Kaku-an's 10 Oxherding Pictures as an Analogy

for Second Language Learning in the EFL Context

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廓庵の十牛図と EFL コンテクストでの第二言語習得

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ABSTRACT

Kaku-an (Kuòān Shīyuǎn) (12th century) was a Chinese monk. Little is known of him except that he is attributed to be the author of most popular version of the Oxherding Pictures (牛図). The pictures show the developmental stages of enlightenment. Noting the similarities between Zen and language learning, here, I shall use the same sequence as a model for Second Language Learning. In the discussion I shall look at how this sequence can give insight into the processes of learning a language.

Keywords：Zen Buddhism, EFL, SLA

1. Introduction

The starting point for this paper is the 10 Oxherding Pictures, a collection of drawings to show the stages of spiritual progress towards enlightenment, the goal of Buddhism. This chart of progress has been loosely transferred here to language learning. The transfer of culture to learning may necessarily be of interest to both the teacher and learner simply because there is access to partial cultural knowledge of a first language culture, in this case, Japan.

2. The 10 Oxherding Pictures

The sequence of the 10 Oxherding Pictures used in this paper is by Kaku-an, a monk in the twelfth century. It is possibly the oldest known series. Although there are at least three other versions of the oxherding pictures, Kaku-an's version is perhaps the most popular version. One version is by Seikyo (Shibayama, 1989), probably a contemporary of Kaku-an. Seikyo's sequence is of five pictures. What is striking is that it depicts the bull as changing colour, becoming more white as spiritual awakening deepens. This sequence is also different in content to Kaku-an's, with some showing stages in between those of the Kaka-an version. The series by Jitoku (Suzuki, 1983) has six pictures and goes beyond Seikyo's 5 oxherding pictures by adding one more to the end, showing a return to the real world (Seikyo's ends on Emptiness). Like Seikyo's this series also shows the bull changing

colour as it makes progress. There also exist another 10 oxherding series by an unknown author. This series, again, is longer in content than to Seikyo and Jitoku, but starting later and ending earlier in sequence to the Kaku-an version. And like the Seikyo/Jitoku series it has in-between depictions. All pictures in Seikyo's 5 oxherding pictures are found in the unknown author version as well. However, the Jitoku version includes one picture only from the Kaku-an version (picture #10). Finally, an eight-picture version is mentioned in Three Pillars of Zen (Kapleau, 1980) but no other information is available about this particular work apart from this mention.

The Kaku-an version used in this paper (Senzaki, 2000) runs in the following order: 1) Searching for the bull; 2) Discover the footprints; 3) Perceiving the bull; 4) Catching the bull; 5) Taming the bull; 6) Riding the bull; 7) The bull transcended; 8) both bull and self transcended; 9) reaching the source; and 10) in the world.

2.1. Parallels between the Zen monastic life and language learning
Both Zen and language acquisition environment are structured in a similar manner. Both have a teacher, student and goal as summarized in Figure 1 below:

Role	Zen	Language learning
Expert	Roshi (teacher)	Teacher
Novice	Disciple	Student
Goal	Enlightenment	Language acquisition

Figure 1 – Role in Zen and Language Learning

This parallel is straight forward with relatively little ambiguity, with perhaps the relationship and dedication between student/disciple and teacher being more intense in Zen (for a good personal account of such a relationship see Pointers to Insight (Morinaga, 1985). But apart from this almost all other aspects of the parallel remain the same.

The pictures in general depict the relationship between man (the self) and the bull (the non-self). Both of these aspects are one and same, or else its existence depends on each other for meaning only through their difference (Saussure, 1986).

2.2. Applying the sequence
Each picture will be viewed from the language learning perspective. A brief description will be given beforehand.

2.2.1. Motivation (Searching for the bull)
A man is looking for his lost bull. He wonders searching everywhere for it. He carries a leash in preparation to catch it.

Perhaps to start one needs motivation. So what is motivation in the English as a Foreign Language context, where the language learnt is not spoken as one of the main languages in the country or culture? There are two main categories of motivation – extrinsic and intrinsic. Extrinsic motivation, external to one, are the types of motivations which are less personal and more concrete in terms of result, like gaining greater work opportunities, better wage and job security (retention and promotions). While these are, by and large, long term motivations with non-immediate advantages they are powerful motivations for learning.

Intrinsic motivations are more personal and internal. They include enjoyment of learning another language, betterment of the self, improvement of overall communication skills and greater range of learning options with learning another language. These seem to be even longer term motivations than to extrinsic motivations, and tend to be more sustained because they are not susceptible to externally influenced change.

