

Rethinking Classical Tibetan Pedagogy

The Importance of Applying Multidisciplinary Research to Tibetan as a Second Language Education (TSL)

Abstract

The following paper explores classical Tibetan language pedagogy as it's generally practiced in the West, while suggesting a radical reinterpretation to that approach by providing alternatives based on the consensus of multidisciplinary research from second language education and linguistics, among others. Especial attention is paid to the importance of production processes (speaking and writing), phonology (listening and speaking), and environment (language exposure) and their roles in language learning contexts; these concerns lead us to the conclusion that the spoken language ought to be the basis for the study of sophisticated literature, even in a classical language context. We then turn toward the specific issues of Tibetan language literacy: the language diglossia; its history; why "classical" Tibetan is not a classic example of a classical language; and, briefly, how to overcome these obstacles in a Tibetan as a Second Language (TSL) educational context.

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Rethinking Classical Tibetan Pedagogy

The Importance of Applying Multidisciplinary Research to Tibetan as a Second Language Education (TSL)¹

It's safe to say that in the Tibetan language learning world, much ado is made about textual translation. This has led to a focus, in educational settings, on students either being thrown, or just as often quite willingly leaping, into the deep end of the literary pool: after a quick-and-dirty introduction to the alphabet, its basic phonics, and the spelling and pronunciation of syllables, instruction immediately turns to grammar and translation. Though this method explicitly addresses the end aim of many Tibetan language students (textual translation), it is implicitly prohibitive in key areas of language learning, most notably language production processes and phonological processes (listening, speaking, and writing), which are actually vital to building the foundations of one's interpretive skills. While it goes without saying that a few great scholars have become adept translators without delving into the spoken language (and that, without their contributions, we wouldn't be where we are today), given what we now know about second language education, we also believe that approaching the literary language via the spoken language would be nothing but beneficial for *most* students in *most* cases.

Our intent, therefore, is not to diminish the achievements of those who have accomplished so much in the field of Tibetology and translation until now, but merely to point to an alternative path toward Tibetan reading fluency for future generations of second language learners. In other words, it needn't be the case that literacy in Tibetan is, as Beyer calls it, such an "elite achievement."² Here, we will present the consensus of multidisciplinary research drawn from fields such as second language education, linguistics (applied linguistics and psycholinguistics), neuroscience, and the like, and describe how these are applicable to the field of Tibetan language study, and more specifically, to building the interpretive and reading comprehension skills so necessary for textual translation. Moreover, we aim to briefly present the issues specific to Tibetan language education and how these may be overcome by educators to guide students to literacy in the Tibetan language.

1. Grammar-Translation: The Current Model

Briefly, the Grammar-Translation method is the offspring of the medieval scholastic study of classical Latin. As mediums of instruction at the collegiate level began to favor the European languages of the modern era, it remained an academic tradition to study classical Latin, though no longer for communicative purposes; instead, the exercise was merely intended to cultivate a student's mental discipline (in other words, the method's purpose was quite specifically *not*

¹ "TSL" is used here as a catch-all acronym for students whose first language is not Tibetan.

² Beyer, Stephan V. (1992). *The Classical Tibetan Language*. Albany: Suny Press.

training translators).³ Key aspects of this method include: **a)** a referential system of instruction grounded in one's first language; **b)** vocabulary acquisition via memorization; **c)** the sentence as the basic unit of teaching and language practice; **d)** an emphasis on accuracy; and **e)** grammar taught deductively by being presented and explicitly studied.^{4, 5} As we will explain, each one of these aspects are found to be wanting in the modern educational context, and many may even be obstacles for students whose aim is language fluency. Furthermore, given that Tibetan is a living language wherein native speakers regularly attain sophisticated levels of literacy, it seems all too appropriate to question whether or not reliance upon a method that gained prominence in 18th-19th century Prussia (and that, in many other language fields, has been well overturned since at least the early 20th century) has become an outdated way in which to approach language learning in a modern context.⁶ As it's been summarized by second language pedagogists:

Contemporary texts for the teaching of foreign languages at the college level often reflect Grammar-Translation principles. These texts are frequently the product of people trained in literature rather than in language teaching or applied linguistics. Consequently, though it may be true to say that the Grammar-Translation Method is still widely practiced, it has no advocates. It is a method for which there is no theory. There is no literature that offers a rationale or justification for it or that attempts to relate it to issues in linguistics, psychology, or educational theory.⁷

Indeed, in examining what we know from these interdisciplinary fields, we don't merely find a lack of rationale or justification for the Grammar-Translation method; what we find is evidence that suggests it is entirely the wrong approach if one's goal is language literacy and fluency, *even if*, in the end, one's language skills will be used for nothing more than textual translation. That is, if one hopes to build the interpretive skills that are the foundation of reading comprehension and nuanced textual understanding, one simply cannot ignore the phonological and production processes of language; for language learning that is restricted to grammar and vocabulary does not give the student the ability to understand a language with accuracy and fluency.⁸ Learning a language, in other words, encapsulates much, much more than grammar plus vocabulary, and the language process of reading comprehension, the basis for textual

³ Richards, Jack C.; Rodgers, Theodore S. (2001). *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching (2nd ed.)*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 5. Also see: Coady, James; Huckin, Thomas (1997). [*Second Language Vocabulary Acquisition*](#). Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 5-6 and Harmer, Jeremy (2007). *How to Teach English*. Edinburgh Gate, England: Pearson Education Ltd. pp. 48-49.

