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PEDAGOGY: COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Prepared by Zelda Brooks

Pronouns for Proficiency: A Package Approach

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Abstract: The diverse population of a community college requires strategies that heighten motivation and reduce frustration of students in trying to master complex grammatical structures. The author suggests a way to teach all object pronouns by exploiting the students' interest in sound, listening and memory. The "package approach" introduces and teaches object pronouns as "extra" material to enjoy rather than analyze as students absorb and work with them over a period of several classes in logical progression. Slow, average, and fast learners apply the method explained here with equal success and deliberateness.

Key Words: pronouns, object pronouns, sound, rhythm, listening, slow language learner, community college population, adult learner, "affective strategy"

In a background paper for a special report done by the American Association of Community Colleges, David Berry points out that in a survey conducted by the Modern Language Association we learn that foreign language enrollments increased by 65,539 or more than 40% in the period from 1986 to 1991 (16). In fact, David Berry adds that the "bulk of the increase" in foreign language study among two and four year institutions between these years was in the two-year school (15). Therefore, the foreign language teacher at the community college bears an increasing responsibility to encourage, train, and retain students who in the two-year college classroom are a unique and diverse population ranging from the novice to the life-long learner.

Since half the elementary and intermediate Spanish classes at Ocean County College during any given semester can consist of adult learners between the ages of 25–70 (although my oldest student ever was 80 and excellent!), while the other half are younger, starting at 18, and since it is rare to find a full time student who is not employed at least 20 hours, the community college teacher continually looks for ways to retain a population with diverse expectations and special needs. The motivation as well as the frustration levels of these students are varied. There are students who want to fulfill a curriculum requirement for the Liberal Arts or the Honors Program or

transfer requirements to the four-year institution. There are those who are working full-time but attend school part-time, such as the policeman on a swing shift, workers at Social Service agencies, telephone operators, nurses and clerks, all who want to upgrade their skills. There are the unemployed returning for more education and training and the single parent who is fitting in school while caring for several children. There are, of course, those—particularly between the ages of 18 and 20—who are attending full-time or part-time for undefined reasons and believe the community college is an opportunity to explore their interests. The objective for most is to earn a degree and find satisfying and well-paid employment. We can be certain that even in today's economy these combinations can be found in schools other than two-year community colleges. However, it appears that we find them in greater numbers than our sister four-year institutions.

Furthermore, because of the mission of the community college with its open door policy and the population that it attracts, the teacher comes to know the personal histories of these students. Perhaps because we are a bridge between the high school and what will come after, students tend to feel an urgency to share a great deal of personal information with their instructors. They explain their absenteeism, why they must leave early from class and

something about their academic background. We learn that some were high school dropouts; others did poorly until now. We discover that we have victims of extreme poverty and domestic upheaval in our classes. We have students who are in various stages of rehabilitation from physical or emotional injury or who are learning disabled. The community college is viewed as a “last” or “first” chance by many. And this “many” has increased. This sort of student population helps us to understand a question that one college administrator responding to a survey by the Community College Humanities Association (CCHA) posed when interviewing prospective instructors. He explained that the central question is “How will you excite students to learn the language?” (Berry 22). Undoubtedly behind the implicit exhortation to “excite them” was the understanding that the unique population of the community college demands that we be especially imaginative while aware of their goals and their academic preparedness. Our challenges are many, for no longer can we rely on the fact that the students in front of us share common knowledge about their own culture or the world. This is readily understood when we consider the difference in the generations in the class, but it is remarkable when we are reminded that no longer can we expect that students graduating from the same high school in the same year have the same cultural knowledge and information in common. This disquieting reality has begun to make itself felt vividly in today’s classroom.

To create a cohesive environment, to get these many individuals to work together as a group, and to compromise for the sake of one another’s peculiar or particular needs, the teacher finds that not just different activities but different methods are required. By the time a considerable percentage of the adult learners arrive in the foreign language class, they have been acquiring knowledge in more than a linear fashion. They are not used to and are certainly bored by learning in fragments. The experience feels too artificial. That is not to suggest that one does not take the time to explain what needs to be explained and to provide examples and opportunity for practicing “fragments.” But as Maureen Regan said

during a workshop at the Northeast Conference in 1990 when she explained “Mother Maureen’s Maxims”: “the shortest distance between two points does not provide for long term learning.” She adds that “Units have beginnings and ends, but language goes on and on and on.”

