

REFLECTIONS ON MY
NEPALI LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCE
WHILE IN THE AMERICAN PEACE CORPS IN NEPAL, 2001 - 2003

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines my experience during my two years as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nepal (2001-2003) learning the Nepali language. I reflect on my process of learning Nepali, which involved drawing on connections between this language and the two other languages I speak – Spanish and English. I also examine the social aspects of my learning this language while living and working as an ESL teacher in a small rural mountain village in Eastern Nepal. This self-reflection on my language learning experience has informed my understanding of how the language learning process is inextricably connected to one's primary language as well as one's social surroundings. At the conclusion of this paper I seek to incorporate this understanding into my evolving approach to teaching ESL.

Second Language Learning; Language Usage; Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

I first arrived in Nepal in August, 2001 to begin my ten week training program for the American Peace Corps. Nepal is a small Hindu country located between India and China/Tibet. After successfully completing my training I was placed through Peace Corps for two years in a rural high school in Ilam, in the eastern part of Nepal, as an ESL teacher.

When I started my training program I did not know any Nepali, and I had never been to Nepal or studied Nepali culture before. By the end of my two year Peace Corps service, I had become sufficiently fluent in Nepali to be able to live and function comfortably in my village, and I found this allowed me to develop a much deeper closeness and trust with my Nepali students, fellow teachers, friends and others in the community. This closeness and trust in turn greatly helped me in dealing with the cultural shock I experienced as I adapted to a culture so different from any I had experienced and lived in before.

My process of learning Nepali throughout this time involved my drawing on the connections I could see between the Nepali language and my first language – Spanish – and also my second language – English. Indeed I was continually amazed at how my success at learning the language depended on my drawing these connections. The more I

gained fluency in Nepali, the more I understood the culture and felt at home there. With time, my students, co-workers and friends came to view me less and less as a foreigner and more as an active member of the community. The closeness I felt with them came from my growing ability to convey my own feelings and converse with them at ease. Eventually I received the ultimate compliment of some in the community actually thinking I was Nepali. I came to see that integral to my process of learning Nepali was the time I spent with community members actively engaged with them in their social activities -- having tea in their homes, participating in the frequent Hindu and Buddhist religious celebrations, weddings, funerals and community meetings, receiving “tika” (a spot of red powder placed on the forehead as a blessing) and being honored with the special respect traditionally given within Nepali culture to the teachers in the community.

My Peace Corps experience, then, has profoundly affected my understanding of how I learn a new language. From this personal experience I can more easily understand what ESL students are going through as they try to learn a second language, and I can use my understanding of my own process to be more effective as an ESL teacher.

CHAPTER 2

USING MY FIRST AND SECOND LANGUAGES TO LEARN NEPALI

During my 12 week Peace Corps training program in Nepal I was immersed in Nepali culture and language. I had five hours of intensive language instruction five days each week, and I was living with a Nepali family of four with whom I could only communicate in Nepali. Because I needed to learn Nepali as quickly as possible in order to survive, I found I automatically started relying on what I already did know – Spanish, which is my first language and which I learned growing up in Cuba, and English, which I learned when I came to the United States in 1980.

We started with the basic introductory phrases – greetings. In Spanish and English we have different greetings for each time of day: “Buenos días,” good morning; “buenas tardes,” good afternoon; “buenas noches,” good evening. But in Nepali greetings are much simpler. There is one word for all occasions: “Namaste,” which means “God is in you.” For more formal greetings this is said with the hands pressed together in a prayer position and the head bowed forward.

To greet one’s elders, or teachers or anyone in a position of respect, the variation on this greeting used to convey respect is “Namascar.” Spanish has a similar linguistic signal for respect – the use of the third person singular instead of the more familiar second person singular. For example, a student in Cuba might greet his teacher by

saying, “Buenos días, señor. Cómo está Usted?” (The verb “está” is in the third person, and “Usted” is the formal/respectful term for “you.”) This translates in English as “Good morning. How are you?” In developing a sense of when it was appropriate to use the respectful greeting “Namascar,” I realized that this greeting is appropriate in the same social circumstances in which the respectful third person singular is used in Spanish. Drawing this connection made the correct usage of “Namaste” and “Namascar” much more automatic and intuitive for me.