⁴ Richards, pp. 5-6.

⁵ Rockwell, for example, admits in the preface to his primer that "the fundamental approach of [his] text is descriptive" and based on sentences removed from a larger context. (Rockwell, John, Jr. (1991). *A Primer for Classical Literary Tibetan*). Beyer similarly asserts on the first page of his introduction that his work is descriptive in nature, and explicitly states it is not his intention to address language *production*. Even the modern classic on the spoken language, Tournadre's *Manual of Standard Tibetan*, is descriptive and presented in English (or French).

⁶ Coady, pp. 5-7.

⁷ Richards., p. 7.

⁸ Doughty, Catherine; Williams, Jessica, eds. (1998). *Focus on Form in Classroom Second Language Acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

translation, ought not be taken in isolation from the others:

- Language comprehension processes:
 - Reading (*orthographic*)
 - Listening (*phonological*)
- Language production processes:
 - Writing (*orthographic*)
 - Speaking (*phonological*)

If we analyze language learning processes, we will see that *reading* is actually intimately tied to the other components of language: *speaking*, *listening*, and *writing*. It follows, then, that using these components within the Tibetan educational context would result in a more effective pedagogy, the outcome of which would be students who learn better, faster, and more comprehensively. Beyond the importance of working with *all* language skills, students who study the spoken language would have the added benefit of being able to communicate and collaborate with a broad range of scholars from within the tradition. That is, translation needn't take place in an etic vacuum—instead, a deeper cross-cultural understanding can be cultivated in an environment that fosters nuanced comprehension of emic language perspectives in service of the accurate translation and transmission of the Tibetan textual tradition. To these ends, students would be better served by a methodology that addresses: **a)** language production's role in building reading comprehension; **b)** the phonological aspects of language, which make the mental lexicon accessible by automaticity and thus provides discourse-level reading comprehension; and **c)** language experience and environment, in recognition that language is contextual and nuanced in conveying its meaning.

2. Issues in Second Language Learning & Literacy

(a) Production

*Language production's impact on language comprehension is so pervasive that understanding production is essential to understanding comprehension.*⁹

Students learning a second language must be given the opportunity to use language for communicative purposes in order to build language proficiency.¹⁰ We also know that when this training is done in an immersive environment, adult second language learners show neural response patterns similar to native speakers.¹¹ It then follows that it ought to be the role of

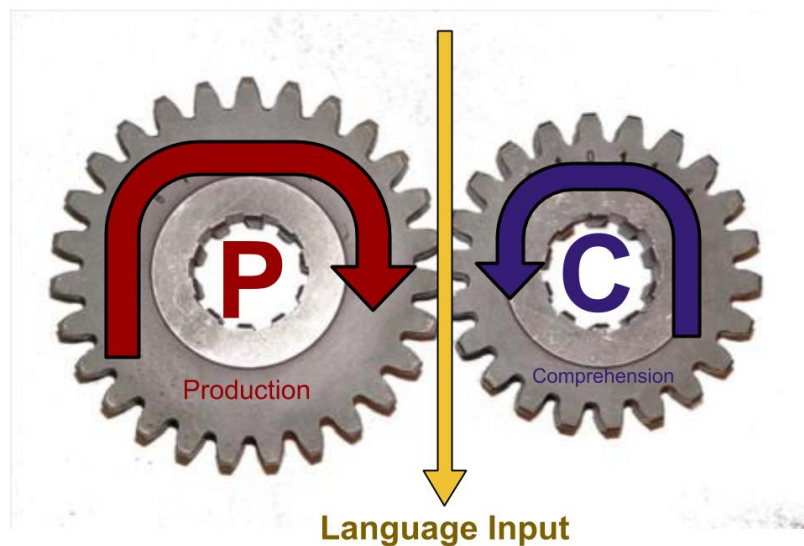
⁹ Macdonald, Maryellen C. (2013). "[How language production shapes language form and comprehension.](#)" *Front. Psychol.* 4:226. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00226

¹⁰ See: Ellis, Rod (2002). "Does form-focused instruction affect the acquisition of implicit knowledge?" *Studies in Second Language Acquisition* 24 (2): 223–236.

¹¹ See recent cognitive neuroscience research on implicit second language training and how it elicits native-like neural responses, ie.; Morgan-Short, Karen, et al. (2012). "[Explicit and Implicit Second Language Training Differentially Affect the Achievement of Native-like Brain Activation Patterns.](#)" *MIT Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*. Vol. 24, No. 4, Pages 933-947.

educators to impart the language skills that will allow their students to approach a text with all the nuance of a native speaker in order to best build their language proficiency; this requires giving students the opportunity to produce language in an immersion environment, or as close to that model as possible in a classroom environment (for one, the medium for teaching Tibetan, even for classical texts, ought to be *Tibetan* in order to maximize language exposure).

