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# International Communication Through Sensory Awareness

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*This presentation describes the organization and execution of an event that allowed participants to communicate in English in a unique and challenging way. The Sensory Awareness Workshop demonstrated the principle that interaction in a second language can be enhanced through deprivation of visual sensory input while accentuating interaction related to touching, tasting, hearing and smelling. Twenty-five participants were asked to put on blindfolds immediately upon arrival while another twenty-five individuals served as their guides for the six-hour duration of the event. This supported*

*friendship-making using English without access to visual cues on the appearance of the caregivers. Both guides and blindfolded participants took part in various activities designed to build trust, heighten sensory awareness and encourage uninhibited communication in English. There were numerous helpers and musicians on hand to create an atmosphere conducive to relaxation, cooperation, friendly English interaction, intercultural sharing, and sensory exploration.*

このプレゼンテーションは”Sensory Awareness Workshop” において、参加者が独自かつ積極的な英語でのコミュニケーションを可能にするための、構成と実践を示すものである。このワークショップで、視覚を遮断すること、そして、それによって強調されるそれ以外の感覚によって、第二言語における相互作用が高められることが示された。25人の参加者は会場に着くと同時に目隠しをし、もう半分の25人は6時間にわたる活動の案内役として務めた。これによって、案内役の外見に左右されずに、英語でのコミュニケーションのみで友達作りをすることを助けた。案内役と目隠し役、両方が、信頼を作り、知覚認識を高め、英語による自由なコミュニケーションを促すよう作られた様々な活動に参加した。会場には複数の手伝いとミュージシャンがいて、くつろぎ、協力、フレンドリーな英語でのコミュニケーション、異文化の共有、そして、知覚探求のための環境を作った。

## Introduction

A Sensory Awareness Workshop was held to demonstrate the principle that interaction in a second language can be enhanced through deprivation of visual sensory input while accentuating experiences of touching, tasting, hearing and smelling. Twenty-five participants were asked to put on blindfolds for six hours while another twenty-five served as their guides. Both guides and blindfolded participants took part in activities designed to build trust, heighten sensory awareness and encourage uninhibited communication using English.

## “Experiential learning” event

Extraordinary circumstances can provide the means to achieve involvement in the language learning process that can not be attained in the classroom. In the classroom, the teacher-student ratio may not always be favorable for learning to take place, the focus may be often confined to an outdated textbook, or there may be other types of obstacles to natural communication. Students can learn in the school-room environment, but teachers owe it to their students, themselves and their profession to present optional and alternative learning opportunities whenever possible. Janice Eyring suggests that we give students concrete experiences through which they “discover” language principles (even if subconsciously) by trial and error, by processing feedback, by building hypotheses about language, and by revising these assumptions in order to become fluent (Eyring 1991:347). Robert Brown in the same vein recommends not simply telling students how language works, but instead giving students opportunities to use language as they grapple with the problem-solving complexities of a variety of concrete experiences (Brown 2001:238). We may indeed be able to

lift some of the restrictions to competent language learning through tapping into the available resources of the community, searching for issues that motivate, bringing enthusiastic and compassionate people together, discretely manipulating various dynamics of interpersonal communication, and empowering learners to engage in self-exploration.

## Participants and goals

It has been my privilege to facilitate an event or shall we say a “happening”, in which the participants were able to advance skills in the use of the English language from a point of personal need and to receive immediate feedback on language performance. The event involved individuals who were blindfolded and an equal number of guides. Both guides and blindfolded participants took part in various activities designed to build trust, heighten sensory awareness and encourage uninhibited communication in English. Guides learned to lead someone with special needs through providing the right balance of reassurance, comfort and freedom. Organizers made every effort to assemble a highly heterogeneous group (Japanese, non- Japanese, students, workers and retirees) to provide an opportunity for trans-cultural sharing and cooperation. Aside from building confidence in English communication skills, participants were able to interact in a secure environment to overcome cultural barriers, awaken the non-visual senses, learn to trust and to be trustworthy, empathize with those who are visually challenged and address the problems of global cooperation.

## The Blindfolding

The participants who were to be sightless through the event blindfolded themselves in order to affirm their decision to

relinquish their sight. This was done in a small room at which time there was only one staff person present. This first highly symbolic act of blindfolding each other contributed to this special group's sense of solidarity and camaraderie. It also allowed them to take the first of many symbolic steps to empower themselves to go forward on their quest for self-awareness and discovery.

## **General orientation**

The orientation time was used to exhort all participants to maintain an open mind, make an effort to share feelings and impressions and remain in the target language of English as much as possible. We strove to ensure everyone on hand that their safety and pleasure were our top priority and they were invited to take advantage of the secure and open environment to explore their senses, gain new awareness and make new friends.

