

外国語言語学習における柔軟性のある思考法 Flexible Thinking in Foreign Language Learning

マーク・オフナー †
Mark Offner

Abstract: This paper illustrates the idea of flexible thinking which enables the foreign language student to better cope with communicating in the target language. This type of thinking allows the student to make better use of the foreign language regardless of fluency level, enhancing the learning process.

1. Introduction

An individual's thought process is arguably the most important factor in learning. "Thought process" is identified here as the understanding that aids in the organization and arrangement of available information to put to practical use. It is not enough to simply have knowledge of something. Understanding and internalizing the information is an integral part of the process. In so far as the thinking process determines how information is pragmatically applied, how well one is able to effectively apply what one has learned to everyday situations is the culmination of understanding. Furthermore, how information is organized for use is as critical to learning as the method of learning. Although this is true of all subjects, it is especially pertinent to language learning because language is a means to an end: one learns a language for communication, both to understand and to be understood.

It is clear that an individual's ability to verbally communicate thoughts and ideas is greatly bound and limited by vocabulary. As command of the language increases, so can the scope and depth of the communication. There are, of course, those who think or perceive things in the abstract—in shapes, sounds, or movements—and although it is said that a picture is worth a thousand words and that the one truly universal language is music, language, whether written or spoken, remains the domi-

nant medium as the most efficient means of communication. To a large extent, too, the manner in which one thinks, and more basically the way in which one perceives and explains the world, is principally determined by one's language ability as it is the predominate factor in cognition.

2. The Need for Flexible Thinking


This is a crucial factor in learning and dealing with a foreign language. Due to limitations imposed by insufficiency in a foreign language, we must be versatile enough to adapt thought processes and ideas to that particular level. Flexibility in thinking is the key: we should not always persist in thinking in established patterns. There are many ways to view things and there are even more ways to explain them. Many of them are merely different ways of saying the same thing. Some words certainly express a thought more succinctly than other clumsier terms, but in the end, they serve the same purpose.


Language fluency level needs to be taken into account then, as the principal factor in determining the oral approach. People often attempt to explain or describe things using the foreign language in the same way as in their native tongue and are frustrated to find that they don't have the necessary vocabulary, that the language simply does not contain synonymous expressions or does not easily accommodate the same type of logic. When an attempt is made to explain or express the same view in the foreign language as in the native tongue, the positive ap-

† 愛知工業大学 基礎教育センター (豊田市)



proach may be used in the former, while due to the confines of the level of proficiency, the negative approach may be used in the latter—or any number of contrasting or differing approaches may be employed. We need to be flexible enough in thinking to allow for this type of transition to occur.






3. The Process of Flexible Thinking



To illustrate this somewhat abstract concept of thinking “flexibly” it is useful to try an exercise developed by de Bono (1983), a leading authority on thinking and the way the mind works. Take a look at this simple figure:  (p. 31)¹. De Bono calls this a “visual situation in black on white” (p. 30) because as simple as it is, it is an unfamiliar figure that has no definite name. We cannot call it a triangle, or an “X,” or an octagon, or anything else. This figure is simple enough that there seems to be nothing about it to understand. But when concerned with communication, there necessarily arises the need to describe what is in our minds to others. In this case, this figure, or “idea”, needs to be described to those who cannot see it. De Bono says: “This describing of a situation to another is similar to describing it to oneself, which is the process of understanding it” and he further states that “the need for action is the most compelling reason for understanding a situation” (p. 32). The need for action for the purposes here is communication of thoughts and ideas to another through the medium of a foreign language.





So how would one go about describing this figure? First, try to break it down into parts. This may be what first comes to mind:  (p.33). The difficulty here is that familiar words must be applied to an unfamiliar figure, since familiar words are our only means of communication. The figure can be understood, then, only in terms of that which is already familiar. One could attempt to explain it by comparing it to some larger, universally familiar or recognizable design, symbol, or object and then describe the differences. Or it could be explained using a more common method of breaking the figure into familiar parts and describing their arrangement and inter-relationships. De Bono gives the following possible descriptions:

1. Two parallel bars separated by two shorter cross-pieces inset from the ends of the bars.
2. A horizontal slab supported above an equal horizontal slab by two vertical pillars.
3. A rectangle with the two shorter ends pushed halfway towards the centre (p.32,34).