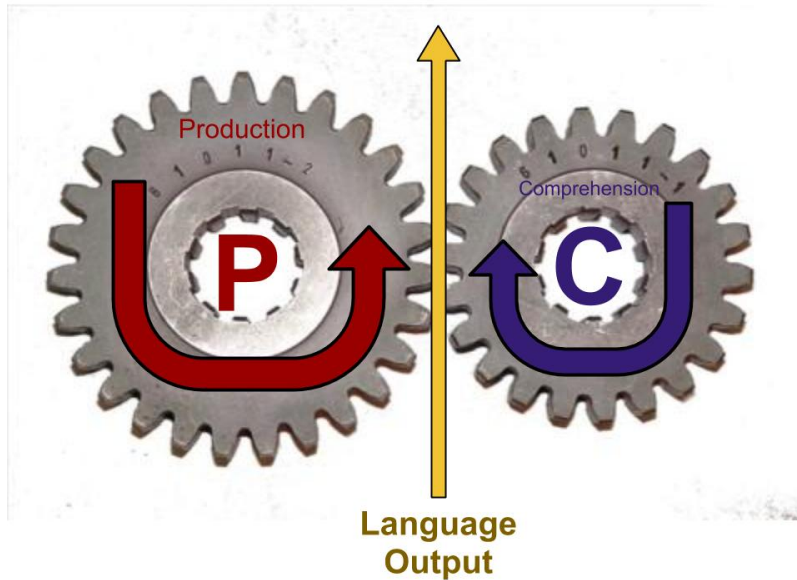
That is, students who learn to speak and write Tibetan (those who are able to *produce* language) will be better off learning to listen or read Tibetan (to *comprehend* it), and vice versa. Indeed, the consensus of psycholinguistic research on the matter has concluded that the processes of production and comprehension are pervasive, cooperative, and carried out using the same representations.^{12, 13} In other words, production processes are not passive as we read, but an active part of interpreting and decoding the meaning of orthographic forms:



**Listening or reading comprehension (language input) drives a production gear to aid in the predictive aspects of interpretive processes (for example, we can finish each other's sentences because we are constantly anticipating speech by silently [re]producing it).*

¹² See: Treiman et al., (2003). "[Language Comprehension and Production](#)." *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology, Volume 4: Experimental Psychology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Pages 527-548.

¹³ Also see: Macdonald and the response: Pickering, Martin J. and Simon Garrod (2013). "[How tightly are production and comprehension interwoven?](#)" *Front. Psychol.* 4:238. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00238



**Producing speech or text, meanwhile, drives a predictive comprehension gear; we understand what we are saying presently and what we are going to say in the near future (and we can thus autocorrect our own future speech mistakes).*

In other words, these are integrated processes that inform each other: comprehenders covertly imitate what they hear in order to create a “forward production model”—that is, they **produce** predictions based on their language experience to comprehend what a speaker is saying.¹⁴ This same model applies to orthographic processes, since readers recreate speech patterns as they read (more on that later). Language comprehenders, therefore, are actually producing and comprehending simultaneously.¹⁵ Consequently, learning how to produce language (by speaking or writing) is, in actuality, learning how to interpret language (by listening or reading), and thus a vital skill for language learners of all stripes, including textual translators. Simply put, truly knowing a language comes from knowing it backwards *and* forwards—if I’ve just arrived at the movie theater and I’m asked to give directions to the supermarket, it will be extremely helpful if I have just walked *from* the supermarket *to* the movie theater. I may simply imagine walking the same route in reverse. Likewise, the ability to *produce* language is vital to *comprehending* it, and vice versa; language is a holistic process, and the routes are actually one in the same.

Though this section has focused mainly on the importance of production processes (speaking and writing) in developing comprehension processes (listening and reading), we may also divide language processes into orthographical (writing and reading) and phonological (speaking and listening). Next, we will address the importance of phonology in reading comprehension, the primary skill for textual interpretation. One should here note that the application of the traditional Grammar-Translation model lacks *all* language production

¹⁴ Pickering.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

processes *as well as all* phonological processes and myopically focuses on building interpretive skills in a purely orthographic, production-less context:

- Orthographical
 - Writing (*production*)
 - Reading (*comprehension*)
- Phonological
 - Speaking (*production*)
 - Listening (*comprehension*)

(b) Phonology

Speech is as old as our species and is found in all human civilizations; reading and writing are newer and less widespread. These facts lead us to expect that readers would use the visual representations that are provided by print to recover the phonological and linguistic structure of the message. Supporting this view, readers often access phonology even when they are reading silently.¹⁶

These observations are really nothing new. The importance of phonics for beginning readers is beyond well-established;¹⁷ yet in many Tibetan language learning contexts, the link to phonology (in both speech production and listening comprehension, as well as in reading) ends after learning basic alphabetic phonics and pronunciation (at the level of the syllable). This is problematic because phonology is actually an integral aspect to *both* reading and writing processes¹⁸ since the mental lexicon primarily stores language phonologically, even if it is accessed via orthography.¹⁹ That is, speech patterns are actually *reproduced* internally during fluent reading (and again, comprehension is tied inextricably to production). And although oral reading skills may be, at some level, encouraged in the Grammar-Translation context, without listening input and speech output, students are not given the opportunity to develop the rhythm and flow of native speech patterns,²⁰ which is a problem when it comes to developing comprehension processes (such as resolving ambiguities).

