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LANGUAGE LEARNING AND FOCUSED TRANCE

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1.0 INTRODUCTION

Focused Trancework techniques have long been adapted to the EFL classroom and to individual language learning – from the formalist methods used in Lozanov's Suggestopedia and in Total Body Response to the interactive visualization methods found in numerous grammar, writing, and oral training texts that employ images/options. creative visualization methods, and response to meditative guided imagery. This paper discusses the author's adaptation of various of these approaches to the language classroom in Taiwan, particularly for developing confidence/competence in language use while decreasing levels of English Communication Apprehension (ECA). As we move further into the twenty-first century, we see more innovation in approaches to education and as computer technology seems to become more dominant within the classroom, likewise we see experiential processes and technologies of the mind being redressed, rethought, and honed for increased effectiveness in augmenting the learning

experience. Focused trance is not merely one technique but a collective category of approaches that broadly share the characteristic of employing a focused trancelike state within a learning context. The usefulness of focused trance depends upon the context and method of its application to a learning context. In this paper, we will examine a number of appropriate uses of focused trance in the context of language learning.

A wide variety of work exists on successfully applying focused trance techniques to the language classroom with sometimes remarkable benefits and effectiveness in increasing fluency as well as comfort compared to classrooms that do not employ such techniques. The author's work in focused trance is an extension of previous studies and applications from a number of researchers and educators with a wide range of approaches to the topic but a common emphasis on formal focused trance with positive effect upon learning. While a great deal of work on focused trance has been done on communication stemming from an impetus that began in the early 1980s, the second language research of most interest to the author for our purposes here has come from research and work by Akhter Ahsen, Maureen Garth, Maureen Murdock, and Brandon Bays.

2.0 ENGLISH COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION

An obvious application of focused trance in the language classroom is in the alleviation of English Communication Apprehension, the fear or nervousness many learners of a foreign language experience when asked to use the target language that can often lead to poor performance or even more serious associative negative effect upon fluency. ECA is related to more generalized

Communication Apprehension in that most people with high levels of CA also have high levels of ECA (or CA for whatever foreign language they are being tested in). The caveat to this is that competence also seems to affect levels of CA for a foreign language, specifically English CA, or ECA. Students who may have low levels of CA in their native language may experience more pronounced levels of ECA partly due to competence factors and perception of competence. However, when low-competence students have lower levels of ECA, they tend to improve more quickly than comparable students with higher levels of ECA, partly due to the tendency on their part to seek out situations in which to practice their new language skills.

One way to measure English Communication Apprehension is to administer various Communication Apprehension Scales adapted for the target language (often adapted from standard scales with emphasis on foreign language communication contexts). Of special note and usefulness is the Personal Report of Communication Apprehension (PRCA24) which is readily adapted to foreign language contexts and provides a reliable indicator of ECA.

Once we identify students with high levels of ECA, we can provide them with Focused Trance activities and exercises designed to increase confidence while improving competence. As ECA levels lower, interest in pursuing opportunities to use English increases and fluency grows.

3.0 RELAXATION CONDITIONING

While there is a great deal of information within the folklore on how to increase confidence or lower apprehension for communication, much of it is hearsay and basically old wives tales. Memorization,

avoiding eye contact, notes, and distraction through pain have all been suggested at one time or another as a remedy for communicative fear and all of these so-called solutions share one essential characteristic . . . they generally wrong. . . . at best they are temporary solutions and at worst they either delay apprehension episodes, penting them up for later stronger release, or they make the condition worse. The strongest evidence for improving confidence and lowering apprehension is through simple relaxation conditioning and progressive desensitization.

Basically, apprehension (English or otherwise) is manifested as physical and mental stress or tension. When we are relaxed, we cannot experience stress. Tighten your arm so that the arm, hand, and fingers are tense, make them very tight, then attempt to relax the arm while maintaining that stress. It cannot be done. The opposite is also true.

In focused trance style relaxation conditioning, the subject is taught to physically relax. Often this is done through a simple induction set as well as a trigger response – sometimes as simple and as subtle as the use of the word "relax" or more overt and complex as trigger response suggestions attached to a keyword. Just as Pavlov's dogs learned to drool whenever they heard a bell ring, people can fairly quickly and easily train themselves to relax with a trigger or "anchor" response – as long as they consent to and follow through with the process.

