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Samue J. Sackett

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## The ESL Program at the University of Weissnichtwo

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**Samuel J. Sackett**

The University of Weissnichtwo, situated on the shores of Lake Wobegon, has received national attention for its championship horseshoe team, but little notice has been given to its success in providing training in English for the international students who have flocked to the campus. These students have not been attracted by the university's academic programs; its most prestigious program, research into cold-climate flax production, has little applicability in Africa, Central America, or Southeast Asia, which supply a full 20 percent of the university's entire student body.

The university's attraction to these students is the reputation which its graduates have taken back with them to Nigeria, Honduras, Taiwan, and the other countries which send the university hundreds of students each year. That reputation rests on two facts: the first is that the university will accept provisionally any student who applies, whether or not he or she can pass the TOEFL test; and the second is that, although international students must complete a grueling ESL program before they can enroll in classes for credit, the program is highly effective in providing them with English language skills which

make them successful both in the classroom and in the native countries to which they return.

The program was designed by Professor Wolfgang Teufelsdröckh, who grew up in a bilingual household, having been born in Wisconsin to first-generation German parents. Part of the program's effectiveness, of course, is owing to Professor Teufelsdröckh's personality; although he pretends to be a curmudgeon, posts the motto "What right hast thou to be happy?" prominently in his office, and preaches the dour doctrine that hard work is the only efficacious panacea for the pains of human existence, he commands the affection of his staff and their students for the zest with which he throws himself into the task of teaching. But not all the program's success can be traced to one professorial personality: some of it arises from the system's design and the manner in which that design is carried out by the teaching staff.

The staff, admittedly, is relatively large, consisting of ten teachers in addition to Professor Teufelsdröckh. The size of staff is necessary because each member teaches one of the eight stages into which the program is divided, and, because most incoming students test out of the early stages

of the program, the enrollment in Stages Seven and Eight is so large that two sections are necessary. But the success of the program merits the staff expense, and the tuition is high enough to cover the cost. The incoming student is given a placement test measuring his competence in each of the four language arts -- reading, speaking, listening, and writing. Then the student is enrolled in the stage most appropriate for his level of development. He spends eight hours a day engaged in language study of one sort or another, either in class or in the listening laboratory, preparing to move to the next stage. When he has graduated from the eighth stage, he is acceptable for enrollment in the university, or he can transfer to any other institution which will accept him. Some private institutions in the region accept graduation from the Weissnichtwo program in lieu of the TOEFL, but the state universities do not; many graduates of the Weissnichtwo program go to the state universities, however, and not one has ever failed the examination. Indeed, one Iranian student who dropped out of the program after the sixth stage passed the TOEFL.

One interesting feature of the Weissnichtwo program is that students are not allowed to possess dictionaries which interpret between their languages and English, such as Chinese-English, Spanish-English, Farsi-English, etc. If a student is found with such a dictionary in his possession, it is taken away from him and not returned until he has graduated from the program. By this time, of course, he no longer needs it, and one tradition of the school is required to own an English dictionary -- Professor Teufelsdröckh

favors The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language because of the illustrations -- and carry it with him at all times.

The language classes go year round, except that the school is closed during August. Each of the eight stages is offered every month, except that frequently there are no students for Stage One because all applicants test out. It is taught by a retired Mennonite missionary who welcomes working only three or four months a year, sometimes with only one or two students in his class.

Each stage lasts for one calendar month, except that the long Christmas vacation celebrated by the university, which is affiliated with a little-known denomination, the Free Will Anabaptist Lutheran Synod of Minnesota, requires December and January to be treated as a single month. At the end of each month, the students in each stage are tested rigorously to determine whether they have mastered the appropriate skills at the appropriate level. If they have, they advance to the next stage; if they have not, they repeat that stage until they have mastered it. Professor Teufelsdröckh has said, "Nothing can be more frustrating to a student than being advanced to a level of language study for which he is ill prepared. He lacks the foundation upon which the edifice must be built."

According to Professor Teufelsdröckh, the easiest language skill to learn is reading. Stage One is devoted entirely to reading; there is very little interchange between students and teacher or among students, although the teacher is available to help students who ask for assistance. The

readings, written by Professor Teufelsdröckh himself, are carefully graded for vocabulary and syntax, from extremely simple to college-textbook complexity; the subjects are all relevant to the students, for the readings are about the English language and the American educational system. Many of the reading are about the English vocabulary, its roots, prefixes, and suffixes. Others are about topics in English grammar, which the professor, a former student of Kenneth Pike, approaches from the tagmemic point of view. One important piece of reading is the instruction sheet informing the student what he is to do during the course. It is written very simply, but the fact that it is the only way in which the student can discover what is expected of him creates high motivation for him to learn to read it, using his dictionary as necessary.