My realization that both Spanish and Nepali have similar linguistic methods of conveying respect was especially interesting to me because, based on my own experience, I could see how this linguistic signal reflected a special level of respect for the teacher in both Nepali culture and Cuban culture, as compared to American culture. In Nepal, once I began teaching in my village, I was amazed at the deep level of respect that the students have for their teachers, and also the deep level of respect within my village for the position of teacher. All teachers, whether religious (“gurus”) or academic, are held in very high regard in Nepal because they are seen as the people in the community who are the source of wisdom and whose job it is to impart wisdom to the next generation. Thus, I came to see that the respectful greeting of “Namascar” I received everyday from my students was not just habit, but reflected a deeply held belief regarding the special respect due to those who are their teachers.

This level of respect in Nepal contrasted sharply with my experience teaching in the United States, where I taught Spanish over a period of ten years in public and private elementary and middle schools in New York City and Philadelphia. In the United States, where there is no similar linguistic signal commonly used for conveying respect in the

greeting, I found that students do not automatically accord their teachers any special respect by simply by virtue of their role as teacher. Instead, students view teachers more as they would their adult friends, and they greet them in much the same way. In fact, in one Quaker school where I taught Spanish for four years, the students were instructed to call their teachers by their first names so that they could feel more comfortable relating freely to their teachers. This use of such an informal and familiar means of addressing the teacher seems to reflect a more cooperative and egalitarian view of the teacher-student relationship in American culture in which the teacher is not placed on a pedestal.

By way of further contrast, in Cuba, where I taught language for ten years before I came to the United States, I found a level of respect for the teachers more akin to what I experienced in Nepal. As in Nepal, the respect conveyed in Spanish through the greeting reflects a deeply held belief regarding the special role of teachers (as well as others, such as elders, priests and leaders) in the community. In this way, my experience teaching in Cuba helped me understand and feel comfortable in Nepal with my role as a teacher there.

Drawing connections with English and Spanish helped me in learning many Nepali words and phrases. Some words were surprisingly identical in sound and meaning. For example, “ke” in Nepali means “what.” It is pronounced the same as the Spanish word “qué,” and has the same meaning. Similarly, “ko” means “who,” which it sounds like. In addition, “ke” and “ko” are so closely related to each other, both in meaning (what and who) and pronunciation, that it was easy to learn them together.

With other words I found enough of a similarity either with an English or Spanish word that I was able remember the word by this connection. For example, the Nepali

word “mero” means and sounds similar to “my” or “mine.” And the word “nam” in Nepali means “name.” Thus, “mero nam” sounds very much like the English meaning, “my name.” (I found it interesting that my students used the same connection in reverse to learn the English phrase “my name.”)

Likewise the Nepali word “ghar” means “home” in English, and is pronounced the same as the second syllable in the Spanish word for home, which is “hogar.” And the Nepali word “dinus” means “give me,” and sounds similar the Spanish “dame,” which means the same thing. I was able to relate several of the words for numbers to the Spanish words: “Dui” in Nepali sounds like the Spanish “dos” and means “two.” “Tin” sounds like the Spanish “tres” and means three. “Nau” sounds like “nueve” and means nine. The word “no,” which is the same in English and Spanish, is similar to the Nepali suffix “na.” This suffix, when added to any of the three Nepali words for “yes” (“ho,” “cha,” “huncha”), means “no” (“hoina,” “china” “hundaina”). Yet another example is the word for red in Nepali -- “rato” -- which sounds like the Spanish word for red – “rojo.”

In this way I found that the key to my learning Nepali was to draw as many connections as I could with the two languages I already knew. By having two different languages to draw upon for making these connections, I felt I had an advantage in learning Nepali. This approach to language learning is identified in cognitive theory as the cognitive strategy of “transfer,” which consists of “using known linguistic information to facilitate a new learning task.” (O’Malley and Chamo 1990: 43). Particularly during my first few months in Nepal, I found I relied very heavily on this strategy, and it gave me a feeling of comfort and familiarity with my new language.

CHAPTER 3

SOCIAL ASPECTS OF MY LEARNING NEPALI

As has been noted in the literature on bilingual education, language choice and used is affected by social pressures, and we choose the components of our speaking and listening based upon the “interaction of language within the social environment.” (Fishman and Keller 1982: 392). Consistent with this observation, I found that my learning of Nepali was very much affected by social factors, such as my identities as an Afro-Cuban, as an American, as a teacher and as a gay man, and by the ways in which these identities are perceived and related to by Nepalis.