## **Choosing the guides**

As in the blindfolding session, once again our blindfolded participants were empowered to make critical choices. They would choose the person who would serve as care-giving guide for the next five and half-hours. We facilitated this activity by providing a lesson in English on how to greet others for the first time, how to make small talk, how to ask appropriate questions to elicit the necessary information that would help them to select a compatible partner. After providing an ample menu of questions and responses in English, we positioned all the blindfolded participants in the middle of the room. The guides would mingle with them until a blindfolded person would initiate a conversation. In order to make things even more interesting and to perhaps further instill a sense of urgency to

this process so that typically shy Japanese participants would assert themselves, we placed a time limit of two minutes on each conversation. After two minutes a bell was rung and new pairs would be formed. If at any time a blindfolded person decided he or she had found the desired partner, they had to ask that person to be their guide. If the guide accepted, then the blindfolded person and guide pair left the center of the room and went to the side and continued getting acquainted until all the remaining participants had paired. One interesting result of this process was that each of the participants succeeded in using English to form “guide-blindfolded” pairs.

## ***Mama*, a voice recognition activity**

The first activity of the workshop served as an ideal icebreaker. It provided an opportunity for the newly formed pairs to strengthen their bonds. It also presented the perfect occasion for the blindfolded participants to awaken their remaining senses now that they had been deprived of their sense of sight. This activity evaluated how well they could recognize the voice of their partner. This voice recognition activity afforded blindfolded participants the opportunity to become aware of their immediate surroundings as they wandered around the room on their own, while attempting to follow the voice of their guides. After becoming acclimatized to their guide's voice, participants initiated the second part of the activity by gathering together inside of a large circle surrounded by all the guides. At the same time all the guides began to shout out the same word, “mama” and their blindfolded partners tried to recognize their voice in a crowd. Some could find their guides immediately while others struggled. All in all, everyone enjoyed this activity, as the reunited pairs seemed to have deepened their rapport with one another.

## The smells activity

In this activity the guides presented zip-lock bags containing various smells to their blindfolded partners for determination of the contents. Guides subsequently wrote down on the provided form what their partners guessed those scents to be. This activity called for deliberate collaboration between the partners. Some very interesting language was produced as the pairs sifted through approximately twenty packets containing both common and unique fragrances. It was very interesting to witness the vast array of memories, emotions, and feeling that were elicited from these smells.

## The indoor picnic

One thing that a good smell activity does is to stimulate everyone's appetite for lunch. As the smell activity drew to a conclusion, staff members began to prepare the large table with enormous amounts of food provided by the participants themselves. Everyone was asked to bring a covered dish to the event. Having a wonderful indoor picnic allowed all participants the chance to engage in an everyday activity so that they could reflect over the events that took place during the morning. With relaxing music in the background and abundant delicious food, participants could enjoy the festive atmosphere while making even more friends. It was also a great opportunity for blindfolded participants to state their food preferences and for guides to inquire about any food allergies their partners may have. It was noteworthy to observe the natural, uninhibited, and friendly interaction, which was taking place between the pairs as they began to naturally form groups. It was a matter of people just being human and engaging in nurturing and accommodating behavior. There was also a fair amount of

conversation concerning how various foods tasted to those blindfolded participants. Some participants reported that they were frustrated not being able to see what they were eating while others expressed a special new-found excitement about savoring every bite of what they could not see.

## The nature walk

In this activity all participants had their first opportunity to leave the safety of the building in order to experience the wonders of nature outside. Participants were given an hour to go exploring outside in groups consisting of three-to-four pairs each. This provided guides in each group a chance to cooperate together in planning an adventure-filled outing, which included a full menu of interesting sounds, and things to touch. One aspect that stood out was the extra efforts taken by the guides to provide a sense of security and fun for the blindfolded participants within the group. Such an outdoor activity contributed to the ongoing building of trust among participants and it further provided a vehicle for empowerment and action, which in turn welcomed innovation and new ideas. While outside strolling through the beautiful college campus, guides were able to pose interesting questions to the sight-deprived members in the group that would further stimulate curiosity and promote sensory awareness. One example of such a question was, "which sounds are from nature and which ones are man-made?" Guides also had blindfolded group members try to guess what kind of shrubbery they were touching or in what direction they were walking. All in all the guides in each group were empowered to make the choices which would, in turn, enrich everyone's experience.

## The drawing activity

This activity provided an opportunity for some of the more reserved participants to express themselves in new ways. Participants were asked to shift some of their attention to their sense of touch as they strove to convey a simple and informative touch sensation to paper. One of the things our blindfolded artists were asked to draw was their partner's face. The task created yet another chance for pairs to collaborate and interact on sensory exploration that would take their bond to an even deeper level of interaction. Following the face drawings, blindfolded participants were asked to draw the letters or figures on the paper that their guides were simultaneously drawing on their back. By all indications this was an extremely enjoyable and challenging task. The final drawing exercise allowed the blindfolded participants to go for a more abstract motif as they were asked to draw an ideal pastoral scene on a beautiful beach or in the mountains. Participants had the freedom to make the drawing more elaborate or to add their own personal touch that would convey any special feelings or emotions that they wanted to share. Once their artistic work was finished they were asked to present to their guide what they had drawn. The guides felt free to ask any follow up questions they may have had. The artists' explanations led to some very dynamic, warm and nurturing dialogue between the inspired pairs. It is impossible to over-rate the importance of such an exercise and the instrumental vehicle it plays in bringing these pairs to a place where they can feel comfortable opening their hearts to someone they had only met hours before. Having the right activities, the right atmosphere, and the right kind of nurturing and compassionate people involved in such an event is the only chance of gaining this type of willing disclosure.