All of the above serves as an introduction to why I have chosen to teach the object pronouns using a blend of pedagogical ideas as a basis. My first objective was to find a way to teach a difficult aspect of structure without having to resort to excessive fragmenting. Students would find it difficult to keep the direct and indirect objects separate, to understand their place in syntax and then to use them with some degree of communicative proficiency. At worst some just gave up, at best some after long pauses could work out the use and syntax with some accuracy. Rarely did I see evidence of long-term memory or adequate manipulation of the object pronoun concept. Students might understand that the pronoun is placed in front of the verb but it started to get more troublesome when they had to figure which one went first when two are used and perplexing to grasp the idea that there is so much flexibility in syntax when an infinitive or present participle is used. By the time we got through teaching the object pronouns, students were beginning to fall off like the proverbial flies. So the object pronoun became for me a logical place to try to “excite the students” and salvage those who looked ready to take flight. Inspired by Maureen Regan’s vision and Stephen Krashen’s thoughtful studies regarding the Monitor hypothesis, I decided to exploit the use of sound in developing the listening skill.

Discussing the role of grammar in *Principles and Practice: Second Language Acquisition*, Krashen says: “There are no studies I know of that directly probe which structures are learnable by different student populations and which are not” (98). There is some suggestion that “easy” rules are learnable by most people (98). Clearly the object pronouns are not considered easy by students. Terry Ballman, focussing on the learner and the object pronoun, notes, in accord with Nattinger, that “the total omission of object

pronouns by the beginning students and the fact that any consistent use of object pronouns was found only in the form of 'chunks' may suggest that teachers can help early-level students by teaching them prefabricated or unanalyzed expressions and structures" (228–29).

Proficiency is ultimately communicative competency, and the pronoun is an integral part that cannot be circumvented, even early on, for conversation should have a natural feel and it is the pronoun that helps to loosen the tongue and make communication smooth. This is what my unit or "package" for teaching pronouns attempts to accomplish.

Regan, in her workshops at the Northeast Conference, kept reiterating "why teach one thing when you can teach 35?" This catch phrase asks us to combine material to be learned "artfully." Clearly more than one aspect of structure is used and eventually learned when presented "artfully." As foreign language instructors, we know that students can handle absorbing more than one element of structure at a time. So why not acquire and learn all the object pronouns and their interconnectedness as a package, building it into the course first as naturally as possible. The instructor can begin to introduce the object pronouns after adequate reinforcement of the present tense has been accomplished and gender and number pose no real problem. We introduce it about seven weeks into the semester.

I found myself questioning why textbooks spread out so the use of the object pronouns, for student generated questions suggested a different view. Invariably if the instructor is teaching the direct object pronoun, somebody wants to know about the indirect object or what happens if you have two objects in the sentence at once. It no longer seemed logical to say hold off and we will get to that later. That seems to defy how complex and meaningful learning goes on. Imagine a parent telling a child not to walk because he or she hasn't crawled enough yet. So the absurdity of it led me to change! The adult learner is quick to process and wants his mental resource filled. The frustration comes from having nothing to call up. The student wants to be a Monitor.

Krashen explains:

While the acquisition-learning distinction claims that two separate processes coexist in the adult, it does not state how they are used in second language performance. The Monitor hypothesis posits that acquisition and learning are used in very specific ways. Normally, acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor, or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of our utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system. This can happen before we speak or write, or after (self-correction). (15).

Krashen believes that the "syntactic operations appear to be more difficult for the Monitor. Permutations, and movements of constituent from one part of a sentence to another are quite difficult to do 'in your head' while in the middle of a conversation or even when writing for content" (97). However, I have come to find that a student does not have to be a super-learner to control a more difficult point of grammar, such as the object pronoun, if the instructor approaches the rules differently, reduces how much the student needs to know, and teaches the pronouns in a prescribed format. To help all students become efficient users of the pronoun, I "packaged" the pronouns for the students, controlling both the content and the form of delivery.