¹⁶ Treiman et al., (2003). "[Language Comprehension and Production](#)," *Comprehensive Handbook of Psychology, Volume 4: Experimental Psychology*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Pages 527-548.

¹⁷ See, for example: Lyon, G. Reid (1997), "[How Do Children Learn to Read?](#)" Adapted from her report on *Learning Disabilities Research*. Testimony before the Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives.

¹⁸ Treiman. "...there is good evidence that phonology and other aspects of linguistic structure are retrieved in reading (see Frost, 1998 for a review)" and "...again, though writing retrieves orthography, phonology plays an important role in this process, just as it does in the process of deriving meaning from print in reading," pages 10 & 42.

¹⁹ Richards, 40-42. Phonology is used as a processing mechanism during reading for word recognition, a.k.a. "phonemic awareness."

²⁰ See neuroscience findings linking rhythm to language skills, for example: "...[researchers](#) found that those who had better musical training also had enhanced neural responses to speech sounds. In poorer readers this response was diminished." and "It turns out that kids who are poor READERS have a lot of difficulty doing this motor task and following the beat. In both SPEECH and music, RHYTHM (*read: PROSODY*) provides a temporal map with signposts to the most likely locations of MEANINGful input (emphasis mine)."

Further support for this conclusion comes from the fact that oral reading fluency (the ability to read fluidly with proper rhythm and intonation) is one of the best measures for reading comprehension.²¹ In other words, a reader understands what they are reading if and only if they are able to *produce* the appropriate speech patterns reflected by the text. And this observation directs us straight to prosody (the rhythm, stress, and intonation of speech), an aspect of spoken language that has been shown by linguistic research to help resolve lexical and syntactic ambiguities in *both* speech and reading, since readers are actively interpreting orthography via phonology (i.e., they are reproducing the prosody of speech as they read).^{22, 23} Since Tibetan has so little punctuation with which to signal prosody,²⁴ how can someone unfamiliar with the spoken language perform such essential (and basic) interpretive tasks? The conclusion, then, is that exposure to native speech patterns, and practice in producing those patterns, would go a long way toward helping a student gain the phonological and prosodic skills necessary for interpretive processing during reading; skills which then would undoubtedly be useful for rendering what they've read and understood from the source language (Tibetan) into some other language.

(c) Environment

*Comprehenders are fundamentally affected by their experience of language.*²⁵

The sort of phonological exposure to speech just discussed is actually vital in many ways. Experience of the language and its environment gives learners a socio-cultural context beyond grammar and vocabulary that is, in text, rendered subtly by language choice instead of concretely by context. It has been said that fluent readers use predictive processes (i.e., *production* processes) and other interpretive skills, experience, and background knowledge when they read; this means that the reader who is actively engaged in the text actually contributes *more* than the visual symbols on the page do to the reading process (in other words, a reader's top-down processing informs the *interpretation* of bottom-up input).²⁶ The implication,

²¹ Lynn, Jennifer. *Need for Speed: The Relationship Between Oral Reading Fluency and the...* Capella University, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Proquest 2008. p. 49.

²² Treiman. "...prosody can help resolve lexical and syntactic ambiguities" and "...several researchers (see Warren, 1999) have demonstrated that prosody can disambiguate utterances" and "...if readers translate visually presented sentences into a phonological form, complete with prosody, these benefits may extend to reading (Bader, 1998; Slowiaczek & Clifton, 1980)," page 27 & 28.

²³ See also Tournadre, Nicolas (2003). *Manual of Standard Tibetan* (MST). Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, p. 479. "It should be emphasized that *prosody* and accentuation are *extremely important* for reading Literary Tibetan, whether verse or prose. Even from a grammatical point of view it is essential to make the right pauses and these follow some prosodic rules. If those rules are not applied, the text becomes incomprehensible..." emphasis mine. (Note that Tournadre defines "Literary Tibetan" here as everything from 7th century to modern day).

²⁴ See Tournadre, MST, p. 405: "Literary Tibetan has no punctuation in the European sense of the term: there are no syntactic signs to mark off groups of words, clauses, enumerations, etc..."

²⁵ Pickering, Martin J. and Simon Garrod (2013). "[How tightly are production and comprehension interwoven?](#)" *Front. Psychol.* 4:238. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00238

²⁶ Grabe, William (1991). "[Current developments in second language reading research.](#)" *TESOL Quarterly*:

of course, is that if an advanced reader has access only to the symbols on the page, but no language exposure from their environment, they are at a distinct disadvantage in comprehending the meaning of those symbols. Furthermore, the richer this backdrop of experience is, the more proficient they become at shifting attention to more abstract conceptual abilities; thus, the richer their understanding of textual meaning.²⁷

What language experience by repeated exposure in appropriate socio-cultural contexts provides is access to features of language beyond grammar and vocabulary, aspects such as: prosody; semantic nuances and associations; figurative and idiomatic speech; and sub-textual messages.²⁸ To be truly accurate while interpreting a text, it follows that one must be intimately familiar with the emic perspective of the culture from which it comes.²⁹ To capitalize on this information, so essential to comprehension, means that the student must be given the opportunity to develop an intimacy with the source language, since these features vary significantly from language to language (and thus the prohibitive nature of Grammar-Translation's dependence upon first language reference points).³⁰

Alongside this, vocabulary usage also varies from one language to another, and is contextual rather than isomorphic, such that "meaning is expressed in groups of words and in combinations of language segments"³¹—that is, meaning is given by connotation within a context rather than by a one-to-one correspondence between words within two languages.³² Exposure to appropriate contextual usage, then (how words in a language are used with other words in that language), is a far better method for imparting linguistic meaning to the student than relying upon either rote memorization of supposed first language corollaries or translation dictionaries (and again, learning vocabulary verbally also reinforces the phonological aspects of mental lexicon accessibility, while forming native-speech neural networks).

