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Theory into Practice: Toward a Modern Pedagogy for Tibetan as a Second Language

Below is a slide-by-slide summary of the talk. A viewable presentation form is available here: https://goo.gl/ecTTsa

Introduction
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How do we learn language?
What about Tibetan?

More Reading & Resources:

➔ Esukhia’s Tibetan-only Textbooks - http://goo.gl/ojHece
  ◆ sound files - https://soundcloud.com/esukhia
  ◆ videos - https://www.youtube.com/user/Esukhia
➔ “Rethinking Classical Tibetan Pedagogy - The Importance of Applying Multidisciplinary Research to Tibetan as a Second Language Education (TSL)” - https://goo.gl/if5Qy8
This presentation is about Esukhia's approach to Tibetan as a Second Language (TSL)—how do we create a modern pedagogy for TSL?

Here, I'd like to use the metaphor of mountain climbing. Prior to modern methods, experts only climbed Everest; still, a shocking 34% died in the attempt.

Today, modern methodology makes climbing safer and easier than ever. Even non-experts regularly scale Everest, and fatalities have fallen to 1.3%.

Esukhia’s goal is exactly this: to apply what we know from the research of linguists and second language educators to the Tibetan language context. To give students the language skills and tools they need to reach the peak of literary sophistication in Tibetan...

In other words, the primary concern is creating a graduated pathway for students (non-experts) rather than concerning ourselves with what experts in the past may have done.
With that in mind, where we want to start is very big picture. First, we'd like to ask: **What is language?** Because if we're thinking of teaching a language, it's very helpful to know what one is in general, how it works, and what it is used for.

Then we want to know: **How do we learn it?** How do people, in general, acquire a language? And, how is second language learning different from first language learning?

And, if we're zooming in from this big picture of what language is, and how people learn them, next we ask: **What about Tibetan?** In what ways is Tibetan just another language, and in what ways is it unique? What does that imply for how we learn it?

Taking all these points into consideration shows why Esukhia's philosophy is an integrated approach combining "classical" and "colloquial"—speech skills inform reading skills, and basic language proficiency is a precursor to higher-level studies. Esukhia's Tibetan-only, 1:1 immersion w/ native speakers works to provide students with a language education modeled on these important, research-based principles.
What is language?

We generally have the intuition that language is nothing more than words (vocab) and how we structure them (grammar). We also generally feel that texts (formal written language) is more important than spoken language.

If we look at the linguistic evidence, however, it becomes clear that everyday speech forms the foundation for literary skills, and everyday meaning the basis for abstract thought.

In other words, language is primarily oral and primarily social. It is about speech sounds and communicative contexts.

And lastly, language is about making sense. Language is grounded in our everyday sense of the world.

First, I’d like to try a small experiment. If I say the word, “apple,” to you, what happens? What comes to your mind?

The answer is, for most people, the picture or image of an apple.
If I say, “crisp, juicy apple” you have a different mental experience than if I say, “mushy, wormy apple.”

Our everyday sense experiences are represented in our minds by sense imagery (mental pictures). These are associated with speech sounds, which are represented by graphic symbols (text).

Importantly, the text “apple” stands for the sound /ˈæpəl/. Research shows that our brain stores words using sound, and that we use sound access meaning. When we read or think using language, we do it with mental images of sounds (with an ‘inner voice’). These sound-images then have associations with our other mental imagery (our sense imagery).

When children learn to read, they “sound things out.” You may think you read silently now, but actually adults sound things out, too.

Silent reading activates the muscles used for speech in a slight but measurable way—called subvocalization—and research shows that this process is necessary for reading comprehension.

Inner speech, too, has been shown to be subvocal—whether we’re producing or comprehending inner speech, we’re activating the same brain regions and muscles of vocal speech.

In other words, what we call “reading” (along with our private inner thoughts) are also forms of speech.
To sum up our first point, then, language is speech; language, in general, is mediated by voice, even if it is private thought or silent reading.

And we should note, too, that associating “reading” as a silent, private activity isn’t a historical norm. Traditionally, reading was an oral, social activity. Texts were unpunctuated, and read aloud (recited, rehearsed, performed).