Students therefore lose motivation to learn for mostly external reasons beyond their control. Work may deny them time and money needed to continue to study, as may relationships and family commitments demand the same. Internally-driven reasons for lack of motivation may include poor self-determination and confidence, and it may harvest negativity and apathy.

Therefore, without strong motivation one may not progress far in their language learning.

2.2.2. Understanding (Discovering the footprints)
The man sees hints of the bull, but not the bull itself. Following its trail, he continues to pursue it.

Studying language is like this picture – the words we already speak is the thing we want to understand. The mystery (or koan) is if we already speak it does this not mean we understand it? Perhaps we still do not understand fully this thing we use and call "language". By following the trail and pursuing the bull, I have made progress towards the goal which may not actually be the bull at all.

There are many things we do without much deliberate thought. Speaking (or communication) is one of these. We communicate long before we actually learn to talk about communication (meta-language) as an object of discussion. Nor we do actually need to understand colour to see colour. The equipment is already there and it is always "on". The eyes, nerves and brain do the rest. Nonetheless, the more we know the better is our understand of things.

Saussure pointed out two very important facts about language. One is that the link between word form and meaning is completely *arbitrary* (Saussure, 1986). There is no reason, for example, for the word 'cat' to mean *that* particular animal. It could be any other word. A word is simply a container into which we have decided upon by social consensus to use to represent that meaning. The other is that meaning, in a word at least, operates through nothing but *difference* (ibid).

In hindsight these explanations about language may be obvious. But learners of language, in general, seem to neither understand their first language, as an object to be open to analysis, nor study a second language based upon these principles. Language, by its very nature, deceives us by its very form as a seemingly stable entity, seemingly neither to change over time, nor to separate from its meaning as though form and meaning are one and same.

In Buddhism, the term for this is *suffering* (Sanskrit, *dukkha*). To think there is anything permanent is suffering. To nominalize the term everything is *impermanent*. The most enduring suffering according to Buddhism is the belief in the self. In other words, Buddhism teaches that everything is without a self, that is, it promotes the principle of *non-self*. Looked at closely Saussure's ideas are really identical to the principles of Buddhism. For the form/meaning to be *arbitrary* is really saying the it is a *non-self*. So, it seems, there is more in common between Buddhism and linguistics than is conventionally understood.

2.2.3. Receptive Skills (Perceiving the bull)

In this picture the man sees the bull for the first time but only partially. Its existence is confirmed. No engagement has occurred between man and bull.

There are two skill categories to which we classify language into – *receptive* and *productive* skills. The passivity of this picture brings to mind the concept of reception. Receptive skills are of two – *listening* and *reading*. For our purposes here, we can view both of these skills as operating in the same manner. A simple model of communication may look like this.

speaker/writer → → → message (language) → → → listener/reader

All communication is purposeful. The speaker/writer will speak/write with a purpose in mind and the listener/reader will listen/read with intent. It is this principle of communication which drives us to desire understanding (Rost & Candlin, 1990). Clues to the meaning of the message is not only within or during the message itself but occurs before and after the message whether spoken or written. Such clues are available and are a part of the entire system of language, communication and culture (see 2.2.8).

Understanding what Buddhism is as in picture #2 is only half of that understanding. To actually see it in reality is what is necessary. The arbitrariness of language, and it operating on the principle of difference needs to be looked at more carefully and seen in real-world situations.

The children's book "Wani san doki, haisha san doki" (Wha! Crocodile, Wha! Dentist) by Taro Gomi illustrates perfectly how the very same message can have two different meanings depending on whether the speaker is the crocodile or the dentist. The story is about a crocodile who decides to go to the dentist because of his toothache. Throughout the meeting with the dentist both think the same monologue, but because of their perspectives the meaning is different. For example, when sitting in the dentist's chair the crocodile says "He's scary!", all the while the dentist says the same thing. But because the dentist had been holding a large ominous looking cutter he was using for his hobby the crocodile was scared. The dentist, for his part, was scared because the patient is a crocodile with a huge jaw which could easily devour him with a single chop. The point of me mentioning this story is that it shows that the words themselves will not give you the meaning; it depends on who, how, where, when and why the speaker is saying these words. This knowledge can be gleaned only from careful observation of the entire message and situation.

2.2.4. Productive Skills (Catching the bull)

The man in this picture wrestles with the bull. He tries to rein in the bull with his leash. The bull struggles. We still do not see the bull clearly.

