved. We are creatures who understand an important dimension of our experience and our world in story shapes.

Abstract and affective binary opposites: Forming, and mediating between, binary opposites, also seems to be another development of the kinds of sense-making we employ prior to language development. Fairy tales such as *Cinderella*, *Hansel and Gretel* or *Jack the Giant Killer* are all built on top of powerful, abstract,

binary oppositions such as security and anxiety, pleasure and pain, expectation and satisfaction, happiness and sadness, and so on. Bettelheim (1976) analyses the "manner in which [children] can bring some order into [their] world by dividing everything into opposites" (p. 74; see also Propp, 1985; Zipes, 1991).

Jokes: In much the same way as physical rhythm transforms into our language, so too do our earliest bodily games and humour give birth to jokes; the physical fun of peek-a-boo becomes the fun of the concocted language of riddles, puns and other forms of jokes. "Maybe you know when cooks are mean? When they beats eggs and whip cream." Jokes such as these, which typically delight young children, rely greatly on incongruity. They also make visible features of language that might otherwise be taken merely as behaviours. That is, the child has to recognize that while whipping and beating are often expressions of meanness, they are not so in the case of cooks in their kitchens. The humour comes from recognizing the different meanings of the same words in special contexts. So we learn to see language as an object, not merely as a behaviour. This develops "metacognition" of language, which is crucial to the development of flexible and creative language use (Herriman, 1986).

Images: Like humour, the array of images available to our minds, while somewhat limited in our early years, is suddenly enriched immensely by the acquisition of language. We seem unable to not form images as we hear events described in words, and a range of the effects of stories depends, to a great extent, upon listeners' ability to form images in their minds. These can be so intense initially that most people seem able to recall with surprising clarity the images they formed when listening to stories in their early years (Cowan, 1998). The ability to call up precise and rich images is a unique feature of our minds and is clearly connected with the development of the imagination.

The Toolkit of Literacy

Once we become fluently literate we can pick up a whole new toolkit. Literacy in general can deliver to the developing mind a new kind of conception of reality (Bruner, 1986). The impact of coming to terms with this new intellectual world generates a new set of cognitive tools, which we can deploy in teaching, because we can be sure all our literate students will also have these tools, in addition to the ones explored above.

The extremes of reality: The initial literacy-driven exploration of reality is of its extremes, of the strange, the bizarre, the wonderful. It is not just coincidental that one of the world's most popular books with newly literate children is the *Guinness Book of Records*, nor that the best-selling texts are such papers as the *National Inquirer*. A rather odd part of the folklore of teaching is that

students' exploration of the world will be more enthusiastic if we begin with what is immediate and relevant to their everyday experience. But we can readily observe that their interest is most commonly and energetically engaged by the exotic, the strange, the wonderful, by the limits of reality and the extremes of experience—with who had the longest finger nails ever rather than the structure of their local neighborhood.

Associating with the heroic: While the exploration of this newly problematic reality can be exciting, it can also be threatening. The threats can be significantly relieved by associating with someone or something that seems best able to overcome them. So associations are formed with embodiments of those human qualities that transcend the everyday constraining and threatening world; whether it is an association with the outrageousness of a pop-singing Lady Ga-Ga (and her freedom from having to behave conventionally, and her money and power) or with the skill and strength of a sports star (and his/her skill, money, and power).

Accumulation of details: Nearly all young people begin a hobby or a collection at about age seven (Burk, 2010; Coe, 1984; Opie & Opie, 1959). The activity reaches a peak of intensity at about age eleven, and usually dies out at about age fifteen. What is going on? Why do nearly all students engage in this kind of activity? Why do we see this powerful spontaneous intellectual engagement in nearly all children? An adequate explanation is beyond what we can manage here, or anywhere, but we can see it as a response to young people's orientation to reality. That is, when a child learns to read (indeed, when we, too, learned to read—though we do not often recall) we often see that Santa Claus and the tooth fairy are left behind, and the real world is seen as worryingly extensive. One way we can achieve some security is to gain exhaustive intellectual control over some part of it. Commercial interests, of course, are very alert to this engagement, and so they produce sets of collectible objects that have the twin requirements of being moderately extensive but also limited and exhaustible.

We can draw on this cognitive tool when teaching almost anything. All topics have within them some area of knowledge that is both moderately extensive and also exhaustible.

Human knowledge: We sometimes suggest to our students that there is no knowledge in the library or on the internet. What they find in these places are only codes, which we can reconstruct into knowledge if we become familiar with the tools of literacy. But no one derives the same knowledge from any particular set of codes, and the only source of knowledge is in living human tissue, in our brains. This leads to a simple principle—that all knowledge is human knowledge; that it is derived from human hopes, fears, and passions; and that if we want students to understand the knowledge—reconstruct it

from the codes in their minds—they need to see it in the context of the human hopes, fears, and passions that generated it in the first place or within which it finds a living meaning today. This connection to human emotional experience is as important in the context of foreign language learning as it is in mathematics, history, or visual arts.

Essentially, we could go on characterizing additional cognitive tools in each category above, and we could also extend this description to further sets of toolkits. However, given the shortage of space, let us instead recommend further reading in Egan (1997) or, for a more practically oriented book, Egan (2005). The implications for how these kinds of observations lead directly to methods of teaching can be found on the website of the Imaginative Education Research group (www.ierg.net).

Conclusion

What we want to suggest is that we can reconceive education as an enterprise aimed at ensuring for each of our students as full as possible an acquisition of each of these toolkits. Each set of cognitive tools yields a somewhat distinctive kind of understanding, and we can describe the educational process as a series of kinds of understanding (Egan, 1997). Acquiring them ensures that the sensible aims of education embodied in the old ideas will be achieved incidentally; a person who gains in significant degree the use of the toolkits briefly described above will necessarily have to acquire a lot of knowledge, will have to attain significant psychological maturity, and will become socially competent. What will not happen is traditional socialization to conformity, nor the acquisition of particular "élite" knowledge that privileges one against others, nor the pursuit of some supposedly proper developmental process; and we will leave behind us the enervating battles among these incompatible aims. Instead, the emotional lives of our students are given the central place they are due in the context of schooling. Teachers of foreign languages, then, will make learning meaningful—and language acquisition more effective—by employing their students' cognitive tools. By doing so, language learning aligns with and enriches students' kinds of understanding.

These are not stages we pass through; they are kinds of understanding we accumulate and that coalesce to some degree. This scheme does not describe a psychological process through which we spontaneously develop as we grow older; rather, it characterizes forms of thinking evoked in individuals today, as they were evoked in our cultural history, by the development of particular symbolic tools. If these tools are not supported by appropriate educational activities, they will not be acquired in any adequate way, and the forms

of understanding they stimulate will not develop.

Each of the sets of cognitive tools mentioned above also gives us clues to how we can teach more effectively, engaging students' imaginations in learning anything in the curriculum. For second language teachers—as for any teacher—when we shape our teaching in ways that employ these tools then we can make knowledge meaningful for students. As we acknowledge at the beginning, many of these tools are not "new" for language teachers—indeed, many consider them tried and true "tricks" for learning and making it enjoyable. Our aim in this paper has been to indicate the much more profound pedagogical role these tools play for student learning and engagement and the central position they should play in teaching.

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