If we ask: what’s missing? From these texts (from our point of view), the answer is: punctuation. But what does punctuation do? Punctuation gives prosody cues. Prosody is the rhythm, pauses, accentuation, and emphasis in language, and it’s also key to comprehension.

Punctuation is a speech cue.

Tournadre, for example, writes that Literary Tibetan is incomprehensible without the right pauses and accentuation.

In other words, our speech-based reading skills are key to our ability to interpreting & understanding Tibetan texts.
To summarize, if you think about what language is cross-historically and cross-culturally, you’ll come to the same conclusion:

Language is primarily oral; reading is a form of speech; thus, speech skills are key for language learners.

The key point in this next section is: language is primarily social. And this ties into how combinations of sounds “make sense”—and making sense, of course, is key to comprehending language!

As we go about having experiences in daily life, our speech community is continuously reinforcing certain combinations of sounds in relation to our experiences: of objects, mental & emotional states, and social interactions.

Thus, we come to connect certain experiences to certain sounds.

For example, I’m from midwestern America. I grew up drinking tea mainly in its “iced” form in the summer. To me, tea was something cold and refreshing. The first time I tried Tibetan tea, it was not cold and refreshing; it was salty and buttery. When somebody said, “This is tea,” my gut reaction was, “No, it’s not.”
All my cumulative “tea” experiences that gave meaning to my sense of “tea” didn’t fit this new sense experience. I have another friend who said, “I didn’t like Tibetan tea until I thought of it as soup.” Soup for him meant hot and savory; Tibetan tea fits his sense of ‘soup.’ So “tea” doesn’t mean quite the same thing as "ཇ་ (ja).

Communication is based on a set of shared experiences. Which means learning a foreign language requires a shift in cultural modes of understanding.

Different cultures have different sets of shared experiences. They have different built-in metaphors for abstract concepts. Different senses of what makes sense. Learning Tibetan requires that we learn how to think in Tibetan...

To paraphrase Tournadre once again, on this point, he writes that “context and cultural background are extremely important for reading Tibetan.”

So language is primarily speech; it is primarily social; finally, it is primarily sense. By that, I mean that language is about the associations we make between our physical, embodied sense of the world and the sounds that come to represent that basic experience.
We've already covered the basics: our experiences of real, actual apples is the basis for our feeling, our understanding, of the sound “apple.”

What's not as obvious is the implications this has for more abstract language and thought. But, there is evidence suggesting that all language is oriented by our basic, physical reality... That our abstract concepts are ordered by metaphor that ties back to our everyday sensation and physical sense experiences.

These metaphors of sense experience are encoded in our everyday language and form the conceptual framework for higher understanding: and different languages make use of these fundamental feelings differently.

If we hope to make sense of Tibetan, we need a basic grounding in sense experience connected to language; and we need to understand what metaphorical frameworks make up meaning in that context.

To summarize, all language is orally and socially oriented. This includes reading, which is a form of language. It even includes our private thoughts, which is language, too.

We talk to ourselves. We think using an inner voice. We have an internal dialog. An author speaks to us.

Language is fundamentally oral. It is fundamentally social.
about sense experience. And this has very important implications for how we teach it and learn it.

How do we learn language?

Keeping these points in mind, we next ask, how do we learn a language?

Here, I think it is useful to draw a distinction between “studying” (to acquire knowledge) and “practicing” (to acquire skill). Or, in other words, to know a language versus what it is to know about a language. You can know about a language through study. But knowing a language requires practice.

Using this distinction, we can say that most speakers of most languages, across cultures and across history, have never “studied” a language. Widespread formal education is relatively new (historically speaking), and yet languages have been used (with great success) for thousands and thousands of years. It’s obvious that “studying a language” is not fundamental to “knowing a language!”

First language learners acquire languages naturally, by using them (by speaking in a social context). Research shows the same holds true for second language learners: the key is practice, not study.
The metaphor I like to use for learning a language is that it's like learning to ride a bike. There is a difference between studying how a bike works (its gear ratios and so on) versus learning how to actually ride one.

Here, there is a lot of research showing that sitting down and studying grammar simply doesn't impart the language skills we think it should. --- In other words, sitting in the garage and studying "how a bike works" doesn't impart any ability to ride it!