Here are two more possibilities:  (p.37), . One could try to use the familiar terms “square” or “T” to help explain the figure. Perhaps the “T” lends itself to explaining this figure most accurately by describing it as a connection, side by side, of two capital “Ts,” with a line at their base parallel to and of the same length as their tops.

Now look at this figure: . The figure cannot be described by a single term since none exists for this figure, so we must resort to breaking it down into parts again. The following ways to break it down may come to mind first because it was found from experience with the previous figure that the “T” is a convenient and relatively simple concept to use in the explanation: , . Look at this new figure: , and a possible way to break it into descriptive parts using the “T” unit again: .

Finally, look at another figure: , and an attempt to break it down into “T” units: . Thus far, the “T” has been effective in explaining the previous figures and in doing so it has become thoroughly fixed in the mind. With this new figure, the attempt may be made to break it down into “T” units again although it is quite cumbersome to use. However, rather than changing our thinking, many of us would persist in trying to explain this situation in terms of the “T” unit forgetting that the decision to use the unit in the first place was completely arbitrary. Look back at the figures again and try to apply a different unit; be flexible in thinking and use a different approach.

Perhaps the “I” comes to mind. Here’s how the figures would look now, and how much easier they would be to describe:  (p.33), ,  and  (p. 51). Since the initial arbitrary unit has been changed, an explanation or description becomes much easier, especially in the case

of the final figure where the “T” had really outlived its usefulness but was by then so ingrained in the mind that it prevented the application of another unit.

This exercise reminds us that there are many ways to explain or view things, and the way we happen to choose is not necessarily the most effective or most easily understood. “The description,” de Bono says, “of any situation depends on the familiar terms in which the observer wishes to describe it, and not on the best possible description” (p. 34). The problem lies in the fact that the terms once decided upon, the “T” for example, tend to exist on their own even after the original situation is forgotten. The more useful these terms or pieces are in explaining other situations, the more fixed they become in our minds and the way we view or say things. In this way, processes which have been created or used quite arbitrarily become strengthened until it becomes almost impossible to think in any other way. This is what leads to the undesirable state of mind where thought processes become fixed rather than remaining flexible and open to new ideas and viewpoints. De Bono makes this point stating:

the arbitrary nature of many entities must be kept in mind and none should be allowed to outlast its usefulness, since this is its only right to exist. . . No matter how adequate the description may seem, there may be a more adequate one. But this will never be discovered if satisfaction with the original description (or explanation) precludes a search for any other (p.36).

Therefore, care must be taken to avoid being so satisfied with the original description that it hinders the search for another better one to meet the demands of the new situation.

4. Conclusion

Ultimately, no matter how diligently we work at mastering a foreign language through hours of studying idioms, expressions, phrases, vocabulary, grammatical

structures, etc., little real communicative progress will be made until we learn to vary and adapt our thinking to cope with or to fit the confines that the target language necessarily imposes upon us. When learning a foreign language, it is important to keep an open and flexible mind. If something cannot be expressed or explained in the usual way, we must search for a new way to go about it by approaching the subject from a different angle. This method has the doubly beneficial effect in helping to develop thinking further in one’s own native tongue while enhancing proficiency in the foreign language.

Notes

1 Subsequent page numbers throughout this paper refer to de Bono’s book cited in the reference. Figures followed by a page number are also from de Bono’s book. Although the main idea and use of figures are adapted from de Bono, they are presented and used in ways different from de Bono’s original work.

References

- Chomsky, Noam. 1982. *Language and the Study of Mind*. Tokyo: Sanshusha.
- De Bono, Edward. 1983. Reprint. *The Use of Lateral Thinking*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd. Original Edition, N.p.: Jonathan Cape, 1967.
- Fowels, John. 1984. Reprint. *The Aristos*. London: Triad/Panther Books. Original Edition, N.p.: Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1964
- Pei, Mario. 1978. *All About Language*. New York: J. B. Lippincott Company.

(受理 平成13年 3月19日)