## Shall we dance

One cannot overestimate the benefits of having a dance activity planned in such an event as this. It afforded our participants an opportunity for some much needed expressive movement. For some it was the first time that they danced. Whether it was due to the blindfolds or to the commitment to have an open mind there was an obvious reduction of inhibitions. Participants were eager to hold hands, form a circle and engage in a festive ethnic dance as a young Australian musician played magical and uplifting melodies from her accordion. The second part of the dance performance was an invitation for our pairs to exhibit a different kind of flair as they took part in a waltz performed by the same accordion player. It was quite an amazing sight to see all the dance partners concentrating on their dance skills while having the time of their lives. It was evident that after all the activities they had experienced together, deep and trusting bonds were formed. This trust and devotion was obvious in the ease with which the couples danced with one another. The guides went to incredible efforts to accommodate their blindfolded partners and those partners went to amazing efforts to welcome trustfully and warmly those efforts with willingly playful and open hearts.

## Guided imagery

With time drawing to a conclusion on the day's festivities, it was now time for all involved to take a step back and reflect on everything which had transpired through the course of the event. Once again with the accompaniment of gentle and moving music and a guided imagery narration, participants could collect their thoughts while comfortably stretched out on the floor as they prepared for the final stage of the workshop.

## The unmasking

Following a twenty minute guided imagery relaxation activity, blindfolded participants were invited to calmly and at their own pace sit up and whenever they felt ready, to remove their blindfolds. They were instructed however not to speak for at least three minutes after they had physically removed their blindfolds. Once again participants were empowered to respond in any way that they felt was right for them. We could observe a wide diversity of responses from subdued introspection to extroverted excitement and a desire to communicate profusely. Some people responded erratically. A great number of people had fairly strong reactions to having finally removed their blindfolds. Some people were simply relieved to have the blindfold off and their sight restored while others surprisingly would have liked to remain blindfolded for a longer period of time. Those people were either in awe of their adventure or wanted to add even more to their new sense of awareness. Some of those who were so relieved to have the blindfolds off were also very grateful to their guides and expressed a desire to be a guide the next time the event would take place.

## Discussion

It was interesting to observe the nature of the preconceptions that were held by the blindfolded participants. We found these preconceptions both from exit interviews as well as from a post-event questionnaire that was requested from all participants. Many of the guides who took part in the event also expressed opinions concerning their partner's experiences and responses. Some of the guides observed that their blindfolded partners were in some ways disappointed when they found out what they really looked like. Although this was a somewhat sensitive area, we were able

to extrapolate from these guides' blindfolded partners that they were indeed carrying a distinctly different image of their guide. One blindfolded female participant had imagined her male guide to be more muscular and athletic looking, while another female participant imagined her male participant to have more of a Caucasoid pigmentation. There were many other occasions where the protracted image was at variance with the actual appearance and in most cases the image was more positive than the partner's actual appearance. There were cases when the blindfolded partners anticipated that they would discover a younger person on the other side of the blindfold. These kinds of results were later used as language exercises among the participants in the event that they attended my university speaking and writing classes in the weeks that followed the event. This is a perfect example of how to expand the learning potential of such an event. It was unmistakably clear from the staging and subsequent analysis of this event that the performers played an indispensable role in producing a successful outcome to the event. The event was enriched by instrumental music and vocal selections providing the atmosphere for several of the activities. It created the perception for the participants that they were truly involved in an ongoing spectacle in which they were the intricate players and that the activity of the event was especially intended for them. The music contributed to the auditory effect experienced by those who were blindfolded and reverberated as a sense of celebration and grandeur coming from different directions in the hall at random times during the event. Frequently there was a linkage between the meaning behind the various activities that were taking place and the particular musical piece that was being performed at the time. These guest performers could elicit emotions and feelings in the participants. There were times during the course of the event when the aim was to invoke feelings of fear, anger, happiness, loneliness, bliss etc. Music had yet another essential function of reducing the level

of participation anxiety. Blair in his discussion of humanistic and psycho-suggestive approaches observes that many teachers are going the extra mile whenever possible to lower the effective filters by creating a non-threatening environment. (Blair, 1991:38). Many participants responded favorably when asked about the music in the exit interviews and in the questionnaires. They said that they had found a source of comfort and hope in the music. A majority of the musical pieces and songs were meant to induce a feeling of well being in the hearts and minds of the participants.

## Conclusions

The sensory interaction event provided a means of reducing participation anxiety in the study of English. This event encouraged cultural sharing, empathizing with the sensory challenged, interacting in English in a warm and nurturing global environment, being empowered to make choices, affirm decisions, and gain new awareness while striking a chord for international cooperation. It is recommended as a way of enhancing language learning by going outside traditional boundaries to experience the true context of interpersonal communication.

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