A brief orientation to a process akin to this is that of anchoring (conditioned trigger response). Close your eyes for a moment and imagine a time when you felt pleasant, really feel the feelings, and as you feel them press the thumb and forefinger of the right hand together and tell yourself that as you press them the pleasant feelings become more powerful. Stop pressing and open your eyes. Close your eyes

again and repeat the process with another time you felt the same kind of pleasant feelings, once again pressing the thumb and forefinger together. Repeat this microprocess five times. Then, test the anchor to make certain it is there by looking at a neutral object and firing the trigger (pressing the thumb and forefinger) without the setup visualization. For most people, they immediately feel the pleasant feelings.

When treating ECA, subjects are taught to relax and then are asked to imagine situations that formerly caused them stress in which the relaxation trigger is used, desensitizing the former stressor conditions.

4.0 DEEP RELAXATION TRIGGER RESPONSE CONDITIONING - DRTRC

In Deep Relaxation Trigger Response Conditioning (DRTRC), subjects are taught to relax through a system of focused trance conditioning processes – live and on recording. The primary conditioning protocol is intended to condition the subjects to relax whenever they focus on a trigger word. Since class time is best used for active processes, students are asked to listen to MP3s at home (a calendar record is kept so as to track participation).

As response to imagery is very individualized, the primary conditioning recording is longer than most and comprises four separate induction styles to maximize the chance that at least a portion of the recording will be particularly appropriate for any listener. Once the primary conditioning has begun, students may select any of four subconditioning recordings, each in a different style: fractionation relaxation, autogenic progressive relaxation, creative visualization, and eye fixation induction.

While the present author uses a method of trigger word conditioning for deep relaxation, others use less overt methods. Rather than making use of a trigger word, Maureen Garth's series of guided meditations for children uses an anchored staging area for her scripts (see the bibliography for references). Each of her pieces begins with the same general induction which includes an imagery of a garden, this sets the stage and becomes part of the conditioning process for relaxation.

As with other relaxation conditioning methods targeted at foreign language acquisition, the DRTRC approach hinges upon the use of concentrated relaxation and positive reinforcement of language use. The primary goal of the method is to lower levels of ECA, which it consistently does. Comparisons of ECA scores of classes exposed to DRTRC and those of classes unexposed to DRTRC show significant difference in ECA improvement. Over time, both types of classes tend to have lowered ECA – in part due to increased exposure and competence – but improvements are greater in classes exposed to DRTRC techniques. Scores on standard suggestibility and imagination tests are also higher for students who have been conditioned to DRTRC than those who have not. This is in keeping with current studies discussed by Murdock and Ahsen that demonstrate ESL classes exposed to guided imagery and other relaxation techniques tend to have significantly higher skill performance than comparable students at the same level in more traditional classes.

5.0 RELATED METHODS

With or without relaxation conditioning using a method akin to DRTRC, students can also derive benefits from focused trance guided imagery or similar processes. Recent reports in sports psychology

and medicine show conclusively that visualization alone can have positive benefits beyond relaxation, a great deal of evidence points to accelerating progress in skill improvement as well as actual positive physical changes in some areas – albeit, the latter is not of direct interest to us here.

Focused trance style guided imagery can be very useful for language classes, both for the lowering of apprehension and the increase in motivation as well as for the skill improvement opportunities. When introducing imagery, it is important to signpost to students that although the method is termed "imagery" or "visualization" one should not be overly concerned with "seeing" things but in "imagining" them. About twenty percent of the population is capable of untutored visualization, that is they see things very clearly when imagining, others can improve the skill through practice and some studies do seem to link accelerated progress with visualization skills but for our purposes reminding students to simply imagine is sufficient. One way that this author has used to demonstrate this is through an imagination exercise of having the students close their eyes and then imagine themselves standing at a bus stop waiting for a bus, then getting on the bus, taking it for a short ride, exiting, and then watching the bus round a corner out of site. Once the students open their eyes, the instructor asks them, "What color is the bus?" When students give their answers, then ask them how they know. Some will have actually visualized the bus but others will only "know" the color from past experience. Reminding the students that when the imagery scripts ask them to see or visualize something they can just "imagine" it will keep the pressure off them – since many imagery scripts that are available to have a bias towards visualization, it is important to key in other modes such as kinesthetic, auditory, olfactory, and as wide a range of sensory experience as possible . . .

this helps connect the listener to the experience. Ahsen's Prolucid Dreaming process attaches emotional context to visualization and imagery, albeit his focus on the difference between imaginative experience when engaging maternal and paternal emotion-sets within an imagery experience, while interesting, make the complete process of less use for the language learning context.