Here we engage with the other broad category of *production*. The productive skills are *speaking* and *writing*. As we have seen a message is always intended for someone, even if they are monologues or soliloquies. Therefore, there is always a speaker/writer and its intended listener/reader within a communication. In our simplified model of communication above in 2.2.3 the learner was discussed as listener/reader. Here, he or she has become the speaker/writer. While I have not looked at systems of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation/spelling above they are highly necessary in being able to convey a message to the listener/reader. Much time is spent looking at how we, the teacher, can improve our students' knowledge of these systems. It is well documented that second language learners at almost every stage of their learning, for example, have a smaller vocabulary base than their native

counterparts. Grammar as well is limited to a certain sub-set of the whole. Physical production of sounds in speaking and producing correct spelling in writing is also a struggle for EFL students, having little exposure to the target language spoken or written. And finally, when to use which form and structure (function and pragmatics) is near to impossible for the learner without guidance and exposure, the latter being something which the EFL situation does not allow.

2.2.5. Function and pragmatics (Taming the bull)
The bull is reined in. It struggles no more. The man leads it home. The bull is willing to go with him.

While the concrete systems and skills have been dealt with thus far, a particular set of systems have been left to until now – function and pragmatics. *Function* is the kind of general structures (particularly grammar) used for certain situations. Asking for permission, for example, can be used on a train checking with a passenger that it is fine to sit, in the office asking to switch off the air-conditioner because you are cold, or requesting more information from a customer. *Pragmatics* deals with meaning of words and phrases in particular situations that can only be deduced from its specific context. By having this much understanding of the grammar, vocabulary and function/pragmatics both receiving and producing messages becomes possible. The language here moves to the next of two-way listening/speaking communication, the goal of language learning as in the now modified diagram below.

$$\uparrow \quad \text{speaker/writer} \rightarrow \rightarrow \rightarrow \text{message} \rightarrow \rightarrow \rightarrow \text{listener/reader} \quad \downarrow$$

$$\text{listener/reader} \leftarrow \leftarrow \leftarrow \text{message} \leftarrow \leftarrow \leftarrow \text{speaker/writer}$$

2.2.6. Fluency (Riding the bull)
The man rides the bull, playing his flute. The bull is untethered leading the man. The man freely lets the bull trek at its own pace and its own direction.

At this stage language becomes a toy for the language learner. He or she is able to use and communicate freely in many of the everyday situations. But now the speaker needs more opportunities to use his or her language. There is no one single definition to the term fluency (for a good summary of the changes in definition to this term see Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Snow, 2013). However, it seems it is often contrasted to accuracy (see 2.2.7). Whether it is fair to compare these is open to debate. If fluency is comparable to accuracy this must necessarily mean that fluency places less emphasis on accuracy, a defining feature I am willing to agree upon. To make mistakes, then, is an important part of fluency tasks. *It is therefore a mistake to try to avoid making mistakes* with fluency practice. This is similar to letting children remove the training wheels on their bike. They will fall over, get scratched knees and grazed elbows but that is all a necessary part of learning. Often students do not realize this and want to create perfect sentences every time they open their mouths or write messages. It is better to have bleeding knees and elbows.

2.2.7. Accuracy (The bull transcended)
At home, the man sits alone, unworried of the whereabouts of his bull. The bull is wandering around somewhere. Both man and bull are happy.

There are times when practicing for accuracy is necessary. Fluency will build, among other things, confidence. Yet, in the end if you continue to speak inaccurately it will show that no effort had been made to monitor your

own language. Not to think about production is a return to the inattentive state of language learning of the early stages of language learning. Anne Lazaraton points out that depends on the setting, whether it is an ESL or EFL environ, which should get precedent – fluency or accuracy. For her, it is in the ESL setting that accuracy should get precedent because many opportunities exist for fluency practice outside the classroom, and so therefore should be given more accuracy-based content. The opposite is thus true for the EFL setting where fluency practice is far and few in between (Lazaraton, 2014).

2.2.8. Communication (Both bull and self transcended)
The man forgets even himself. Everything is one.

This is the balance between practice and learning. If done correctly, it should create an all-round speaker of the second language. But the *language is not the end goal* of the learning. Let me repeat that: language is not the end goal.

2.2.9. Real world usage (Reaching the source)
There is nothing but this world. In blissful observation of everything, all is at peace and beautiful.

The end goal of a successful learner is to understand the very nature of the socio-cultural aspects of the target language. After all, the language is not what binds people but rather it is what they do together. Language is only a tool to bind people.