Finally, reading comprehension processes are built on speed: students who build vocabulary and automaticity by extensive reading are able to access textual meaning at the level of discourse. That is, readers must make use of long-term memory to understand reference, relevance, and implication in order to then understand how sentences are integrated into a larger causal structure; readers must do this by analyzing events in terms of goals, actions, and reactions, and to do this, they must be able to take in vast amounts of information

Vol. 25, No. 3. p. 376.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 377.

²⁸ Francis R. Jones, p. 2

²⁹ See here Tournadre, MST, p.395. "The classical language is characterized by its conciseness and by the corresponding importance of *context* and *cultural background*." Emphasis mine.

³⁰ Koda, Keiko, in Richards, p. 37.

³¹ A translation skill such as "congruity judgment," for example, means a translator must know that a *pho rog dkar po*, literally a "white crow," is the Tibetan term for the English equivalent "black sheep." Gaining proficiency in understand the meaning words convey beyond bare vocabulary and grammar in order to avoid overly literal translation is an essential skill that is best obtained by language immersion in order to pick up the special ways in which words within a language interact with each other in order to convey meaning.

³² Rivers quoted in Richards, p. 11.

quite rapidly.³³ Working word-by-word or sentence-by-sentence is too slow and inefficient a process to support this level of comprehension, which must be built from the ground up by repeated exposure to vocabulary. Readers who acquire automaticity, the ability to recognize and process words automatically, are thus far better at reading comprehension.³⁴ Acquiring both rapidity and vocabulary require extensive fluent reading, along with accompanying production and phonological processes, something that is best supported by exposure and experience from a broad range of textual and speech input (even if the translator's goal is a niche textual field, he would be best served by developing these foundational skills from a broad range of language exposure).³⁵

(d) A Summary of Second Language Learning Issues

To return to the key features of the Grammar-Translation model, then, we may summarize by saying that: **a)** A referential system of instruction grounded in one's first language is contextually prohibitive for practicing language production and listening comprehension, and for developing a mental lexicon strongly linked to phonology (with which to access orthography) and contextual experience; **b)** Acquiring vocabulary via memorization is phonologically prohibitive in the same way, and ignores the fact that vocabulary is contextual, *not* isomorphic (words have relationships to other words within the language, which are meaning-dependent, and connotations vary by context); **c)** Using the sentence as the basic unit of teaching and language practice means students aren't exposed to meaning at the structural level of discourse; **d)** An emphasis on literal accuracy artificially constrains the student's sense of idiomatic, figurative, and sub-textual meaning found within a text; and **e)** That grammar is taught deductively by being presented and explicitly studied means students have no inductive feel for the natural flow of language, or any sense of the meaning that is given non-grammatically by syntax, structure, connotation, and prosody, which are all especially important factors in weakly inflected languages such as Tibetan, a markedly ambiguous and terse language.^{36, 37}

In Japan, for example, a country where English language study is dominated by a form of Grammar-Translation known as *Yakudoku*, English placement test scores demonstrate the

³³ *ibid*, page 26.

³⁴ See Lyon & Wan-a-rom, Udor (2008). "[Comparing the vocabulary of different graded-reading schemes](#)," *Reading in a Foreign Language, Volume 20, No. 1*. pp. 43–69.

³⁵ Huckin, Thomas; Coady, James (1999), "Incidental vocabulary acquisition in a second language," *Studies in Second Language Acquisition 21*: 181–193

³⁶ In his grammar of the literary language, Tournadre, for example, attributes the syntactical complexity of literary Tibetan to the "transcategorical and optional nature of the use of case markers." Since grammar is ambiguous by being transcategorical and optional in nature, meaning is instead given by pragmatic structures; it's our opinion that these are best illuminated by an intimate familiarity with the spoken language, which has retained many of those features (no matter one's view of classical Tibetan, the modern spoken language is certainly the closest possible language in this regard, and learning it would give students some insight into those structures). See Tournadre, Nicolas (2010). "The Classical Tibetan Cases and their Transcategoriality: From sacred grammar to modern linguistics." *Himalayan Linguistics, Vol. 9(2): 87-125*. (Hereafter cited as CTT).

