

We must distinguish between studying and learning English

September 28, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

Last week's column ended with a promise to continue a discussion of a problem that many of us care deeply about. That problem is the apparent dwindling of interest in Taiwan in the study of the English language. Interestingly, an article on this very topic that appeared locally in the interim since last Sunday seems to have used the term "learn" without being conscious of a nuance it has in the United States and perhaps other English-speaking lands.

"Why do Taiwan's university graduates continue to have difficulty with English after learning it for at least 12 years at school?" asks a local reporter in "Practical makes perfect" (TT 9-25-14, p. 12).

There are more important issues to address than the matter of a twist in the usage of a common word which people may use differently in a different part of the world. In this case, however, the nitpicking in which I engage has a logic to it. A consequence of using some words in a very specific way may say something about attitude. And attitude is a, if not the, magical word when it comes to mastering a new language.

When I visit the United States every now and then, someone is bound to ask me, "How long did it take you to learn Chinese?" I don't even blink. "Oh, believe me," I say, "I haven't learned Mandarin yet. I began studying it long ago, and I still study it."

I use "Mandarin" to highlight the fact there are many forms of Chinese language, which uninformed Americans may not realize. I insist on being pedantic about "study" because, well, I'm sorry, but I was taught from the age of 9 or 10 that there is a difference between "learn" and "study." Learning is a long-term pursuit, a search for knowledge that is endless. Whether we are 6, 16, 26, or 66, all of us are learning every day. In what some call American English, "studying" is a far more isolated act.

I studied Latin and German for 6 years in school. Can I speak or read those languages easily today? No. I never really learned those languages. Latin is quite useful when I teach English, however, because gobs of Latin words are the roots of English vocabulary. Luckily for me, I did retain a grasp of some of that Latin.

Why did I never get really good at Latin and German? The answer is simple: I never had to. The new language in which I eventually had to become reasonably competent was Mandarin Chinese.

If we were to ask Taiwan students if they **MUST** master English, positively must, what percentage of them would say "yes"? Perhaps 1 or 2 per cent? Of course we'd have to ascertain their mastery of "master" as a verb. Mastering a skill means becoming very good at it.

The author of "Practical," cited above, says Taiwanese student performance in the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is worse for university than it is for high school students. I am not surprised. English proficiency for most of our students peaks, he says, "while they are preparing for the joint college entrance exam, and then declines during their university years . . ." This also is no shock. When pushed to excel in exams, Taiwan students generally do just that: they excel in exams. The author of "Practical" seems to blithely accept the validity of high TOEIC scores. The apparent assumption that high test scores guarantee fine English and are a promise of sunny skies ahead gives me the shivers.

To a degree, I agree with "Practical." Taiwan's universities should provide a wide variety of practical courses in English, and whenever possible the courses should link with the interests of local commerce and industry.

But until masses of students become convinced they "must" master English to be happy in life, they are not about to risk losing face by opening their mouths in English, in or outside of class. Our present level of English will only improve when students see that learning English is not the same as studying it, and that they must want to learn it, and want it desperately.

I love my students to pieces. I find them interesting and enjoyable to be with. But there are so many other things that seem more vital to their lives than getting really good at English. And getting really good at English is very hard work for a very long time. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. This column continues the topic of last week, a lessening of interest among Taiwan's students to study English. Comparing your attitude to 1 or 2 years ago, are you MORE or LESS concerned about your level of English today?
2. This column argues in part that TOEIC test scores may not actually be so important in showing a student's ability in English. Do you feel tests measure YOUR ability fairly in English?
3. This column poses the Q: Do Taiwan university students feel they "must" master (truly master) English to be happy in life? What is your answer to this question?

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