In addition to beneficial results inherent in the use of guided imagery, the activity can also be used as a springboard for listening-speaking activities as well as writing. Obviously, when students listen to the teacher read or a recording of a guided imagery, it is a very specific listening activity. If students are encouraged to create their own pieces or discuss what they have imagined during the activity then the speaking component is brought into play. A writing component can include student-created pieces as well as student-written reactions of feedback for pieces. Some writing and discussion courses are now designed with imagery as a component, acting as a springboard for discussion or writing.

When using guided imagery or other focused trance methods, it is helpful to explain to students that they will gain more benefit from the experience if they imagine "as if" the image is real and that they focus upon "feeling" the experience as if it were happening. This sort of experiential trance has been found to be the most beneficial in a number of studies comparing the effectiveness of different modalities. Ann Weiser Cornell's work on focusing and experiential states found that those who can "feel" imaginative experiences are more likely to gain the most positive outcomes from the experiential nature of the process. This author has had similar results when using experiential trance techniques with students and others.

6.0 EXPERIENTIAL FOCUSED TRANCE GUIDED IMAGERY

Guided imagery, the use of focused trance style imaginatively involved exercises or activities which involve relaxation and imagination, can be a very worthwhile addition to the language course. There are a number of various techniques and approaches to help students develop communicative ability through the original creation of guided imageries.

6.1 BASIC PROTOCOLS

Most programs using experiential focused trance guided imagery involve engaged imagination. Basically, the students are asked to close their eyes and relax while following along as the guided, a teacher of fellow student, reads a guided imagination type story in which the students are asked to involve themselves imaginatively and to imagine vividly.

This type of guided imagination story, a story within the mind (or as I refer to them in my related body of work "waking dreams") can be adapted as a simple listening exercises as well as a comprehension and speaking exercise. However, its uses go beyond that. For instance, Kilgore Rice and Unaiki Burns found an excellent way of utilizing simple guided imagery exercises for the writing classroom as a setup for response and descriptive writing. Similarly, Stevick developed a number of approaches – passive and active variations – for utilizing imagery in a number of contexts for the language classroom.

6.2 SOME BENEFITS OF EXPERIENTIAL FOCUSED TRANCE GUIDED IMAGERY

A number of studies involving the use of guided imagery in the language classroom have shown very positive results in terms of using

the activity as a means to engage students associative response via involved imagination as well as for other non-directive benefits. Murdock reports that students in one Los Angeles study who engaged in weekly guided imagery exercises reported much lower stress levels and scored higher on standardized English tests aimed at learners of English as a Second Language (Spinning Inward). In a study of the long form guided imagery activity, The Journey Process by Brandon Bays, where elementary school students in South Africa participated in the process on a weekly basis, it was found that overall retention rose and that stress levels and physical illness incidents were lower in the imaginative classes than in the control groups (The Journey for Kids). When the focused trance is of an experiential nature, benefits tend to be comparatively higher.

In a major compilation of work related to guided imagery and education, a special edition on Education of the Journal of Mental Imagery, had a number of papers that summarized the use of guided imagery in their respective skills. The editor, Ahkter, has also found in his own work that the number of benefits far outweigh any potential disadvantages.

6.3 APPLICATION TO THE CLASSROOM

In my own classes, I tend to use a very straightforward approach to experiential focused trance guided imagery that capitalizes on specific language instruction processes as well as leverages other tertiary benefits. The same process can easily be adapted to various educational needs (high school through university and adult as well as varying levels of language proficiency).

Guided imagery can be a useful supplementary activity for a variety of courses when it is tailored to specific class needs. The activity is particularly of value as a listening and speaking activity and

as a writing or composition project. An increased amount of work is being done in using guided imagery as a setup for discussion as well as a jump-start visualization activity for literature and reading courses. Guided imagery can be adapted to each of these course types.

While there are a number of general guided imagery script books available that teachers may adapt to their own needs, some with very specific examples of pieces appropriate for listening, writing, literature, and more (I have included a number of such resources in the bibliography with this paper to help teachers get started with some excellent resources). However, the number of published or widely available guided imagery based activities specific to the language classroom is not high and those that are available may not suit the level or context of any given class. Unfortunately, many teachers are inexperienced at creating their own guided imagery of this type or they simply do not have the time to do so.

