Teachers as Language Students: Hmong, Lesson 1

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This paper reports on an introductory, competency-based Hmong language lesson given to instructors of students of Southeast Asian origin. The goal of the presentation was to give teachers first-hand experience at being language students so as to enhance their understanding of what their own students were going through while learning English, and to discuss a few linguistic and cultural features Hmong shares with other languages of the region as well as the participants' reactions to the lesson. The motivating factor underlying the format of this presentation was the fact that teachers typically get lectured at during teacher conferences, and are not reminded often enough of what it's like to be "on the other side."

I. Hmong lesson.

In order to simulate the real life situations students of English have to cope with, I asked the instructors to put their pens down and to rely solely on auditory and visual channels for comprehension. I then started the presentation in Hmong:

[ŋɔ55ʒɔŋ33kʊ24lu55mbɛ33hu33ua33anizɛsɛʁ kʊ24tuɑ52tɪ31ʔkælfɪˈhɪətɥɪa52]

Ideally I would have liked to continue in Hmong exclusively, but in order get the audience to participate, I had to quickly explain the format of the presentation in English. After doing so, I proceeded with the lesson. There were three members in the audience by the names of Judy, Marybeth, and Carol who had studied Hmong previously, so the total immersion approach was facilitated by the fact that I could use them as guinea pigs to act out the lesson with me before turning to participants with no previous exposure to Hmong.¹ I turned to Judy, and motioned her to join me in front of the audience, saying Los ntawm no² accompanied by the typical Southeast Asian beckoning hand motion.

After she joined me, we had the interchange given in (2a):
(2) a. Annie: Kuv lub npe hu ua Annie. Koj lub npe hu li cas?
Judy: Kuv lub npe hu ua Judy.
Annie: [toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Judy.

I repeated the same interchange with Marybeth (MB) and Carol as seen in (2b-c), and then tried it on several non-initiated participants as exemplified in (2d). With repetition where necessary and positive reinforcement in the form of *Zoo heev!*3 the participants readily became competent at stating their names.

b. Annie: Koj lub npe hu li cas?
MB: Kuv lub npe hu ua Marybeth.
Annie: [toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Marybeth.

c. Annie: Koj lub npe hu li cas?
Carol: Kuv lub npe hu ua Carol.
Annie: [toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Carol.

d. Annie: Koj lub npe hu li cas?
Jim: Kuv lub npe hu ua Jim.
Annie: Zoo heev!
[toward the audience] Nws lub npe hu ua Jim.

After enough participants had developed competency in stating their names I turned to my three guinea pigs again, and exchanged (3a-c) in turn with each of them:

(3) a. Annie: Kuv tuaj tim Berkeley, California tuaj. Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?
Judy: (Kuv)4 tuaj tim Sacramento tuaj.
Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim Sacramento tuaj.

b. Annie: Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?
MB: (Kuv) tuaj tim San Diego tuaj.
Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim San Diego tuaj.

c. Annie: Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?
Carol: (Kuv) tuaj tim Madison, Wisconsin tuaj.
Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim Madison tuaj.
Then I asked non-initiated participants the question, and practiced developing competency in stating their place of origin with them, which they achieved, as exemplified in (3d):

d.
Annie: Koj tuaj qhov twg tuaj?
Jim: (Kuv) tuaj tim New Jersey tuaj.
Annie: [toward the audience] (Nws) tuaj tim New Jersey tuaj.

For the next two competencies I used a set of overhead projector transparencies (reproduced as A1-6 and B1-3 below) in addition to the three guinea pigs. Pointing at one of the two children on transparency A1 and saying me nyuam to illustrate the child concept, I had the following interchange with Judy:

(4) a.
Annie: Judy, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam?
Judy: (Kuv) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Paul thiab Sandi.
Annie: [toward the audience, pointing at the two children in A1]
(Nws) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Paul thiab Sandi.

Transparency A1

To expose the participants to the first five numerals, I pointed at the woman and her five children in A2 below, and counted out loud several times à la Southeast Asian, i.e. starting with the little finger and working up to the thumb, as seen in (4b):

b.
Annie: [pointing at the woman in A2, counting her children]
(Nws) Muaj ib, ob, peh, plaub, tsib tug me nyuam.
Then I went back to practicing inquiring about number of offspring as I had done with Judy in (4a), this time with Marybeth and Carol. While the interchange with the former provided the opportunity to introduce negative statements (4c, illustrated in transparency A3), the one with the latter allowed for a cultural value to be humorously conveyed (4d-e):

c. Annie: Marybeth, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam?
MB: (Kuv) Tsis muaj.
Annie: [toward the audience and pointing at A3]
      (Nws) Tsis muaj.

Transparency A3

d. Annie: Carol, koj muaj pes tsawg tus me nyuam?
Carol: (Kuv) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Melissa thiab John.
Annie: [toward the audience and pointing at A1 again]:
      (Nws) Muaj ob tug me nyuam, Melissa thiab John.

e. Annie: Judy muaj ob tug me nyuam,
       Carol muaj ob tug me nyuam:
       nyob hauv Asmeslivkas teb, sawv daws muaj ob
tug me nyuam!\(^5\)