For example, if we take pan-Asian English language pedagogy as a case study, we see a clear correlation between high test scores and communicative-based environments on the one hand, and low test scores and grammar-based education on the other.

Despite all its advantages, Japan ranks a lowly 135th on the list internationally -- and research has clearly linked Japan's low test scores to its Grammar-based pedagogy. (And it isn't just a lack of oral language skills; Japan tests equally poorly in reading).

If I may quote from experts in the field, "Research over a period of nearly 90 years has consistently shown that the teaching of grammar has little or no effect on students."

And: "Many people think that direct instruction and drill in grammar—the exercises remembered from their own schooling—provide the shortest, most logical route to language skills. About a century of research, however, indicates otherwise."
Many people think that direct instruction and drill in grammar—the exercises remembered from their own schooling—provide the shortest, most logical route to language skills. About a century of research, however, indicates otherwise.

- NCTE, the National Council of Teachers of English

This is the majority viewpoint for modern language educators, not a fringe authors or studies.

**Grammar study does not impart language skills.**

Instead, research shows that practice in communicative environments is what imparts language skills, reading included.

**Grammar study does not impart language skills.**

Speech skills give students an external voice; in turn, this develops an internal voice. Speaking in Tibetan is the easiest way to learn how to think in Tibetan. Thinking in Tibetan is then, of course, key to reading Tibetan, ‘making sense’ of what is read. The ‘voice’ is the tool that mediates the two (symbol / meaning).
This is why Esukhia works to equip students with oral reading skills & social context in practice-oriented curriculum. These are tools they carry with them throughout their Tibetan language education, that will help them up the peak.

What about Tibetan?

The intuition seems to be that, in some way, classical Tibetan = classical Sanskrit, in that Tibetan adopted the same teaching method as the dead classical languages (of Sanskrit via Latin).

But Esukhia’s position is that Tibetan is not a dead classical language but a living diglossia.

So our goal for the TSL student is reaching native-like proficiency in all four language skills: speaking, listening, reading, & writing.
Tibetan is **not** a dead classical language. It seems that, being a literary language of classical Buddhist texts, Tibetan has been conflated with Sanskrit. But Sanskrit is Indo-European; Tibetan is Sino-Tibetan. They’re unrelated linguistically. Sanskrit dates back to antiquity Buddhism then doesn’t reach Tibet until some 1,200 years later. Tibetan’s literary heyday is **not** antiquity, but the middle ages.

What is a **living diglossia**? A diglossia is when a language has a strong contrast between the language used for formal, prestigious, literary purposes on one hand and informal, everyday, common uses on the other.

So while we can distinguish between the kind of language used for speech versus the kind used for writing, both are still **living forms** used by native speakers.

The quintessential diglossia is Arabic. If we compare it to Tibetan, both have a large body of **culturally-defining literature** (Tibetan Buddhist Canon / the Quran) and both **scriptural languages** date to the 7th century (the Middle Ages, **not** Antiquity).

To quote from Arabic L2 classrooms: “The field of teaching Arabic has benefited from the advances in foreign language teaching such as moving away from the grammar & vocabulary focused methods toward more communicative techniques.”

And reports from Arabic classrooms also suggest that students easily and naturally learn to speak/listen in vernacular and read/write in literary, side by side.
Since “Anyone who knows colloquial Tibetan can quite easily learn the literary language,” using spoken Tibetan as a foundation for further study just makes sense.

In other words, with a living diglossia, a cohesive curriculum that mirrors native-language use is possible.

And, even if we really believed the modern spoken language did not give us access to texts, it’s no excuse for leaving conversation out of the picture.

For example: “The use of Latin, especially in spoken and conversational discourse, has experienced a dramatic growth in popularity among teachers and students of Latin in the last two decades.”

So what is needed for a modern L2 pedagogy for Tibetan?

First, we can equip students with speech skills and social context to ground them in meaning, giving them the tools they need to carry them up the slope of literary achievement;

we can provide clearly marked basecamps for attainable language proficiency goals and easy, graduated pathways in the form of curriculum and textbooks;

finally, we can give them native-speaking ‘guides’ who support language learning in a safe, practice-based learning environment.

This, in short, is what Esukhia strives to provide.