Do keep in mind that while focused trance and related modalities are often used in therapeutic contexts, classroom application of these methods is for educational and not therapeutic purposes. A teacher is not a therapist and should not be guided students through therapy without appropriate training or background. Many of these non-therapeutic processes do indeed have some therapeutic benefit, but this is not the purpose of the activity within the language classroom.

7.0 CREATING YOUR OWN EXPERIENTIAL FOCUSED TRANCE GUIDED IMAGERY

Guided imagery, also known as Creative Visualization, Scripted Meditation, Experientials, Mediated Metaphors and a seemingly endless parade of names, is basically a scripted scenario in which the guide creates a general baseline experience through the use of

descriptive language with specific details of the experience filled in by the listener's inner mind. This technique, when used appropriately, can be a very useful tool in the language teacher's toolbag. Guided imagery has been shown in a number of studies to be very effective in the educational setting and other locales where the use of formalized trancework may seem inappropriate.

It is important that the imagery be general enough that the subject can get a handle on the experience and specific enough with positive wording that the resulting experience is both personalized and positive. It is very important that the author determine which sorts of imageries are inappropriate for a particular subject so as to avoid negative experiences or abreactions when they are not part of the course agenda. For imagery sessions, it is very important to use keywords that set the stage for the experience in a positive frame – words such as *comfortable, pleasant, enjoy, positive, pleasure, bliss, happy,* and the like help to create an expectation for positive circumstances and results. With subjects who have preconditioned themselves to a keyword or trigger through DRTRC or similar means, one can use the trigger as a deepening process within the imagery.

The form of simple directed guided imagery discussed here seems to be one of the easiest for most beginners to understand and begin using immediately (albeit, in the hands of a skilled artisan, the craftsmanship behind a guided imagery can be very sophisticated).

Each guided imagery of this type should have three main parts: the Induction or relaxation portion, the Imagery, and the Emerging (or, Return to Awareness). We should note that the Induction and Emerging sections are abbreviated here as the session concentrates on the imagery rather than depth of relaxation.

Each of these three sections of a guided imagery may have subparts. The following is an outline of a simple guided imagery of the type recommended for most language classes.

7.1 PART ONE: INDUCTION

An induction, or relaxation procedure, will often have two chief components.

7.1.1 COMPONENTS

1. *Eye Closure* – Ask the listeners to close their eyes. This is usually done with a big breath in and on the exhalation, the listeners should close their eyes and begin relaxation exercises. Eye closure is used partly so that the listener can relax more readily but also as a means of shutting off distractions within the environment. As a listening exercise, it is excellent as the student must rely upon listening comprehension solely to understand the imagery instructions.
2. *Breathing = Relaxation* – Start deep breathing exercises and make certain that the listeners give themselves the suggestion that with each breath out they will become more and more relaxed.

7.2 PART TWO: IMAGERY

The actual imagery section of any guided imagery, rather DRTRC-based or freeform, is the main section of the piece. It should be specific enough to guide an experience and open enough to allow leeway for individual imaginative response.

7.2.1 COMPONENTS

1. *The Image* – The main image should guide the listeners into a beautiful, relaxing, playful, and positive scene. Your images should

always be fun and positive. Never use negative images for your guided imagery (or for any guided imagery as it is immoral and potentially hazardous as it can lead to negative abreactions in some participants – while some may be intrigued by the idea of fully associated vicarious experiences related to violent fantasy and the like, it can be overwhelming for most and is best avoided, particularly in an educational setting). For classroom purposes, you should create imagery appropriate to a general and family audience – not *your* family, but think of the most conservative family you can possibly imagine and write with them in mind. For recreational purposes, create pieces that fit the interest and values of the participants. There are many wonderful books with playful guided imagery for small children which adults can also find stimulating and entertaining if you would like to consult them for models. There are fewer resources for adult material of this type, but they do exist. See the bibliography for some examples.