The course is essentially self-paced. When a student completes one reading, he takes an objective test over it. If he passes the test with 85 percent or above -- 85 percent is the minimum acceptable score throughout the program -- he moves on to a more difficult reading. If he does not, he is given another reading on the same level. Eventually he reaches readings on the level required for promotion to Stage Two. If he passes the tests over these before the last day of the course, he reads popular fiction from a collection of paperbacks until the month comes to an end.

Supporters of the oral-aural method and other more recently fashionable language teaching approaches have criticized Professor Teufelsdröckh because he ignores the historical and, we might say, ontogenical primacy of spoken over written language. The professor's response is that

while the written language is in fact only a more or less accurate attempt to record the spoken language, and while children do in fact learn the spoken language first, his students are neither cavemen nor children; they are, in fact, literate in their own languages, and, regardless of theory, they find reading easier than any other language skill. To those critics who blame him for handing incoming students an instruction sheet and making them read it in order to find out what they must do in the course, Professor Teufelsdröckh compares his methods to throwing someone off the pier in order to teach him to swim and concludes by saying, "I must be cruel only to be kind."

Students promoted from Stage One advance to Stage Two, where the time is divided equally between reading and speaking. "Speaking," the professor has written, "is easier than listening to a language learner because the speaker controls the ideas to be encoded and the vocabulary with which he chooses to encode them. By contrast, listening is very difficult, because the speaker is often confronted with ideas and vocabulary with which he is unfamiliar."

Content of the readings in the course add English pronunciation to the subjects treated in Stage One. The basis of Professor Teufelsdröckh's approach to pronunciation is physiological. He has gone so far as to argue that if a student comes from a language where the sound of /æ/ is not used, he can learn to make it by holding the tip of his tongue against the lower teeth just at the point where they erupt out of the gum. He claims also that Oriental students can learn the difference between /r/ and /l/ by pressing the tips of their tongues against their hard

palates for /l/ and holding the tips of their tongues slightly retroflex from that position for /r/. The Stage Two teacher spends some of his time pronouncing English words and having his students repeat them.

In addition to pronunciation, of course, the content of Stage Two includes grammar. As noted before, the approach to grammar is tagmemic, and many of the exercises require students to expand kernel sentences tagmemically. Students spend two hours a day in the listening laboratory, imitating the pronunciations of American speakers as well as replacing words with phrases in kernel sentences. It is, of course, very tedious to sit for hours repeating “bat, cat, fat, hat, mat,” and so on, and “He ran home; he ran to his home.” But Professor Teufelsdröckh likens learning to produce language orally to the acquisition of other physical skills which must be repeated ad nauseam, such as typing, driving, playing the piano, and karate. In all these the actions must be rehearsed over and over again until they are engraved in the very neural system itself. The test for advancement into Stage Three is entirely concerned with the student’s ability to speak.

Stage Three is devoted entirely to speaking. The teacher listens carefully to each student’s pronunciation and grammatical usages, identifies his trouble spots, and assigns him exercises designed to overcome his difficulties. Proportionately more time is spent having the student produce more and more complicated sentences, including various types of imbedded clauses, then on pronunciation.

When the student has passed the test over Stage Three, he is ready for Stage Four. Here his time is divided equally between

speaking and listening, the latter of which Professor Teufelsdröckh believes is the second most difficult language skill. At the outset the student continues working on his pronunciation and sentence formation, both in class and in the listening laboratory; and in addition he begins a series of exercises which call upon him to listen to simple commands and follow them. When the instructor says, “Pick up your pencil,” those students who pick up their pencils have understood what they heard. When he says, “Stand up,” those students who remain seated have not. These exercises soon give way to more complex demonstrations of the students’ skill in listening; the student has an answer sheet and is required to check the correct answer, which is given orally by the teacher. During Stage Four everything the instructor reads to the students is based on information which they have previously read.

In Stage Five the skills of speaking and listening are put together, and four weeks are spent on conversation. From this point on, students in the program are prohibited from speaking to other students in their native languages. This rule is followed so rigidly that if two Thai students are rooming together in the dormitory, for example, one of them is compelled to move out and join a student of another linguistic heritage.

