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# Learning to Listen: Teaching ESL as a Tool for Individual Personal Growth

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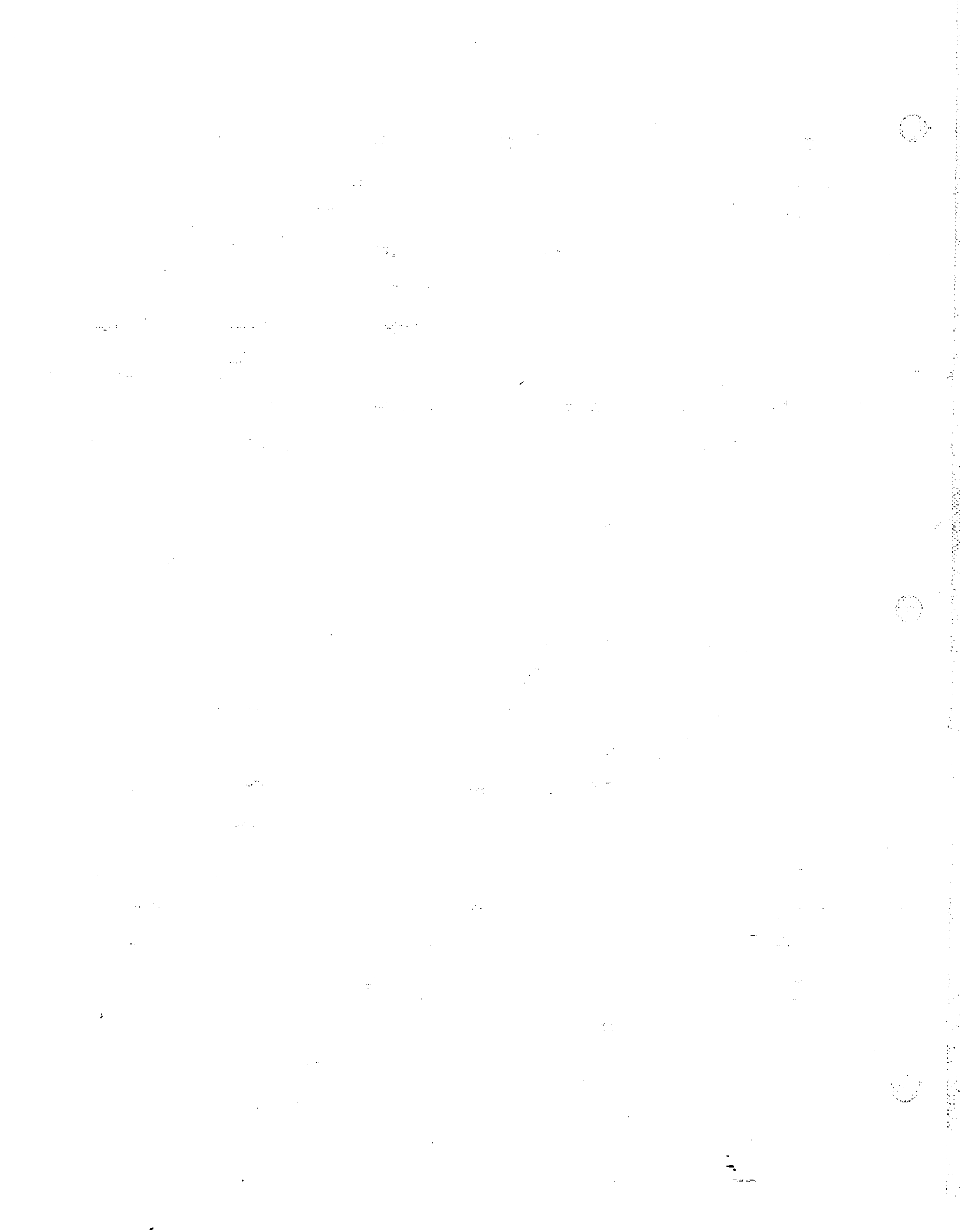
LEARNING TO LISTEN:  
TEACHING ESL AS A TOOL FOR INDIVIDUAL PERSONAL GROWTH

by  
Dan Turin

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for International  
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June, 1976



This report by Dan Turin is accepted in its present form.