As I learned during my training period with the Peace Corps, to Nepalese villagers, all westerners are white, all white people are Americans, and all Americans are rich. Many Nepalis believe that all Asian-Americans are Japanese, and that African-Americans are “habsis,” which is a derogatory Nepali word for black people. Peace Corps trainers advised us that non-white American Peace Corps volunteers commonly experience among the Nepalis an annoying curiosity and to a lesser extent, some hostility due to ignorance, resentment or jealousy. in Nepal

After my training period, I arrived at my village, Ilam, located on a small mountain at an altitude of 3,300 feet in the eastern part of Nepal on the border with India. As an Afro-Cuban-American volunteer, I used all my experiences as a teacher, as a

refugee from Cuba, and as a gay person, in order to cope with social discrimination, and these social factors very much affected how I learned Nepali. I chose not to act as an outsider, but instead I participated in festivities, talked with students' parents, went to temples, and socialized with people in the local market. I visited with other teachers in my school and in other schools. I found that by being open and approachable, the barriers that initially arose faded away quickly and the people in my village began to treat me more and more as a member of the community and not an interloper.

In addition to teaching ESL in the public school in Ilam, I took on as a second project the establishment of a cooperative. I met with 65 members of the community, mostly lower caste and mostly women, and we discussed over the course of several meetings what type of cooperative they thought would be most useful for them. They ultimately decided they wanted to establish a vegetable cooperative. I then went about securing funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). We received a \$2,000 grant to cover the cost of leasing land and the purchase of seeds, irrigation equipment, materials to build a greenhouse, and other agricultural equipment. We met regularly with trainers from a non-governmental organization (the Nepal Cooperative Development Council), who trained the members of the cooperative in all aspects – organizational, financial, and agricultural -- of operating the cooperative.

Throughout this process I used my Nepali language skills to run the meetings and help the group arrive at consensus. The need to accomplish specific tasks and the importance of resolving disagreements between members continually challenged my language abilities and helped me learn how to communicate in Nepali in a manner that would be both persuasive and non-confrontational. This aspect of language learning was

far more subtle than my initial instruction during the training period, and my focus had to be much more on how to communicate with the appropriate tone for the situation.

The cooperative was and still is a tremendous success, providing a means for otherwise poor and landless members of the community to grow a variety of vegetables for their own consumption and for sale at the local market. I was very touched when the members insisted on naming the cooperative after me, calling it the “Shree Eloy Multiple Co-operative.” (The word “Shree” signifies respect.) To this day I still receive letters from members of the cooperative telling me proudly how well it is doing and how much it has been able to expand.

As an Afro-Cuban I was for many Nepalis a curiosity. Nepalis are very open about their curiosity, and they frequently came by my apartment. I opened my door to them, and my lively conversations with them about Nepali culture and about being Afro-Cuban and American, became one of the primary social settings for my continuing to learn Nepali. I found that Nepalis converse very much like Cubans in that they start a conversation, and then take a long time to get to the point, if they ever get to the point at all. I felt comfortable with this open-ended conversational manner because of my Cuban background, and the long conversations were an excellent way for me to keep learning Nepali through total immersion. At this stage in my language learning, many of the words and phrases I did not know I was able to start understanding simply by their use in the context of the conversation.

One long conversation I had was with a 22 year old Nepali who was going to college and planning on becoming a teacher. He told me that many people in the village were asking him why I had never been married. I was 52 years old at the time, and in

Nepali culture, to be an unmarried male at that age is very unusual. Being gay is simply not recognized in the culture as a life-style or as existing in any manner. Although it is common knowledge that men do have sex with men, and women with women, no one talks about it, and all men and women are expected to get married. This lack of any recognition that gays exist is reflected in the language by the fact that there is no commonly understood word for “gay people” in Nepali. (There is the word “chhakka” in Nepali, which means gay or homosexual, but I found that no one in my village knew this word.) And when I spoke with English-speaking Nepalis in English about gays, they always insisted there were no gays in Nepal. I sensed that this college student was wondering about whether I was gay, but he did not have the vocabulary to express it. I responded by just talking with him at length about how there are many different life-styles, and mine is to be not married.

