

## GETTING ON PEOPLE'S WAVE LENGTH

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims.

" We had a new teacher at our school - we had loads of different French teachers - and then we had this one, Mrs Ford. No one really liked her because she shouted all the time and was really nasty. Then like, ... when we were in class she'd just make us sit down and copy out all this work; it was a bit boring as well. " ( Patrick, aged 12)

It is clear that Mrs Ford did not get on this 12 year-old's wave length and, from his point of view, it does not seem she tried to. If a teacher is as out of rapport with Patrick as this one clearly was , it is hard to imagine how she can teach him much.

I asked Patrick " do you like meeting people?"

and he said: " yes, I suppose, but it depends if I like'em "

" what does it take for you to like them?"

" if they like the same things as me, we laugh about the same stuff and we like the same things on TV.

Patrick is pretty clear about two ways of getting on a person's wave length:

achieving content rapport

finding you have humour rapport.

## CREATING HUMOUR RAPPORT

How do I achieve humour rapport with my students? There are several ways:

- right at the start of a course I bring them in some sheets of jokes. They read a dozen and they pick two they like. They mill around and try and find some one else who has picked the same two, they search for "humour partners" One day I noticed my colleague, Jim Wingate, using jokes to good effect in class.
- I tell three jokes to the group and ask them to say which one they liked best.
- I offer them a laughter-provoking exercise and enjoy laughing with them.

For example.....I ask some one to talk to the class for a few minutes about something that interests them . I ask the speaker not to turn and look at the

board. I tell the class they are to react to the speaker in the way I tell them to via the board. So I may write up: THRILLED

From their reaction the speaker has to suss out what I have written.

The speaker continues for a bit and I write up SAD etc.....

This exercise, that I learnt from Jill Johnson, has people really laughing!

I agree with Jill that laughing together is a major way of getting in sync with people. Why do families crowd round the box to watch sitcoms together?

#### ACHIEVING CONTENT RAPPORT

I was getting on reasonably OK with a colleague's spouse, whom I had just met, when suddenly I discovered he had done his PHD thesis on Gramsci, the Italian Marxist thinker. Everything changed for me when I thus suddenly discovered he had his heart in the right place, for me. My whole physiology became warmer, I sat forward, listened more attentively and he, of course, responded to the change and his previously measured words became a torrent. Clearly we had created a new level of content rapport.

There are many exercises I use in class that aim to achieve content rapport between me and the group and among the students.

For example: I show the students the scar on my left knee and tell them the story of my learning to ride a bike on gravel and how that led to screams, to iodine, to lint and to bandages. They then tell each other their scar stories thus establishing huge content rapport. ( In adolescent, middle class, Western European classes the scars are often from skiing, motor-biking etc....in Chinese Universities with rural catchment areas the scar stories are about saws and axes and rocks and they mostly end with an ethical bit ... " if I had done what Mother said, I would not have this scar today...."

So the content rapport in both groups is a tight, targeted one.

If I ask students to write down the last seven things they do just before leaving their house of flat they find there is a communality of content, that has its own drawing-together and binding effect.

#### COURSEBOOK WRITERS IN SEARCH OF CONTENT RAPPORT

Obviously coursebook writers hope to find topics for their units that will interest the students and somehow become “theirs”. It isn’t easy for middle-aged teachers to do this, for one is programmed to forget much of what one thought about and felt in one’s own teenage and teachers in staffrooms will often shut their eyes very firmly to the reality of the 13-14 year-olds on the benches in front of them. The best hope of realistic thinking comes from coursebook writers’ observation of their own children.

There could be themes in coursebooks that link in with the kids’ thinking and feeling lives so that content rapport is established. Here are a few:

- time
- birth order
- them there boys, them there girls
- hair
- losing friends
- cushty teachers
- How could I have thought that six months ago?
- territory

etc....

The above themes/ areas are universal but will surface quite differently in different cultures.

#### LANGUAGE AS RAPPORT

Suppose you are Japanese and I only know a couple of “kotoba” in your language and can only say “ Ohio gozai mas “, at least by saying “good morning” politely this way I am throwing a tiny pontoon bridge across the gulf that initially lies between us. The whole business of learning a second language is a preparation for getting rapport with the people who speak that language.

The best way of working as a beginner is to get into strong fellow-feeling with a native speaker of the target language. This can happen in several ways:

- a) falling in love with a speaker
- b) fixing on a person as your model : A US learner of Polish went to Poland and chose his cousin, Maria, as his model for Polish. He copied everything she said,

imitating her intonation, her sounds, her flow. He filled notebooks with Maria words, collocations, grammar etc... Linguistically he saw eye to eye with her and heard ear to ear with her- he tried to subsume his eye and ear to hers.

- c) learning a language via language psychodramaturgy ( see Dufeu, TEACHING MYSELF, Oxford, 94 ) In this method you relax deeply, find yourself in breathing harmony with the teacher and find yourself picking up and saying some of the words and phrases that float over your shoulder from the teacher's lips. The practitioners of language psychodramaturgy achieve excellent results by paying minute attention to the establishment of breathing and general physical rapport.

#### GETTING ON THE EXAMINER'S WAVE-LENGTH

I have found that teaching students some of the technical tricks for establishing physical rapport is very useful in training them for an oral exam.

I teach them to:

sit in the same lower body posture as the examiner

to notice and follow the other's breathing rhythm

to imitate the examiner's speed of speech

to speak lower to a deep-voiced person and go up in pitch

if the examiner is speaking from the upper part of her voice box.

For those candidates who are able to take this sort of training on board these are several advantages :

unconsciously the examiner feels more at ease with the "matching" candidate. Somehow she feels attended to.

By focusing on the person of the examiner, the candidate reduces the energy she puts into worrying about her own deficits and often performs better.

The focus on "matching" makes the candidate sense her own power.

The ideal situation is for both examiners and candidates to be aware of how to create a harmonious situation, which would require offering both sides basic communications training. This basic training would considerably ease the load on the oral examiner and reduce the fatigue the late afternoon often brings if she has been at it all day.