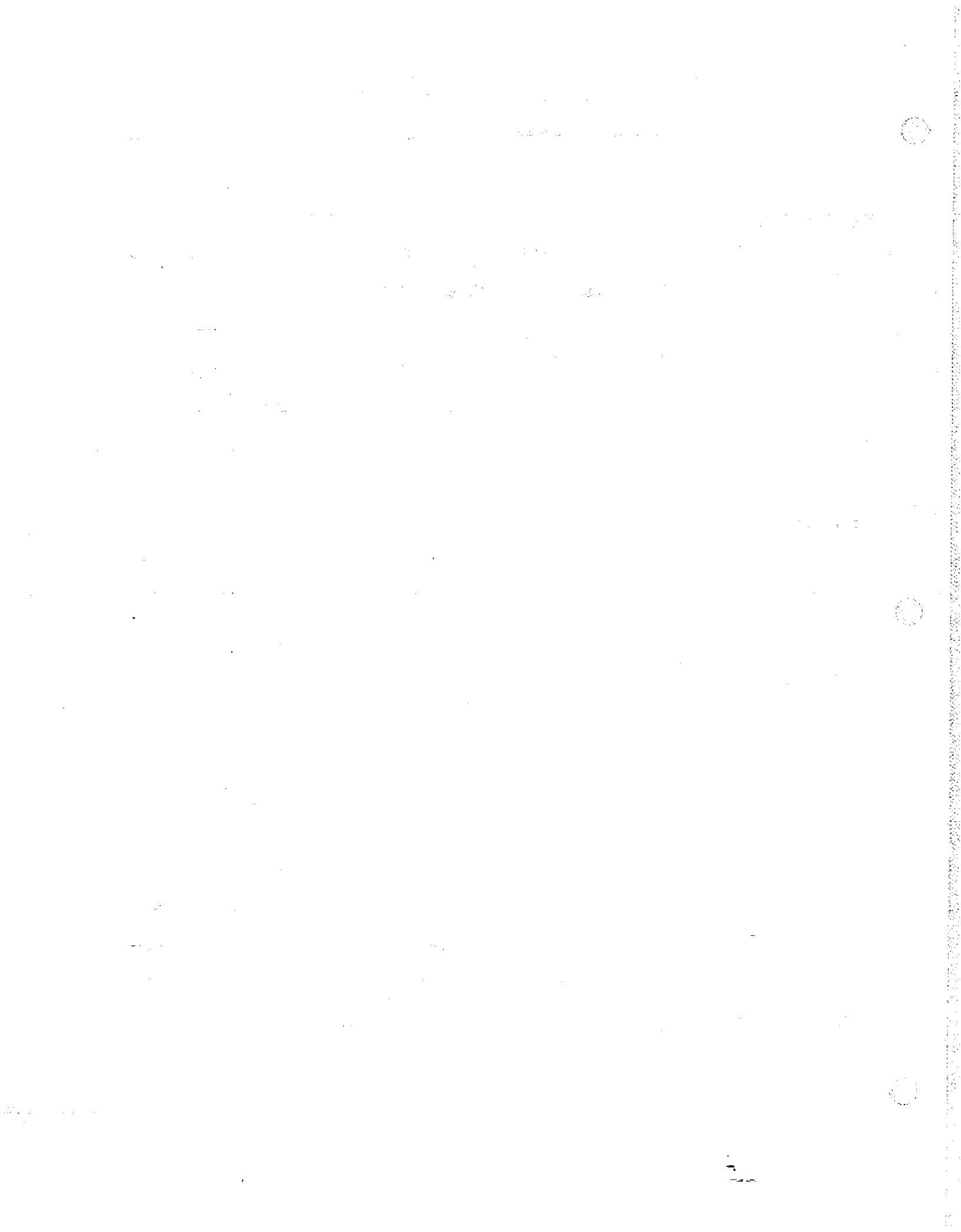
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LEARNING TO LISTEN: TEACHING ESL AS A TOOL  
FOR INDIVIDUAL PERSONAL GROWTH

This paper is the record of the inner experience of a beginning ESL teacher who feels teaching is a wonderful tool for increasing awareness of self and others. What I want to attempt to convey is the art of listening to oneself. Through a diary I kept of my own experience and experimentation with this process, I hope to present a "feeling" for this approach to teaching. I have watched it open myself as both a person and a teacher.