³⁷ Tibetan is an isolating language with weak inflection: See also Rockwell, p. 1.

failure of this method to impart language proficiency to its students (Japan ranks near the bottom of all Asian countries in English language proficiency); meanwhile, others such as South Korea and China have seen nothing but gains in English language education after abandoning similar methods (and, as of 2011, even North Korea had surpassed Japan in English language test scores).^{38, 39} Educators have diagnosed one major issue as being the fact that *Yakudoku* reinforces a “word-by-word” translation strategy, as opposed to fluid, interpretive reading comprehension. This has numerous disadvantages, including limiting the speed at which a student can read (and this has been measured in regressive eye movements of its students); inducing fatigue and reducing the efficiency of comprehension processes; and reducing the ability to understand discourse level meaning (since readers tend to forget the beginning of a text by the time they reach the end).⁴⁰ Furthermore, the word-by-word translation strategy is laborious; fluid reading, a combination of bottom-up and top-down processes, takes oral reading skills, interpretive capacities, and a reader who is engaged with the language in the most intimate way possible. Although there are a few obstacles for second language educators specific to the Tibetan language context, we wholeheartedly believe that, given concerted effort, addressing and remedying these issues is ultimately possible.

3. The Tibetan Diglossia and Its Effects on Second Language Learning

(a) Diglossia: A Brief History and Its Modern Context

We know from transcriptions of Old Tibetan into other languages that Tibetan spelling more or less reflected pronunciation at earlier points in history (and some dialects are still closer than others in this regard, such as Ladhaki, Balti, and the Tibetan spoke in *rgyal rong*).⁴¹ Later, when reforms were undertaken to standardize the language, we know too that spelling and vocabulary were modified, most likely reflecting changes to pronunciation and language use; the royal edicts also explicitly stated that the language used be easily understood by Tibetan readers.⁴² Of three language reforms undertaken by the Tibetans, the third and final one came in the 10th century; the literary language has been more or less unchanged since then (if we view the situation in a positive light, we may say that students who are able to read modern literature, newspapers, and so on, don't have such a jump to make to get to the classical language). Within Tibet today, the conservative impulse to uphold this rigid standard is at least

³⁸ See: Ueda, A. (1979). “Chokudoku chokkai.” *Yomu Eigo*. pp. 78-103. Tokyo: Kenkyusha, Hino, N. 1988. “Yakudoku: Japan's dominant tradition in foreign language learning.” *JALT Journal* 10 (1 & 2): 45-55, and P. Carrell, J. Devine, & D. Eskey (Eds.), *Interactive Approaches to Second Language Reading* (pp. 223-238). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

³⁹ See also: Ogawa, Hiroki (2011). “[Why English is Tough in Japan](#).” *The Diplomat*. Accessed 15 August 2013.

⁴⁰ Norris, Robert W. (1994). “Getting Students More Personally Involved: An Alternative to the Yakudoku- and Lecture-Dominated Methods of Teaching Literature and Reading.” *Fukuoka Women's Junior College Studies: Vol. 48*: pp. 25-38.

⁴¹ Beyer, pp. 7-38.

⁴² *dkar chag 'phang thang ma*

partially influenced by the mutual incomprehensibility of the many Tibetan dialects; in other words, keeping classical Tibetan as the literary language is seen as the uniting factor among the various dialects of ethnic Tibetan identity. This stance may be summarized by Khenpo Tsultrim Lodro, who here represents the opinion of the *gangs ljongs mkhas pa'i lhan tshogs* (a yearly consortium of Tibetan language authors):

Nowadays, Amdo, Central, and Khampa vernaculars are diverging further and further: If we think of olden times, the language found in our religious and specialized literature was extremely consistent. We should be aware that this literary language is actually the standardized language of the Tibetan ethnicity. Apart from pronunciation differences, the literary language standardizes our language perfectly.⁴³

While a detailed historical description of the language's divergence between vernacular and literature is beyond the scope of this paper, the important point is that today, the Tibetan language exists as a diglossia: the "low" vernacular dialects are superposed by the "high" literary language.⁴⁴ Diglossias typically occur in situations where: **a)** there is a large body of culturally defining literature (in this case, the Tibetan Buddhist canon); **b)** there are low literacy rates (which has been the case in Tibet even to this day); and **c)** the literature has been around for centuries (also the case here).⁴⁵ In other words, vernacular literature is nearly non-existent in the Tibetan language. While much has been made of production, phonology, and exposure, it must be admitted that these language learning features must also necessarily relate to the modern spoken Tibetan vernaculars, as classical Tibetan is no longer a spoken language; if so, how does the student bridge the gap between the spoken language they are learning and the literary language of old?