About one or two classes before the students will be dealing with the pronouns in the textbook, the instructor comes to class and opens the "package" by repeating all the direct object pronouns in a list: "Me, te, lo, la, nos, os, los, las." The instructor repeats this over and over and over, changing the beat and the pace, until it is obvious that the repetition is more than the students expected. In an article unrelated to the adult learner, in fact, entitled "Foreign Language and the Youngest Learner: How to Begin," Regan notes that "what distinguishes one language from another even more than its syntax, is its sound system" (8). She further comments "choose and organize material to be learned based on sound and beat... it keeps them active and prepares the way for reading and writing" (8). Although Regan is talking about how to grasp the attention of the youngest, this proves to be equally valid for the adult learner. Sound is engaging, entertaining, and attention get-

ting. When the students are “all with me,” I ask them to repeat the pronouns after me as a group. As I change the rhythm and the pace and the voice level, they have fun following me. Then each student repeats the list individually. The students invariably listen to each other and comment when someone misses a beat or puts “la” before “lo.” Next I ask them to use their intuition and what they already know to guess which of those “sounds” we have been repeating represent in English, “me, you, him, her, us, them, you, my friend, all of you, my friends.” They always guess accurately. Easy? Probably. Interesting? Yes, because no reference need be made about masculine, feminine, singular, or plural, nor the “vosotros” concept. The association is “easy” because they have prior knowledge from which to draw. They already know gender, number, and subject pronouns. They can guess, they can compare. Everything feminine sounds like “la,” everything masculine, is “lo.” Plurals are easy to recognize. For students to be less frustrated, it is important to show them that they do have a growing resource from which to draw. Frustration, on the other hand, comes when there is nothing from which to draw.

In the next step, I ask the students to listen *keenly*. In “Assessing Foreign Language Listening: Processes, Strategies, and Comprehension,” Susan M. Bacon tells us: “Once labeled a “passive activity,” listening is now recognized to be a dynamic process whereby individuals construct meaning from a stream of noise based on their prior experience, perceptual style, and comprehension strategies” (205). We begin with a short sentence that they can identify with ease, for example, “Conozco a Roberto.” Then the instructor repeats one sentence after another, making the substitution with the direct object pronoun immediately, moving: “Conozco a Roberto. Lo conozco.” “Conozco a María. La conozco.” “Conozco a mi padre. Lo conozco.” “Conozco al médico. Lo conozco.” “Conocemos a los estudiantes. Los conocemos.” “Compro la blusa. La compro.” “Compro la blusa y el estéreo. Los compro.” The teacher moves from masculine to feminine, singular to plural, person to thing, with no particular order

and with as much imagination as possible, to get them to focus on meaning along with syntax. At the very beginning it is wise to do six or seven sentences with masculine singular, in order to draw them to attention and give them a solid connection. It is very important, critical in fact, that the teacher not be doing this litany from a written list. Reading is not effective. The sentences need to be short pieces of information that contain increasingly interesting and pertinent facts delivered enthusiastically. They may include practical facts and cultural references, such as “El presidente Arias Sánchez recibió el Premio Nobel. Lo recibió.” However, one would present this type of example after considerable experience with the more practical type.

After hearing about 20 statements, the class is ready to participate again. The teacher repeats a sentence and a student volunteer returns the sentence with the pronoun substitute, i.e., “Venden el auto”/ “Lo venden,” beginning with masculine singular options. Very early on I was impressed that 100% of the class participated and finally 100% did it correctly—a notable accomplishment on any given day in a foreign language class! This means that the weakest students who begin to feel genuine success are repeat performer-volunteers. They are as spontaneous and deliberate as the quickest learners. They do not appear threatened. They are engaged by what they are doing. Before the class meeting is over, they receive a handout on which they underline the objects. Someone then reads off the list of underlined object nouns. They are then asked to read the sentences making the substitutions. This is done orally and they are asked to remember carefully what they just stored in memory. The sentences include some that they heard as well as new options. They go back now and write the sentences with the pronoun substitutions. The instructor walks around the class to see how each student did, and can expect to see 100% or near 100% success. If any sentence causes pause, it is generally because it has an infinitive or participle. Some students may have attached the pronoun to the infinitive or participle, others may have put it in front of the conjugated verb. A quick explanation suffices to alleviate such

momentary perplexity.