The very last thing I want to do is to set up my own particular experiences or choice of techniques as having some inherent value in themselves; they most certainly don't-- except perhaps for me. So, at the outset I feel compelled to say that I have nothing to tell a teacher, and those of you beginning teachers, quaking in your shoes, anticipating your first day in the classroom (or hut) in some far-off corner of the world, I can offer you no guidelines. What I sincerely hope I can offer you through the sharing of my own thoughts is the possibility of your bringing a new openness to the challenge of living in this world. If I can succeed in even a small way to convey or express what I want to say, then perhaps you may become increasingly free and eager to look dispassionately at the myriad and often contradictory sides of yourself as a person in the classroom. I see this task as a delicate one: one that I am so anxious to tell others that if I could reach

off this page and touch you to make you understand, I would. I say this because I feel that the words I choose will often be inadequate to the task. But I can take some consolation in the fact that the joy of seeing yourself and others grow through the quality of an experience often doesn't lend itself to expression in words. But I see that worrying about the possible reception of my labors will inhibit me from conveying the meaning and content of the experience as it feels to me, and this is the very thing I want to express. So, dear reader, if I have aroused your curiosity a little, please brush the dust off the cover of the folder and read on! And, anyway, I'm really looking forward to the possibility of communicating with you (and it just occurred to me, this is going to be great fun).

I want to explore how we, as human beings, listen to our personal experience as we go through life. It seems to me that we all listen very selectively to our own experience. On one hand, the biological organism inherently has limits concerning the range of data it can intercept, but what I am mainly concerned with here is how, as products of a particular upbringing and cultural context, we are encouraged to abstract--the key here is "abstract"--from the environment certain categories of thought that are deemed to be relevant. We know that these vary greatly from one person and one culture to another. I certainly won't attempt to comment on this aspect in detail except to say that the common feature among men is the universality of the process by which the Mind of man is from moment to moment labeling his experience and measuring it against a culturally biased standard--

and sad to say, we spend a good portion of each day, often quite unconsciously, measuring ourselves, others, and any number of other variables against the self-imposed polarities of thought: good-bad, normal-abnormal, adequate-inadequate. We can rarely appreciate living plain and simple. This is not to say there is not a definite value in the capacity of humans to physically discriminate in our environment through words; this is certainly a necessary ability. But maybe we could take a closer look at this labeling and judging process.

First we will look at the nature of psychological thought and thinking. Suppose we are looking at an oak tree, to take a relatively neutral example. First, there is the physical perception of the leaves, the trunk, and so forth. Next, there is recognition, which is re-cognition, applying a label or word based on past experience. And finally there is judgment or comparison. "It looks uglier than the one in my front yard," etc.

This whole process has become a unitary movement which we are not normally aware of. As can be seen, after the simple perception, the response of memory--which is built up from a person's own experience, his parents, culture, as well as the entire race of man--provides the screen through which the object is perceived. So, we can see, when taken into the realm of human affairs, this whole matter of naming and judging becomes much more distorting, as an oak tree holds little emotional content for most of us. In a way, we could say that this marvelous mechanism of thought, which man has been busy culti-



vating for thousands of years and has given birth to the miracles of science and medicine, has become a real burden in the psychological field of human affairs.

My point is that by unconsciously subjecting such a large portion of our daily experience to this process of constant comparison and judgment, we cut ourselves off from a whole realm of living which has been selected out of our consciousness and isn't currently available to our awareness.