One of the social aspects of learning Nepali that I felt most uncomfortable with was the terminology associated with the caste system and the use of unpaid servants from the “lower” castes. The caste system is still firmly entrenched in Nepal, and the principal castes are Brahmin, Chhettri, Newar, Shudra (which includes the “disadvantaged” or the “untouchables”). I had frequent conversations with Nepalis about the caste system, and I found that adult Nepalis in describing another Nepali invariably referred to the person’s caste. Children, on the other hand, seemed to be completely unaware of the caste system and generally did not even know what caste they were from.

Child labor using children from the lower castes as servants is widespread in Nepal, and for all working people servants are considered a necessity. In the first “dhera” (rented room in a home) I stayed in while in Ilam, the landlord had a low caste child

servant named Alolita, who was 16, and who had been with them since the age of eight. The landlord (who was a lawyer and university lecturer) and his wife explained to me that both the child's parents had died and they had found her wandering in the streets. They viewed it as an act of benevolence to take her in as their servant, and even though they had two children of their own whom they had sent to school, they did not even consider sending their servant to school.

Alolita worked hard for this family all day every day, doing all the clothes washing and cleaning for the house, and cutting grass for the cows they owned. The only reason she did not cook for them was that the family was Brahmin, and Brahmins do not let anyone from the lower castes touch their food. She was not paid for any of her work, but was given a room outside the house, plus meals, which she would eat in the kitchen after the family had eaten. She was always very cheerful, and she was the person with whom I first practiced my Nepali. I found her very easy and comfortable to converse with, and her Nepali was easy for me to understand. Through my conversations with her I became familiar with the everyday Nepali phrases and expressions used around the household.

The lower castes are generally dark skinned, and the higher castes tend to have European features. As an Afro-Cuban, I have dark skin, and many Nepalis asked me what caste I was from. I had to keep explaining in Nepali that there is no caste system in the United States. Sometimes in the market place I would overhear people referring to me with the derogatory term "habsis," but most in the community knew I was a Peace Corps volunteer teaching in the public school, and for that reason they accorded me much respect. Although I had many conversations with people about the injustice of the caste

system, ironically, because the caste terminology is so much a part of the language, I found myself having to learn and use the terminology just to participate in conversations. To the extent that I did not want to be viewed as an outsider, I had to be fluent in the language as Nepalis spoke it, which meant using the caste terminology.

Another aspect of my social setting in Nepal that influenced my language learning was the Maoist insurgency which has been growing and spreading in Nepal ever since its inception in the late 1980's. The Maoists, known as the "Mao Baadi" in Nepali, seek to abolish the monarchy and establish a one-party Communist state. They model themselves after the Shining Path ("Los Senderos Luminosos") of Peru, and they are adamantly opposed to the caste system. They view themselves as the true followers of Chinese Maoism, but they are not supported by, and indeed they are opposed by, the Chinese government.

Some of my students confided to me that they were part of the Maoist movement, and in my conversations with them I found I needed to adjust the way I spoke Nepali to avoid caste terminology. They would not use caste terminology except to condemn it. Other students were very much afraid of the Maoists, since the Maoists frequently set off bombs and had a reputation for kidnapping young boys to force them to join the movement.

One ninth grade student of mine named Rashan came to my dhera to tell me about that the Maoists in his village were kidnapping young boys there. He was very much afraid and did not know what to do. He was looking for a place to hide. Through intense conversations such as these I became familiar with the Nepali terms for different types

violence and different types of bombs, such as pipe bombs and those made from pressure cookers.

Similarly, the Nepali word “bhanda,” which roughly translates as “forced general strike” or “forced work stoppage,” came up frequently in conversations. “Bhanda” is a term loaded with both emotional and political significance for everyone living in Nepal. When the Maoists call a bhanda in a particular part of the country, it generally means that all public and commercial transportation in that area has to stop, and government workers cannot go to work. The word “bhanda” instills fear because the Maoists force all to comply by fire-bombing buses or trucks that violate the strike, and threatening to kill workers who go to their government offices. All normal activity in the community comes to a halt, and in my school, the teachers were too afraid to go to school.

The fear of the Maoists amongst teachers was very real because throughout the country a number of teachers and headmasters had been executed by the Maoists. In fact, I learned from one of my students that five months before I arrived, the Maoists had taken over the school where I was teaching, tied up the headmaster and forced him to lower the tuition for the students. (All public schools, although public, charge tuition in Nepal.) One evening while I was visiting with the headmaster and his wife, his wife pulled me aside and implored me to arrange for her husband to go the United States since they both very much feared for his safety.