Students in Stage Five and higher are awarded a badge of merit which they must wear at all times; this is a symbol of achievement, but it also serves to identify them so that they can be fined if a staff member overhears them conversing in any language other than English. The amounts of the fines are recorded and become progressively higher with each infraction,

beginning with fifty cents but becoming extremely stiff. A few years ago, for example, when Argentina was playing in the World Cup soccer match, an Argentinian student became so excited during the game that he forgot the prohibition against using Spanish and accumulated \$127.25 in fines before he became calm enough to be reminded of the rule. Professor Teufelsdröckh took pity on the erring Argentine; he did not refund the money, but he used part of it to buy a large color photograph of the Argentinian team which is still on display in the student lounge.

The student who succeeds in Stage Five advances to Stage Six, which is essentially a course in listening to lectures. In the beginning of the month the lectures are very brief, only a few minutes; after the instructor gives the lecture, he asks the students questions over it, to which they respond orally. Gradually the length of the lectures is extended and the questions grow into class discussions. By the end of the month the lectures achieve the duration of the fifty-minute college hour, and objective tests -- at first true-false but later multiple choice -- are given over them. Most of the lectures are over the English language, and toward the end of the month the subject is usually English spelling, preparing the students for the challenges of Stage Seven; other lectures are over aspects of the American educational system with which the student can expect to come into contact.

In Stage Seven the student begins to write. The rhetoric is tagmemic, as was the grammar; the student begins by writing kernel sentences and then expands them by replacing words with phrases and phrases with clauses. Of course, by the time the

student commences writing, he knows a great many sentence patterns from his study of speaking; his hours in the listening laboratory have caused him to absorb these patterns into his nervous system.

The tagmemic concept of the sentence is eventually expanded into the paragraph, which is seen as an organic outgrowth of the topic sentence. This application of tagmemic principles to units beyond the sentence may be Professor Teufelsdröckh's most notable contribution to linguistic science; he himself has modestly referred to his rhetorical theories as "metatagmemics." During the last week the student learns to expand a thesis statement into an entire essay. Throughout the stage, hand in hand with applied metatagmemics, the student is learning English orthography.

Students are required to keep lists of words they misspell on their papers, and once a week they are tested over the words on their list. Once they learn how to spell these words, they can remove them from the list. Thus the students' spelling lists are in a continuous state of rotation, as new words are added and taken off every day. Professor Teufelsdröckh has said, "There is little purpose in a student's being forced to learn to spell words that he never uses; even less in his being given spelling lists which contain words he can spell correctly. A student should learn to spell the words he uses but misspells; once he has done that, he can worry about the other words in the language at a later date."

Stage Eight, the final stage, requires the student to perform various kinds of writing activities which are commonly assigned in a university. In addition to writing essay tests and a research paper, the student takes notes

over lectures, and his notes are examined and graded for accuracy and completeness. Thus, by the time he has finished this stage, he is prepared for the most customary types of writing that he will be called upon to perform in his course work.

During the entire program the student progresses through the four language skills in the order of their difficulty, as Professor Teufelsdröckh perceives them -- reading, speaking, listening, and writing. It is important that the student is not allowed to proceed to the next stage until he has demonstrated his competence in the stage he is in.

Being held back has sometimes been bruising to delicate egos, but Professor Teufelsdröckh confers personally with each student to whom that has happened. "You are not here to be passed from stage to stage," he tells them; "you are here to learn English well enough to succeed in the university. It would be cruel to pass you on to the next stage until you have achieved a level of competency which will allow you to succeed in it. We want you to succeed, and everything we do is done with that intent and purpose. What you are trying to accomplish is very difficult, for English is a very difficult language. You are doing well to have come this far. You have the ability to master English. If we did not believe you had that ability, we would send you home. But we know you can do it. Your trouble is that you are looking ahead and seeing how long a journey lies before you. Instead, look back to see how far you have come. You have accomplished a great deal already."

Whether because of this lecture or simply because of his personal concern for each student, only approximately seven

percent of the students in the ESL program at the University of Weissnichtwo become discouraged and drop out. The longest any student was in the program was twenty-seven months. The record holder was the heir of a wealthy Korean electronics corporation president. The young man had been sent to the U.S. against his will; he was rebellious, and in addition he was not used to working hard, and after his fifth attempt at Stage Three he would have dropped out except that his father refused to send him the money to return home. It took him some time to decide that he was defeating himself, but eventually he did, and he completed the last three stages in one month apiece.

Not all students, of course, are wealthy enough to afford such a prolonged training period at the University of Weissnichtwo. The tuition is sufficiently high that nearly all the students are from the middle class or higher in their native countries, but many of them arrive with only enough funds to last for the eight months of the program. Many are pleased to be placed at advanced levels when they take the initial screening examinations, for then they save a little on their tuition; but some are made anxious by being required to spend more time in the ESL program than they have money to bankroll. To solve this problem, Professor Teufelsdröckh has succeeded in capitalizing a work-study fund, much of the money for which has come from successful graduates of his program. The professor does not approve of scholarships -- he feels that if you give a student a scholarship because he has failed a stage, you are encouraging him to fail it again -- but he arranges for indigent students to work in the university cafeteria and on the grounds.