The net result of all of this is the living of a life based solely on motives. For example, we avoid looking strangers in the eyes in order to get away from "uneasiness." We might work incessantly on some meaningless task to prevent "laziness," etc. There is always this silent judgment of all of our experience, the channeling of the richness of life into a few mechanical categories of thought. This deadens the abundant energy each of us contains within. It is very difficult for us to conceive of living life without goals, expectations of ourselves and others, and standards of various sorts. In a sense, this is the proverbial "prison" within which each of us humans labors for most of our lives. We have been educated from practically the moment we are born to emphasize certain personality characteristics and to suppress others. We can easily see how people can become estranged from themselves in this manner. But at the same time, it represents to us our "hold on reality," the way in which we establish our identities as people and impose meaning on what otherwise appears, at first glance, to be a chaotic universe. It seems, indeed, a frightening prospect

even to consider the possibility of bringing up for examination these categories we cling to.

But if we stop a minute and consider the enormous significance of what we are suggesting, perhaps we can discover the kernel of something tremendously exciting--to examine our own prison walls which are so much a part of our lives that they have sunk below the level of our everyday awareness. I'm not suggesting anything more than an innocent inquiry into what really is going on in mind and body.

But before we proceed with <sup>the</sup> inquiry, we must realize that the very evaluation of this as something intellectually "desirable" as opposed to the less desirable state I am currently in can easily become a new trick of thought. In other words, if a teacher (or any other person) perceives that he is "impatient" and blindly pushes the legitimate raw sensation or feeling into the word, he will condition the remedy in terms of another thought or idea: the ideal of "patience." The other avenue one can take, bypassing all of this, is to allow oneself to descend into the actual rough, "bumpy" feeling, the living reality of the impatience as it exists in one now. James Baldwin has said, "Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced."

So, this denial of the actual fact of the impatience, anger, or whatever else is going on in one at the moment, is where this inquiry will center. It is this gap between what is and what should be that we are interested in bringing up to the level of everyday awareness. We have all had experiences of hearing

people, as they are trembling with anger, tell us with a straight face, "I'm not angry." It is very likely that they are truly not conscious of all the signals with which their own organism is attempting to communicate to them the actual fact of anger. But because of our particular conditioning and culture, we have felt the necessity of denying its very existence to ourselves.

The shocking discovery that I can experience everything that I really am at any moment without the need to hide any of these culturally conditioned "negative" aspects of myself from myself or others is the most liberating of experiences. As we look around at the world (ourselves included), we see it is replete with examples of people who slave away their lives under the completely unexamined assumption that the arbitrary value judgments which they have accepted are necessary to cling to. One well-publicized example is former President Nixon. He tried to cling so tenaciously to his ideals of "honesty" and "truthfulness" as he vainly tried to hide the fact of his own dishonesty. He fooled others and maybe himself for a while, but his own body collapsed under the strain. This was an exaggerated case of what I want to call, as Carl Rogers does, the incongruency of experience, awareness, and communication.

As one begins to understand intuitively the consequences of living within the mire of categories of experiencing, one will slowly begin to see that the congruence of experience and awareness can promote the opening up of an individual to more and more of the gut, raw, bumpy level of everyday experience. If I feel anger, embarrassment, jealousy, etc., I will no longer

deny the truth of the matter but will "ride" with the feeling, forgetting about the label, and see where it takes me, but this time with the judgmental quality of the emotion removed. The emotion will still be there, but the momentum of the conditioned response as "anger" will lose a little of its grip.

What is it that allows us to "ride" the thoughts, feelings, and emotions of everyday living without getting caught up in judging? Where is it possible to ride from? I might suggest there are two energies that operate in the human. As things stand now, we are familiar primarily with the conditioned cerebral movement of the mind. This includes functioning through the whole network of words, images, and symbols that man has built up in civilization. It's this mechanical grid we've been exploring together; this conditioned energy by definition can never be new; it's always perceiving in terms of the past, through standardized labels. But one thing to remember is these aren't our own personal labels--they are inherited and learned ways of perceiving life handed down to us from the past.