2.2.10. Closing of social distance (In the world)
The world and the greater beings are at one. The world is just the world.

At what point does a person become a native speaker of a second language? Perhaps never. By its own logic a second language is one that will always be second. What matters most is the interaction of people, society and culture.

3. Discussion

The world of Zen Buddhism and Second Language Learning could not be seen as more different. But as ideas created from a real world, they are not so different. The 10 Oxherding Pictures offer a view of spiritual progress towards the goal of enlightenment. That goal in turn could be extended or transplanted to teaching in general. Zen is about the teaching of life's lessons.

Particularly, we must always start with a desire or motivation (picture #1). While Zen's motivation is to find eternal happiness, the motivation of Second Language Learning is to become an expert speaker. How strong this motivation is depends on the student, which in turn determines how successful the student is likely be.

Another factor is understanding. Many students start incorrectly and struggling in a kind of one-man sumo (hitori-zumo). It is not surprizing, for example, to find students who believe that the form of a word and its meaning are an unbreakable link. But clearly this is not true, looking at it from either the Buddhist or Second Language Learning point of view. The Buddha taught (through careful analysis of the condition of life) that all things are *impermanent*, to think that there is some thing permanent is *suffering*, and that perhaps the most common thing to think of as permanent is the *self*. From Saussure's analysis, form and meaning are marked by a completely *arbitrary* relationship. Because of the arbitrary nature of the form they only take on meaning through *difference*.

Such a delicate understanding of language therefore needs to be instilled into students to aid their learning progress.

Pictures #3 (Perceiving the bull) and #4 (Catching the bull) breakdown the task into logical difference of its workings. Reception is a passive almost contemplative or meditative task, which is not so different to picture #2 (Discovering the footprints). Both pictures require an understanding through *one-way approach* (that is, requiring no response after comprehension). Picture #4 requires action either after a message is received or one that needs to be produced, thus it is harder than simple reception.

By bringing together receptive and productive skills (picture #5) brings about true real-time interaction. When a series of exchanges occur we have something akin to a conversation or dialogue. Fluency (picture #6) works at the expense of the accuracy, meaning mistakes are abundant and necessary. Again, here students must learn to fight the urge to be accurate and work toward online responses that get the message across rather than a perfect response. Nonetheless we need to work towards being accurate after developing mistakes through repeated incorrect usage. Krashen had believed that authentic input was all that was necessary (Krashen, 1985). At some point though accurate output must also be practiced (picture #7). Noticing one's own error during production is difficult simply because it is a kind of multi-tasking.

The learner must overcome most of his or her errors, be comfortable with his input comprehension and output production. The second language becomes second nature to the learner (picture #8). But ending it here would mean we do not understand the nature of language, namely, it is for the purpose of communication. Language is part of the socio-culture of its speakers (picture #9) and should treated as such. When even this the culture is assimilated it is only then we come to truly understanding that language and culture are part of the same fabric (picture #10).

4. Conclusion

Admittedly this analogy between Zen Buddhism and Second Language Learning can seem somewhat forced, it is still valid in that it is the experience of a single person, myself. However, as I have pointed out, culture and language are not separate things. Language is culture, and culture is language. Separating them has disastrous consequences for the teaching and learning of the language. The element of Zen here was solely used to be a springboard to ideas in teaching. Some parts of the sequence are highly relevant. The parts up to picture #7 can almost be taken as a developmental sequence for some of the main areas of language teaching. Pictures #8 to #10 are a little bit more difficult to graft onto language teaching and learning because of its cultural orientation. However, that brings up the point that perhaps culture is the final goal of language learning, not just the language itself. There is a curious hole in language education in the Japanese context of the link between culture and language. It is as though students are not aware that learning language entails learning culture. This hole is perhaps what needs to be looked at in future studies.

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Appendix 1

Table 1: The overlap of different version of the Oxherding Pictures.

	10 Oxherding Pictures (Kaku-an)	*Seikyo*	*Jitoku*	*Unknown author*
1	Searching for the bull			
2	Discovering the footprints			
3	Perceiving the bull			1
4	Catching the bull	1	1	2
5	Taming the bull			3
		2	2	4
		3	3	5
				6
		4	4	7
				8
6	Riding the bull home			
7	The bull transcended			9
8	Both bull and self transcended	5	5	10
9	Reaching the source			
10	In the world		6	

Appendix 2
Figures 1-10 – The 10 Oxherding Pictures

Figure 1

Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4

Figure 5

Figure 6

Figure 7

Figure 8

Figure 9

Figure 10