Many students, of course, graduate from the ESL program before the end of the university's semesters or summer sessions, and they must wait for periods up to three months before it is possible for them to take regular classes. But the university offers by independent study some general education courses for undergraduates, and a few basic graduate-level courses in each department for graduate students. Some of these courses use videotaped lectures, some use interactive computer software, and a few use both. Thus these students are able to take two or three courses before enrolling in regular classes for the first time.

Some other American institutions with large enrollments of international students offer, in effect, two programs -- one for native-born students and one for international students. The international students are not allowed to take the same classes as the native-born. The reason for this is that international students are often linguistically unready for full participation in regular classes. But since the graduates of Professor Teufelsdröckh's program are ready, they can take regular classes along with the native-born students. This is a measure of the successfulness of the program. It also provides the international students with a greater opportunity to meet and become friendly with American students instead of being isolated among others of their own kind, from whom of course they can learn little about American life and culture.

Let us now examine the program in retrospect to see what elements create its success. The first is that it is rigorous and intensive. It says to the student, "I know you can accomplish a difficult task, and

therefore I will not make it easy for you." The student begins the program with a placement test to determine his present level, and he advances to each stage of the program only after he has demonstrated his competence in the preceding stage. An 85 percent level of proficiency is the minimum acceptable score. By demanding a full eight hours a day, five days a week, the program tells the student that he is expected to work hard. It makes no compromises with the student; he cannot use a native-language/English dictionary, and during the second half of the program he is forbidden to use his native language in conversation.

The second element which makes the program successful is that it is built upon an orderly progression from simple to complex. The four language skills -- reading, speaking, listening, and writing -- are taken up in the order of their difficulty. Within each stage the lessons are arranged in order of difficulty, from the easy to the hard. The grammatical system used at Weissnichtwo is tagmemic, which lends itself readily to making sentences progressively difficult: first the kernel sentences, then the transformation of each element in the sentence into gradually more and more complex forms.

But perhaps the most important reason for Professor Teufelsdröckh's success is that he has created a program in which the students must be active participants. In many other ESL programs -- perhaps because English teaching in many other lands requires students to be passive -- the students come to class expecting that they will be poured full of English each class period and sent away with the language sloshing inside them. At Weissnichtwo, on



the other hand, from the very first day, on which the student is silently handed an instruction sheet and left to his own devices to read and follow it, he is put into a paper bag and challenged to fight his way out. The program is like that of other institutions in that nearly all the work is done in class; but the difference is that instead of three hours a week, the students spend eight hours a day.

Conditions at Weissnichtwo, of course, are ideal, and it would probably be futile to expect any other institution to follow its pattern in every respect. Because Weissnichtwo is a private university, the students must be fairly wealthy in order to

afford the tuition, and in general -- although there are glaring exceptions -- upper and upper-middle class students are fairly intelligent and well educated to begin with. These wealthy students are willing to pay the high tuition at Weissnichtwo because they know that the program there gets results; they know that graduates from Professor Teufelsdröckh's program get good grades in American universities and get good jobs when they return to their native countries. Only other institutions which are prepared to establish that kind of reputation could expect to draw that kind of student in large enough numbers to make that kind of ESL program feasible.

### **End Note**

The accompanying article summarizes the author's views of an ideal ESL program at the university level. Professor Teufelsdröckh is a fictional character originally invented by the English essayist Thomas Carlyle, who also invented the University of Weissnichtwo (German "Don't know where"); Lake Wobegon is a fictional community originally invented by the American humorist and radio personality Garrison Keillor.

### **The Author**

Samuel J. Sackett received the Ph.D. in English from the University of California at Los Angeles in 1956. He began a study of scientific linguistics during the 1960s and offered several courses and workshops in the subject at Fort Hays State University in Hays, Kansas. He also assisted his colleague, William F. Marquardt, in teaching ESL classes to the international students at the university. Dr. Sackett left Fort Hays State in 1977 to pursue a career in business and moved to Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, but in 1984 he began teaching ESL part-time at the Vietnamese-American Association in Oklahoma City, meeting the needs of Vietnamese refugees who had settled there. Over the past 15 years he has also taught ESL part-time at the University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma City University, Oklahoma City Community College, the English Language Services (ELS) center in Oklahoma City, Educational and Cultural Interactions, Inc. (ECI), and elsewhere. He has developed a specialty in American English pronunciation.