Thus, when someone talks about "anger," "impatience," "last Tuesday," or " $\sqrt{2}$ ," we can each understand what is meant. There is a real beauty here, but also a distinct limitation.

The non-cerebral realm, or non-conditioned energy, is there inside us too. We can feel it at times--maybe as a totally indescribable joy at watching the sun set over the ocean. It is an energy with no conditions or motives attached to it. It only perceives and nothing more. We are not taught to recognize the existence of this other realm, but it lives inside us to

be discovered. I would suggest this is the place from which we observe the conditioned responses.

Maybe if I present one everyday example of the dynamics of the divergence of mind or cerebral movement and organism, or non-cerebral movement, it will become more concrete. Here, we have a person that is 30 pounds overweight. He looks at himself in the mirror and says to himself, "I hate being overweight; I must eat only 900 calories a day for two months." Here thoughts woven together as an ideal overlay the challenge and exert influence over the body. But let's get to that living quality of feeling. . . Is he hungry at 6 P.M. when he sits down to dinner, or is there some other reason he's there? How does it feel to walk up the hill in his present condition? and so on. Clearly, the simple perception of the organism is much more direct, unforced, and efficient than the mind.

A person free to look at himself and the gap between the "should bes" generated by his mind and the reality of experiencing becomes a tremendous potential constructive force to himself and others around him. When a person discovers the increasingly widening freedom inherent in the honest communication of his own humanness and fallibility, others are given the courage to do the same.

Now back to our everyday life. We have chosen teaching as our profession. How can we use the challenge of being a teacher as an opportunity for increasing self-awareness? What is it about the classroom situation that can be used as "raw material" for personal growth?

My experience as a student teacher in Mexico persuaded me the classroom setting is an ideal place for refining and honing the tools of perception. I need not mention that each day class is different. Each student's head is in a different place than it was the day before. Maybe last night a student went to sleep at 2:30 A.M., and today he sits chin propped in his hand, eyes glazed in the back row. What is my reaction? Do I feel angry, sympathetic? Do I feel indifferent, amused? And what is my reaction to my reaction? Do I feel self-righteous if I'm angry? Do I want to cover it up, hide it from the students? When I withhold the feeling from the students, what tightens in my body? How are the students affected by this contradiction in myself?

All of these are subtle things, most of which I normally don't concern myself with. But if I have the strong urge to understand myself, maybe this is the "stuff" that change is built upon. If I pretend, for example, that I know the answer to a question when I don't and continue to do so in similar situations, am I meeting challenges anew or adhering to a frozen pattern? Remember the quote from Baldwin. My feeling is that growth lies not in substituting one behavior for another, but in totally understanding the behavior as it exists in me now. The answer may be inherent in the understanding; perhaps the tool of perception is the key to change and nothing more.

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Let's investigate together!

Through the vehicle of a diary I kept during my student teaching in Mexico, I want to demonstrate how refining the use

of perception in the class promoted opening and personal growth in the author. As an outgrowth of this, I became a better and more effective ESL teacher. In a very real way I now feel strongly that the specifics of teaching will come to a teacher as a result of his own growth; the clearing away of the obstacles in himself will permit a unique style to emerge.

In my own case, Caleb Gattegno's "Silent Way" approach to teaching foreign languages attracted me because of its potential for sharpening my awareness as a teacher. For this reason, I decided that as a broad approach, the rods would serve as a good point of departure for my student teaching.

By way of introduction, I was a first-time teacher in the MAT program. I had five classes in Amecameca, all basically beginning.

The diary evolved by itself and became a tremendous asset in helping me clarify my feelings, emotions, and ideas concerning what went on in the classroom.

In retrospect as I reviewed the diary, I saw a sequence developing both in the short run and in the overall teaching period. First, there were simple observations of classroom situations. Then at times questions were formulated based on the perceptions. The questions at some point would lead to experiments which lead to new observations. The whole sequence was in the direction of opening. In that opening came more adequate responses to each class situation as it unfolded, as well as the potential for further opening.