The next part of the package (I avoid the word "unit" because it has so many traditional connotations) is to quicken the pace at the beginning of the next class. This time the teacher begins again with "me, te, lo, la, nos, os, los, las." The students do the same. After the warmup, the teacher begins again saying, for example: "¿El estéreo? No lo veo. ¿La camisa? Sí, la veo. ¿Roberto? No, no lo conozco. ¿Juan? Sí, lo conozco. ¿El jabón? Sí, lo compramos en el supermercado. ¿La pasta de dientes? La compramos en la farmacia. Compramos el jabón. Lo compramos. Veo la camisa. La veo., etc. We vary the exercise to stimulate comprehension without pausing to explain. The teacher needs to work with this almost intuitively, observing the expressions on students' faces, the intensity of their focus, and other signs of comprehension and approbation. Now the teacher and students can interact again, choosing to do a simple substitution exercise as on day one or with questions, such as: "¿Roberto? ¿Lo ves?" If a student-volunteer can handle, "Sí, lo veo," then this is a good exercise with which to continue. If it appears too troublesome, meaning that their pace is interrupted with longer pauses, then "move into" the easier exercise or mingle them. It doesn't really matter. There are many ways to get to the desired outcome of adequate and repeated use of the object pronoun. Timing is important!

All of the work with object pronouns is done while students are doing other grammatical work from the text, such as verb conjugations. This is a good time to introduce the preterite tense using it a bit in the oral exercise and in the handout. More than one complex structure can be handled at once. The difference is that the student views the work with the pronoun as "extra" and, therefore, seems to feel no pressure. Both Krashen and Bacon talk about the importance of a non-threatening atmosphere. Bacon calls it the "affective strategy" which should "instill a feeling of calm and purpose" (211). I believe that the more challenging or unlike English the structure is, the more important it is to promote a non-threatening atmosphere. For students, non-threatening means not being

tested, especially for the adult learner with the perfection syndrome and students preoccupied with the cumulative point average.

The next logical progression in the "extra" package is the indirect object. Once again the teacher reverts to performing with pronouns by changing the beat, the pace, and the tone of the voice. They hear "me, te, le, nos, os, les" over and over and over. They know to listen! They absorb the pronouns with little time to analyze them. Then they are again asked to guess which words mean "to or for me," "to or for you," "to or for him," etc. There are those who listen for "la" or "lo," but it's not there. The instructor asks again which one means "to or for you, my friend." They respond with "te" easily. So then if "me" is "to or for me," which one is everybody else? "To or for him, her, you, formal?" They respond with "le." This is a good time for the teacher to answer everything they always wanted to know about object pronouns but were afraid to ask. Here the package allows as few steps or rules as possible. We don't deal with redundancy because they never ask about it. The idea is to let them acquire just what they need to know to support their beginning proficiency without digressing into an extended discussion of everything the instructor always wanted to teach about the pronoun! Next, the instructor repeats the list of indirect object pronouns once more, followed by the students as a group and then individually.

To help students hear and sense the code (the pronoun lists), the instructor plays with the pronouns by going from one list to the other, from direct to indirect. It gives the feel of learning "trabalenguas." The instructor, who still does most of the work, begins to speak in sentences that demand the student's comprehension, like "La profesora da un examen a los estudiantes. La profesora les da un examen" or "El comité da el Premio Nobel a Oscar Arias Sánchez. El comité le da el Premio." When the class is obviously catching on, embracing the information, they are ready for some exercises, beginning with oral ones. Changing the verbs, nouns, and subjects in 15 or 20 is adequate before giving them a handout of 30 or more sentences to complete. As with direct objects, this handout should

contain some of the sentences practiced orally and some new options. Several handouts should be used showing the direct and indirect objects in the sentences and on the last sheet, a list of the double object pronouns:

me lo, me la, me los, me las
 te lo, te la, te los, te las
 se lo, se la, se los, se las
 nos lo, nos la, nos los, nos las
 os lo, os la, os los, os las
 se lo, se la, se los, se las