The Maoists have effectively turned this one word, “bhanda,” into a means of projecting their power throughout the country. By simply announcing a bhanda, they demonstrate that they can shut down all commercial and government activity at will, even in areas where they are not known to have extensively infiltrated the community. Indeed,

the word in itself is so powerful that it has entered the vocabulary of all English speakers in Nepal and is not translated in normal conversation or in the English language papers. No English word or phrase (like “strike” or “general strike”) can adequately convey either the significance or the power that the word “bhandas” now has in Nepal.

I had many intense conversations with co-workers and others in the community about upcoming bhandas. Word that a bhandas had been announced by the Maoists would spread like wildfire through the community, and we shared strategies on how to stay safe and what places and activities to avoid. Talking in Nepali about an issue of such immediate significance to my personal safety and the safety of my community compelled me to push my understanding of the language as far as possible, and I found that this dramatically increased my comprehension of the language. My experience certainly confirmed the central claim of the functionalist tradition in second language learning theory that “language development is driven by pragmatic communicative needs.” (Mitchell and Myles 1998: 117).

During my last two weeks of my Peace Corps service in Ilam, the Maoists went beyond calling bhandas, and began taking over the area in and around Ilam. They bombed a bank and a Red Cross building, and there were times I could hear guns firing near my dhera. One Peace Corps volunteer’s dhera was destroyed by a bomb that went off across the street, and he plus the other two volunteers in Ilam quickly left to go back to the capital, Katmandu. But since I was in my last two weeks of my service (the last two weeks of October, 2003), I stayed in order to complete the process of saying goodbye to the community I had come to know so well and that gave me such a sense of belonging. The community members in turn very much wanted me to stay because they

had planned my going away ceremonies to coincide with the religious holiday of “Dasain,” which was during those last two weeks. They viewed Dasain as a particularly auspicious time for the ceremonies because this is the celebration of Laxmi, the goddess of wealth.

Saying goodbye was emotionally the most difficult part of my Peace Corps experience. The ceremonies lasted for a week, and included goodbye ceremonies at my school, at the food cooperative, at teachers’ homes, and at the homes of many others in the community. During these ceremonies, a priest or other person of respect would perform a blessing by placing a red powder called “tika” on my forehead along with some grains of rice. Others would then place garlands of flowers around my neck, and we would eat “Dalbha” – the traditional Nepali meal of rice, lentils and curried vegetables. I was deeply impressed by the rich tradition of showing respect for a teacher, and the rituals for saying goodbye. By this point, my Nepali language skills, although far from perfect, were sufficient that I could converse very comfortably, and I truly felt I was a member of this community.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

My experience learning Nepali directly affected how I was teaching ESL in Nepal. Seeing how much it helped me to use my Nepali language skills in situations of immediate concern to me, I started to incorporate into my lesson plans real situations that were occurring in my students' villages. I planned lessons in which students wrote about the Maoist activity in their villages, and their thoughts and reactions regarding this activity. Then I had the students discuss their thoughts and reactions in groups in English, and following that we would discuss points of grammar that came up in their writing. Finally, after correcting points of grammar, I would have one or two students from each group read their papers.

Based on my own experience with learning Nepali words, I had students focus on the English words they wanted to learn, and we would write the English words with the Nepali translation on cards and post them around the classroom, eventually covering the walls and ceiling. I found many of the students were seeking to draw connections between the English words and the Nepali words, just as I was doing in the same in reverse.

Taking into account the importance of Nepali food, culture and holidays, I prepared classes comparing Nepali and American foods, customs, holidays, life-styles,

jobs, etc. Whatever aspects of Nepali culture the students brought into the classroom, I used as a basis for teaching English relying on the four skills of writing, speaking, listening and reading. As researchers in the language socialization tradition have found, “language and culture are not separable, but are acquired together, with each providing support for the development of the other.” (Mitchell and Myles 1998: 183).

My own experience learning Nepali taught me that one learns a second (or third) language most effectively when the teacher combines emotion and real life situations with the lesson plan, and when the teacher continually incorporates the students’ culture, ideas and questions. In this context, what the student is learning has immediate importance and makes the most sense, thereby helping with retention. Thus, I have found that one key to effective ESL instruction is to draw on the environment and the experiences that confront the students so that they feel connected with the language they are learning.

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