Here are some entries from my diary grouped chronologically

to show the nature of the process I've been discussing. I think it's possible to sense the day-to-day growth as well as the overall movement. I labeled the diary entries when preparing this paper.

January 30--11 a.m.: Observation

Frustration again. I saw that I was still trying to control too much and one man helps the others too much. But I still try to direct what happens by constructing the situations for the students. The result is that they wait for me to "direct" the class.

This led to feeling my way into the nature of the problem.

There has to be a happy medium when introducing an item. I should give just enough direction so that they understand more or less and then sit back and let them work on it. It takes an awful lot of courage for me to do that because it feels like I'm not teaching or giving up control as teacher or perhaps "they won't like me" and get mad because they expect me to teach them something.

January 31: Observation

After class one older man said he understood nothing. I practiced with him for 15 minutes alone and he just couldn't understand the possessive pronouns. I don't know why. I was tempted to explain in Spanish but didn't. He didn't seem to be afraid during class, but he sat at the side and didn't say much. How much responsibility do I have for students like that? I felt like "Jesus, this guy is stupid!" Just note the feeling.



Observation

Many of the kids seem to need a lot of praise, and if I don't give it, they don't answer.

The nature of the problem is formulated.

A question--is praise ever warranted or is a general all-acceptant attitude of the teacher sufficient? What to do with students who want praise? Is it up to me to hold out until they discover themselves?

February 3--11:00: Perception

. . .It was very difficult to tell the older man that he was a distraction to others. During class many people were speaking up and I couldn't hear what was going on.

Questions

But here is a problem--unless it's an unusual case, if I bring it to the attention of a student who is saying too much that he is a distraction, maybe I should leave it to his responsibility to take necessary action and shut up.

In general, how much should I let students help each other without telling them to give each other a chance?

Should I set up "rules" at beginning to get them to realize that each person should try himself, or is it beneficial to have students help each other as much as possible?

Taking the observation from February 3 and feeling my way into answer.

This class I laid down the line as far as interference from the "smarties" went and forcibly got the quiet ones to be left alone when speaking. I had been very afraid to shut

people up firmly for two reasons: (1) It might shut them up for good. (2) It might create antagonism. (3) The silent ones might resent being singled out for practice. (4) Contrary to an assumed "let be" attitude integral to S.W.

But I have been wrong and too timid in this respect. Shutting up people may indeed be very necessary in a situation (it depends). And the way it is done is important.

Results of the experiment.

I saw some interesting things--the wife who was under husband's domination spoke up and seemed to be proud that she was capable of doing something on her own (God knows what might happen in her own life!). A couple of boys in back row were asked up to do "on/under" box sequence by themselves and they seemed to be happy at chance to practice, although one or two seemed hesitant because they didn't know or understand item at first. I guess in certain instances it is necessary more to show others that each person should have a chance. The way it's done is important, not how--without animosity.

The class was spirited, much laughter. Class seemed to be more together.

February 7--5:00 p.m.: Observation

These kids act as if the class is a concentration camp to be successfully negotiated by their wits even when I'm trying so hard to subtract the authority and unpleasantness from the situation. It's their educational background I'm dealing with.

Experiment with answer.

At the beginning of this class I had the feeling I was

going to have to show them that if they wanted to come to this class of their own accord, I wasn't going to let them sit and do nothing. They were going to have to work on their own. I haven't decided, but maybe you have to be stern before you can be gentle.

February 18--5:00 p.m.: Observation

The kids were wild, wouldn't keep still.

Question and experiment with answer.

A funny thing--when I don't get very stern, but just flow with their noise and don't object, they seemed fairly concentrated on the number chart which we were doing today despite the noise.

February 19--11:00 a.m.: Observation

. . .I was a little less talkative today, but still too much. I see that one reason I talk too much is because I don't make things simple and clear enough and then have to pull them along with me.

Experimenting with answer to "pulling them along."