The instructor begins by repeating the double object pronoun list over and over with no explanation. Then, the teacher asks the students to put one line under the direct object noun and two under the indirect object noun. This may sound too elementary but we cannot assume that they are connecting with grammar and syntax, nor can we be certain of the base from which they begin. This allows the slower student to get comfortable and gives everyone a chance to review and make associations. Next, a student volunteer is asked to read the list of direct objects. Another reads the indirect list. If there is a question, the instructor responds as briefly and succinctly as possible. It is helpful to send students home with a clean copy of the class handout or a new one or both and crucial to remind them to practice their oral repetition of the codes. Practice, practice, practice!

After reading the lists of direct and indirect objects on the handout, the students orally make the substitutions as before. First they do the direct object substitutions, followed by the indirect. At this point, the instructor starts the litany of the double object pronoun, repeating so rapidly that it seems a “stream” of sounds. The students know to listen without analyzing or judging. The instructor slows down the pace and changes it often so that students begin to discriminate sound and word. They listen and listen and listen! They start to hear the combinations clearly. And in a surprisingly short time, after 8–10 teacher recitals, changing pace and beat, they can do it too. The teacher asks for a volunteer to repeat the double object pronoun code. It is better to do this with volunteers rather than going row by row so that the quickest to hear perform first

and the slower catch up without concern. Everyone finally volunteers. It never fails, even the most awkward verbally can do it well. They can repeat it from memory and time proves that they do retain it.

Now the instructor begins with the same method as before providing one sentence after another containing bits of information that will engage the students. They hear the substitutions immediately after and the sense of it all emerges. They hear the combinations and the instructor prompts their recognition. The “se” for “le” and “les” takes very little effort to get across. They can be told now that the contents of the package that they have memorized contains all that they need to know to substitute anything they can say. For example: “Di el piano a mi hermano. Se lo di. Di la foto a mi hermana. Se la di. Di los libros a mis amigos. Se los di. Di las flores a mi novia. Se las di. (Se lo, se, la, se los, se las). Even though a great deal of application begins to take place, they are prepared. Rather than having to figure out the rule, they listen to the code that they have memorized and literally select the combination that works. The mind distinguishes effectively and with little pause, chooses from the memorized code. The almost 100% success by all on the test for this structure is due, I believe, to the selection from the resource code that they have built into their memory. It appears to stay with them for the long-term. Students that have continued on in the curriculum and have moved into the intermediate level and conversation classes have no problem employing the object pronouns. They *use* them. These are continuing students who still reflect the mixed community college population. They are the life-long learner, the returning unemployed, the recent high school graduate and even college administrators and faculty.

Although I have not done a scientific evaluation of the long-term effect of learning the pronoun package, a great deal of anecdotal evidence and performance in subsequent courses shows that students retain the pronoun package and can use it without frustration to express themselves more naturally. If there is any divergence as a group, it is with the writing skill at the intermediate level. Here

the stronger academic students "remember" it faster but the slower appear to edit their work appropriately when necessary. However, the development of the writing skill was not the primary intention in creating the pronoun package.

In developing the pronoun package originally, there was no expectation that an entire class could learn to use and retain all of this. The goal was to help students to finally "get it," to straighten out the confusion many would feel about what is an object, what is a pronoun, and what do "I do?" Several years' experience shows that the package enables students to access their conscious knowledge of the language, makes a difficult structure manageable, and inspires all to participate. Not only has the package been effective in salvaging students who might otherwise be discouraged by difficult grammatical structures, but also in making them enjoy what they learn from it. It is likewise effective with the adult learner, who is quick to process, wants the mental resource filled, and is frustrated if there is nothing there to draw upon. This approach helps students of all ages and abilities store knowledge for the long term and appears to be the "code" that gets them through.

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