(b) The Diglossia in Tibetan Language Education

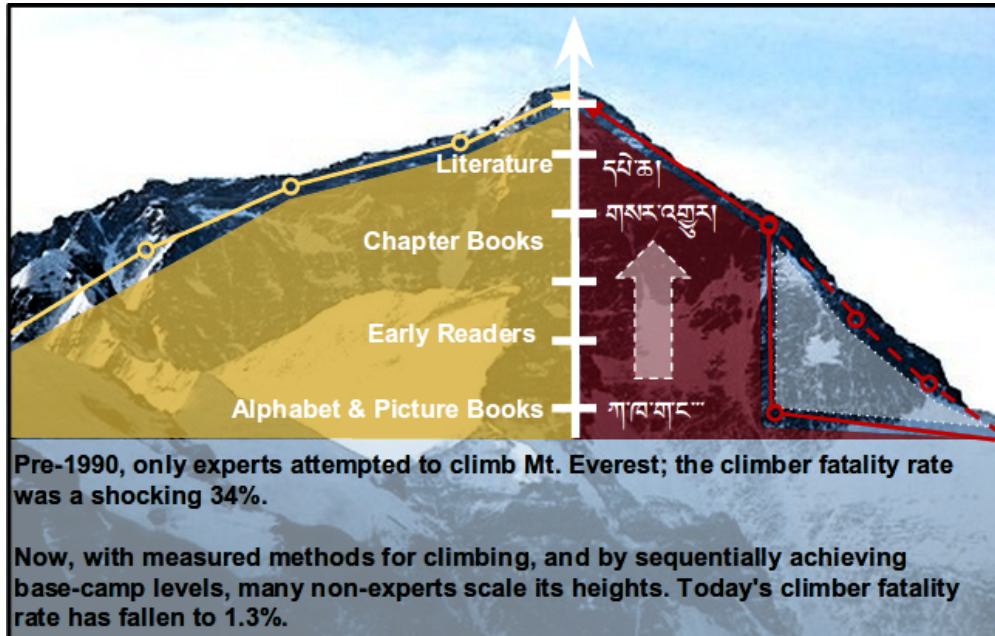
Notwithstanding a native renaissance of vernacular literature within the Tibetan community itself (as was the push by Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and so many others in the West when classical Latin represented the language of scholarship and literature), educators have the capacity, and therefore the duty, to attempt to create modern educational materials to support Tibetan language literacy. These ought to be based on the consensus view of second language pedagogists to fill the gap between the Tibetan vernacular and classical languages; and while the diglossia is an especially critical gap for first language learners, learners who are

⁴³ Within, *bstan bcos kyi skad* is an unusual term for literary Tibetan (*yig skad* as opposed to *kha skad*). It's probably used as juxtaposed to *phal skad*, common language. Khenpo Lodro specifically talks of this as being any piece of writing before any record of regional vernaculars (in this case, it does not refer specifically to commentaries on Buddhist teachings, the common use of the term): *kha sang de ring mdo dbus khams gsum gyi skad de bar thag je ring je ring la 'gro gi yod. sngon chad la mtshon na nga tsho'i chos dang rig gnas kyi bstan bcos dag gi thog nas skad rigs gcig gyur ha las pa byas bzhag yod. nga tsho bod kyi spyi skad gang yin zer na bstan bcos kyi skad 'di nga tsho bod mi rigs kyi spyi skad yang dag pa de yin. bstan bcos de klog tshul gyi sgra gdangs cung zad tsam m gtogs 'di'i thog nas nga tsho'i skad rigs 'di yang dag par gcig gyur byas bzhag yod.*

⁴⁴ Ferguson, "Diglossia," (1959). Word 15: 325–340.

⁴⁵ *ibid*, 325-337.

already literate in their native tongue are actually already primed to literacy in a second language.⁴⁶ Given the importance of production, phonology, and exposure to language learning, then, it seems the best strategy for Tibetan language educators to take would actually be research and education centered around the *spoken* Tibetan language. As it's been said of Arabic, another diglossic language: "The field of teaching Arabic as a foreign language has benefited from the advances in foreign language teaching such as moving away from the grammar and vocabulary focused methods toward more communicative techniques."⁴⁷ This is how *most* Tibetan language students will *best* gain the peak of sophisticated literacy:



(c) The Classical Tibetan Misnomer

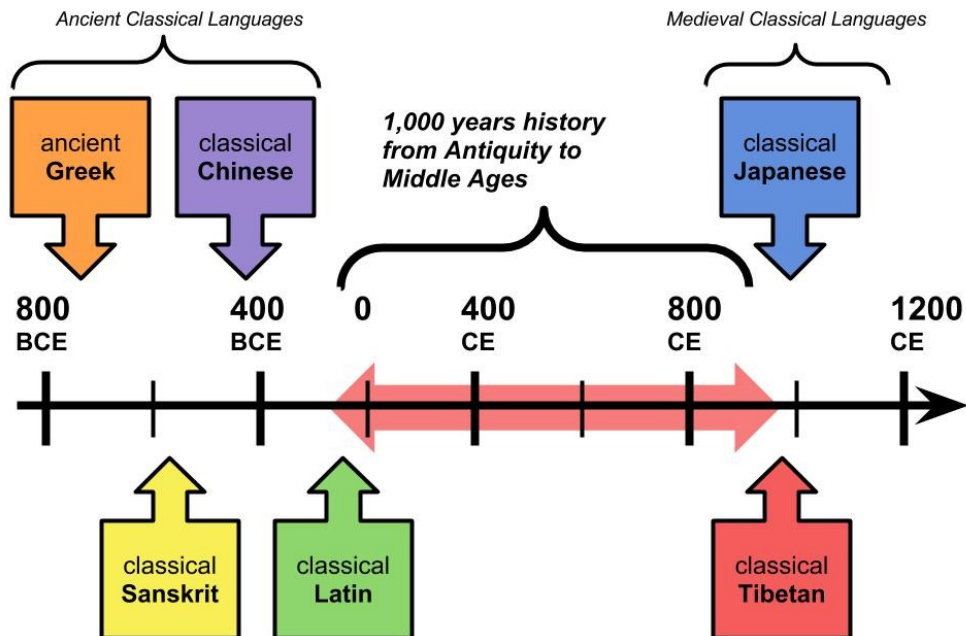
Again showing that the study of "classical Tibetan" is not in any way correlated with the study of "classical Latin," and hence it doesn't follow that they ought to share a pedagogy, we may point out that not only do modern native-speaking Tibetans quite regularly gain literacy (since the spoken vernacular is syntactically similar), but that "classical Tibetan" is also a bit of a misnomer given that it doesn't date back to antiquity as many other so-called "classical" languages. Instead, classical Tibetan (along with its Asian-language peer, "classical" Japanese) dates to the middle ages. Beyond this, the grammar of the Indo-European classics tends to be starkly inflected, with grammatical cases very clearly demarcating the relationships between words within a sentence; Tibetan, on the other hand, is isolating and has weak inflection, resulting in more ambiguous relationships.⁴⁸ As discussed above, one of the best strategies for