I CAN'T stress enough the necessity of having simple, uncomplicated practice of one (or possibly two) items at a time. Even though I would like to believe that they can understand a new structure simply and quickly, never take that for granted. BE TIGHT with practice, isolate item and don't be afraid to drill. Maybe I'm bored with the item, but they're not.

February 21--11:00 a.m.: Observation

Today I went into "new territory" grammatically speaking with count, non-count nouns. One of the first times I didn't know

what I was doing fully and had to deal heavily with the feeling, "I really don't have all the answers and I'm going to have to feel my way through this just as you students are doing!" To my surprise, the students tried to help out with their own examples.

What I'm dealing with here is the teacher demonstrating that he isn't an "authority" in the class. It's heavy for me.

February 26--5:00 p.m.: Experiment based on all past experiments.

Dropping all structures in my mind. This initiated an opening sweep. Really good class! I forgot more or less about the Silent Way and practically did all of the talking. I called on people, but most didn't reply. In a word, I violated all the rules--I spoke in Spanish to explain grammar. I pushed a few people to speak when they obviously didn't want to, but I was really with it myself, felt "on." Nothing mattered, I was joking, let go, had great fun, as many of them sat there with deadpan faces. Did they learn well? For the moment it didn't matter. If they wanted to learn, I was right with them. Interesting for sure!

February 28--11:00 a.m.: Further opening up.

. . .the map sequence was poorly planned and needed revising. I think it was a big step to feel comfortable enough with teaching to admit things aren't good enough or working out right. It will permit more experimentation and freedom for me in the future.

March 3--11:00: More opening and increasing freedom to experiment.

Excellent class! Really spirited, tight. Did before and after clauses and three pairs of verbs with rods. It took a

while to have them catch on, but I felt freer to experiment with many situations to try to get it across. Kept pressing them to see if they understood because really if they don't get it in real life, what's the use?

One virtue of this class was that it was very carefully planned. I knew how I was going to present it in terms of concrete situations. I used the board, Spanish--any means that seemed appropriate at the moment to help me. I think there is a delicate balance between overplanning and planning too little.

March 5--5:00

. . .the class didn't seem to be much of an effort at all. Flowed pretty smoothly. . .I didn't try to force anything at them and, "voila," they had it.

. . .I felt I was back to the spirit of the Silent Way today. I said only enough, refused to be taken in or be impatient with students when they refused to listen carefully or just didn't understand. It amounts to a gentle type of control over myself when the Silent Way is working best.

March 7--5:00

Ann Puyana here. Felt really loose, perhaps due to exercising last night. Class was good, close, laughter.

Opening

They picked up things eventually. When Ann sat there I became aware of my own self-censoring attitudes as far as "following the spirit of S.W." How I felt I "shouldn't" write things on the board, or verbally help students except very begrudgingly

as a last resort. The sign of an unbending attitude.

I felt very resourceful today, in thinking up situations to illustrate what I'm presenting.

March 12--11:00: Fearlessness coming out of perception.

I felt and probably looked like a beginner today, had to refer to my notes, they kept looking at my notebook as I looked at it, but I didn't really care that much at all.

By no means did I meet every challenge; there are still many areas in which I feel fairly inexperienced. But I came away from my student teaching with a great feeling of confidence that if I had the ability to state accurately my feelings in the classroom situation--the answer was often inherent in the challenge. Understanding the issue at hand creates its own technique.

Again I'm not in any way suggesting that my choice of a class-by-class diary is in itself good for others to use. I found it very useful for me. I'm not propagating the idea of a diary itself but only encouraging others to devise their own means of refining their ability to feel intuitively what is happening inside of themselves as people first and teachers second.

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The writing of this paper has served a real need that I have of sharing a little bit of how and what I've been learning from life. While this paper devotes itself largely to the teaching of English as a Second Language, I hope that those



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reading it will see that my intention was much broader. If you found anything which you feel can help you improve the quality of your own ability, I will be very happy indeed. But if you close the cover of this report and feel that not just teaching, but everyday life provides infinite opportunities for human growth, then I will have considered my mission a success.