2. *Pause for Silence* – In general, always provide your listeners with a few minutes in which they can let their imaginations run wild. This is often setup in an image with a statement along the lines of, "You will now have three minutes of clock time to explore which is all the time you will need. You may begin now." This allows the listener's inner mind to participate more directly in the process, helping to create imagery metaphors that can aid therapy or provide relaxation and imaginative stimulation. Once again, when creating imagery you can't accurately predict what will work well for a particular listener and so by using your positive words along with the image setup and then sitting back and letting the listener's inner mind provide the images (not the conscious mind, but the subconscious) you can better be assured of a successful session tailored to that client's needs.

7.3 PART THREE: EMERGING (RETURN TO AWARENESS)

The emerging is merely the termination of a session. However, so as not to be too abrupt, it is best to signpost the end of the session prior to asking the students to stop their imaginary session and open their eyes. By giving the listener a chance to re-orient to the environment, a successful and positive experience is more likely.

7.3.1 COMPONENTS

1. *Signpost* – Be sure to let the listeners know when their moments of silence are about to finish and signpost that you will begin helping them exit the imagery and return to full awareness. This is often done by saying something along the lines of "I will now count upwards from one to five, and at the count of five you will return to full awareness, open your eyes, and notice how alert and relaxed you feel."

2. *Eyes Open* – Count up to whatever number you set for the Signpost and tell the listeners to open their eyes. They should now be ready to share their experiences! That is, when appropriate. It is possible to setup self-discovery sessions for yourself or clients that are intended for the imaginer only.

8.0 CREATIVELY ADAPTING FOCUSED TRANCE GUIDED IMAGERY TO THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

There are a number of ways that teachers can approach the creation of guided imageries that are both worthwhile and easily adapted to their own classroom situations.

As we have seen above, there are three main components of simple guided imagery for the language classroom (induction, imagery,

and emerging) and how they are structured (see following). Likewise, there are three main approaches to guided imagery creation, or adaptation for the language classroom. The first approach is simple adaptation in which the teacher takes a previously published or archived guided imagery (an appropriate list of resources for scenarios is included in the bibliography) and then adapts it to their classroom setting. The second approach is the teacher-centered tact in which the teacher plans and writes an original guided imagery for the specific course. The third method is the student-centered guided imagery project in which a teacher guides students as they create their own guided imagery for their classmates to listen to and discuss. There are a number of strategies for handling this project and how to keep it on track for the course goals. One such strategy is to include out-of-class adaptations of guided imagery as listening homework through the use of online technology and original MP3 creations. You may see examples of this in the MP3 portion of the Waking Dreams webpages (http://www.briandavidphillips.com).

9.0 GUIDED IMAGERY RESOURCES FOR ADAPTATION

Please note that you need not write an original *Induction* or *Emerging* for your guided imagery unless the circumstances call for it – such as when publishing or recording material for distribution. As the focus of the experience tends to be on the imagery, teachers may feel it more efficient to use the standard formats for other parts of their classroom scripts. You should write the central Imagery part. In addition, the bibliography lists several sources for guided imagery scripts.

10.0 RECORDING MP3S AND CDS FOR DISTRIBUTION TO STUDENTS

As classtime is best used for actual language practice, teachers are encouraged to record simple guided imagery or DRTRC type material and to make it available for students to listen to at home. This can be done through distribution online or on audio CD.

Online distribution of MP3s is fast and easy. Be certain to tag the files and webpages with "Educational Resource" titles and disclaimers letting the students – and others – know that the pieces are original, and legally available freely to students for educational purposes. Since the music industry began aggressive anti-piracy suits, some students and their teachers have become wary of putting mp3 material online – just remind the students that they can download material you have made available to them for class that you have created. You may not distribute work by others without specific consent or permission but this does not apply to your own work which you can distribute any way you see fit.

An excellent basic software for recording original material is Goldwave. The software is easy to use and is very powerful. It is shareware with a fully-functional trial version at http://www.goldwave.com – while the trial version is free and will allow you to record all you like, the professional version is inexpensive enough that you might consider purchasing it anyway. With the proper support software, Goldwave can produce excellent MP3s as well (the freeware MP3 support is on the Goldwave website).

11.0 CONCLUSION

Wile it certainly should not comprise the main thrust of a language program, focused trance can be excellent for reducing English Communication Apprehension as well as for improving more direct aspects of target language fluency. When coupled with experiential guided imagery, the process can also be very beneficial for accelerated skill improvement as well. As we move further into the twenty-first century, we will find that more work in the application of experiential focused trance methods in the language classroom will further enhance the language learning experience.

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