

Language and the Teenage Mind

September 5, 2003

Middle and high school students (ages 12 to 18) sometimes seem incomprehensibly alien to parents and teachers. Unfortunately, according to developmental psychologists and sociolinguists, that is the way we human beings are designed. There are, however, some predictable stages in adolescent mental and social development. One part of adolescent development involves language learning and use, and that will be the subject of today's column.

You might think that language teaching practices would be based on what social scientists know about adolescents. It is not as though the scientists are keeping their knowledge a secret. And the issue is important: In Japan alone, millions of adolescents study foreign languages. Nevertheless, textbooks and teaching practices reflect very little knowledge of what the learners are really like.

Predictable Behavior

Something makes rebels of adolescents. Children who love their parents and who have accepted their views without question for a dozen years suddenly become critical of what their parents do and say. This is distressing to parents because children have the critical attitude long before they have the ability to apply it with grace and delicacy. I suppose teenage rebellion has considerable survival value for societies. I see no other reason why such social discord would be built into human nature.

We like to imagine that we can reason with adolescents by using standard adult logic, but this is often difficult. Brain research shows that adolescent brains do not work the same way as adult brains. The prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain associated with making plans, setting priorities and controlling impulses, is undergoing major reorganization and development during the teenage years. What adults notice are impulsive behavior and failure to follow plans or keep promises. What adolescents notice (I think I remember) are many options for plans and activities, quite apart from adult advice.

Adolescents are especially interested in social relations with their peers. Gender differences are evident. As a general tendency, girls work at keeping up good relations, and this means paying close attention to meanings, hidden meanings and ways of criticizing without fighting. Boys, on the other hand, tend to concentrate on hierarchical relationships and how to assert and maintain their positions. Boys in many cultures work to master the language of put-downs and intimidation.

With respect to basic language-learning ability, adolescents are well past their peak. Except for a tiny minority, they have already passed the point of being able to learn a second language without an accent. This inability is a key indicator that the neural pathways for speaking and hearing are set in their ways.

Adolescents focus more strongly than younger children on appropriate language for different purposes. They know very well that different words can have very different effects. They learn "registers" (different forms of speech for different situations). They learn gender-specific language, language for formal occasions and for speaking with older people, language for writing formally and informally, and language for peers.

There are registers for society-wide groups such as users of e-mail and cell phones, for local groups such as high school clubs for sports or music, for small peer groups and gangs, and for tiny groups such as a family or a pair of lovers. Adolescents often use specific nonstandard forms that set them apart from the adult world and help enforce a feeling of solidarity with their peers.

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The influence of their peers is particularly strong among adolescents, not only regarding language but also regarding standards of behavior. William Labov, sociolinguist at the University of Pennsylvania who first demonstrated the influence of peer groups, identified some groups that had a "counterculture," including norms opposed to those of their schools. Suzanne Romaine, professor of English Language at the University of Oxford, studied students in Scotland. She reported: "In one secondary school where I made some recordings, there was a group of boys who operated a system of fines for cooperating with school teachers in classroom lessons."

Fitting Language to Minds

An adolescent's understanding of registers and different forms of expression is not restricted to first languages. He or she knows perfectly well that such different forms are found in all languages, however well or poorly he or she knows them. In fact, one of the barriers to speaking a new language is knowing that different forms exist but not knowing what they are.

How, then, should we design second-language instruction for adolescents? Obviously, the most effective way would be to fit the topics and forms to the audience. We would offer registers and personal situations that interest them. Instead, what do we find?

Opening an English textbook at random (it happens to be a first-year high school textbook), I find the question, "What's important for you when you buy a shirt?" In the text, the answer choices are price, comfort and quality—all safe, but boring. More interesting answers might be, for example, "like what my friends are wearing," "a sexy neckline with buttons down to here," or "I don't get to choose shirts because I have to wear this stupid uniform."

Textbook-writing committees are cowardly. They like to organize texts by grammatical categories. They choose goody-goody situations and use words that are safe all around. The result is limp language, empty of immediate and gripping reality.

Let us imagine the kind of language that would spark some interest. First, an example of a situation of planning and follow-up. It might start with an apparently boring textbook expression like "Today, Wilfred went hiking." What kind of reply might follow that? Let us go for a little conflict. A reply might be, "Has he gone soft in the head? He is supposed to be studying for tomorrow's test." Or, better yet, "The rat! He completely forgot we had a date! I'll kill him!"

As part of their apprenticeship in social relations, teenagers have apparently limitless interest in talking with each other and in talking about talking. They would be interested in the human relations angle as well as the language of this exchange:

"Are you going to call her again?"

"Shut up!"

Teenagers love replays of conversations. There are some unique expressions for this purpose, for example:

"And I was like, 'Did you have to get it all over my shoe?'"

"And he was like, 'Duh, I'm sorry.'"

Taboo words are wonderful attention-getters. I usually introduce them with, "Now, this is not important. You don't have to remember it and you must never say it, but..." Of course, students remember taboo words with one hearing.

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Too often we make the mistake of thinking that learners should be given simple and sanitary language, and grammar galore until they learn it. Wrong. Complexity and sanitization are false issues. This is not trigonometry. Language is a living skill. Like dancing, it is mostly automatic and it floats on emotions. No wonder our secondary-school students think our teaching efforts are mostly irrelevant and boring. They are right.

Of course, we need to equip students with the polite neutral register of standard classroom English. But that is only one register among many. In addition to it, we need to teach adolescents things they want to know. They want to know teenage slang and put-downs, and when to use them. They want to know how to talk on a cell phone and how to write e-mails. They want to know about registers for talking with people their own age. For many students, only this kind of language can hold their interest.

*This series of columns is an attempt to reconcile views of language teachers, theorists and bureaucrats. Readers are invited to send e-mail to mrchilds@tokai.or.jp or letters to *The Daily Yomiuri*. The column will return on Oct. 3. Childs, Ed.D., is a lecturer at Temple University Japan, Tokyo, and Fuji Phoenix College, Gotenba, Shizuoka Prefecture.*