⁴⁶ See, for example, Pflapsen, Alison. "Improving Learning Outcomes through Mother Tongue-Based Education." RTI, North Carolina: 2011.

⁴⁷ Al-Mamari, Hilal (2011). "[Arabic Diglossia and Arabic as a Foreign Language.](#)" Capstone Collection Paper 2437.

⁴⁸ Since Tibetan grammar is traditionally described using the Sanskrit case system, one can immediately see

readers in resolving these ambiguities would be cultivating oral reading fluency built upon *prosody* and *production*, especially given that Tibetan is still a living language that retains attributes of the literary language,⁴⁹ rather than continuing to rely on a method used primarily to study the dead languages of antiquity:



**Approximately 1,000 years separates “Classical Tibetan” from the classical languages of antiquity. Classical Japanese, too, is of the medieval era; yet students of Japanese are first trained in the spoken language, and are only later introduced to the classical language.*

(d) Tibetan Language Studies in Academia

Indeed, it seems that in nearly every other foreign language, educators have abandoned Grammar-Translation in favor of more effective methodologies. One problem here is that Tibetan is never studied at the university level within a context dedicated to language⁵⁰—instead, it is relegated to the history, religious studies, or philosophy departments, where language requirements are *four to seven times lower* than they are in true language programs (see table below). One can imagine, then, the difference in relative language proficiency of a graduate student in Japanese, who has completed four years of colloquial language study and

that, in comparison: nouns are not marked by gender or number; grammar is particle-based, not inflective; the first case has no grammatical marking; the *ladön* stretches over three Sanskrit case meanings; and the vocative case doesn't truly exist in Tibetan. Even though Tournadre (CTT) divides literary grammar over 10 cases (or 2 “super cases”), he also asserts that they are “transcategorical” and “optional” in nature.

⁴⁹ Tournadre, MST, p. 26. Literary and spoken Tibetan “share the same basic grammar and are very similar lexically... with a knowledge of one it is possible to read the other without too much difficulty.”

⁵⁰ “There are currently no undergraduate (or graduate) Tibetan-language TTPs (Translation Training Programs) in universities outside of the PRC.” Raine, Roberta (2011). “[Minority languages and translator training: What Tibetan programmes can tell us.](#)” *Journal of Specialised Translation (JoSTrans)*, No. 16: 126-144.

one year of modern literature as an undergraduate, along with a slew of electives (which were taught in Japanese), and is continuing both colloquial and literature studies throughout a master's program, while perhaps adding, and beginning to focus upon, classical Japanese as well (a standard progression for any run-of-the-mill university) compared to an M.Phil student in Tibetan and Himalayan studies at Oxford, who is just about to *begin* language study with the first lesson in the Manual of Standard Tibetan.⁵¹

Program	Undergrad	Grad
UVA 7:1	2 years basic language + 3 years worth of advanced language + 1 year literature + semester classical + semester capstone ⁵² ----- "East Asian Studies:" 1 year of language	n/a ----- M.A. 1 year optional Ph.D. 4 years classical (spoken <i>optional</i>) ⁵³
Oxford 7:n/a	4 years of full-on language study (10 hrs. per week), including a compulsory year of immersion in Japan ----- n/a - Tibetan exists as an elective for Chinese, Japanese, & Sanskrit students	M.St. in Japanese studies available ----- Tibetan language studies BEGIN at the M.Phil level
Emory 4:1	4 years required language courses; classical lit. n/a ----- "East Asian Studies:" 1 year	n/a
Wisc. 5:1	4 years of spoken + 1 year of modern lit. ----- 1 year optional for South Asian Studies Cert.	Classical studies in Japanese begin at the graduate level

*Here, the common standards, across all degree programs, show that **Tibetan language requirements (red)** are **four to seven times lower** than their peer Asian language programs (here represented by **Japanese language requirements [blue]**), and while non-Tibetan

⁵¹ http://www.orinst.ox.ac.uk/isa/mph_tibetan.html

⁵² Beginners must first take intro to Japanese and intermediate Japanese (2 years/16 credits); they must then complete 18 credits in advanced Japanese (3 years worth @ 3 credits per) plus classical and capstone requirements (6 credits). [See UVA's worksheet for a Japanese major.](#)

⁵³ In theory, then, it seems possible that a UVA student could receive their Ph.D. having only studied classical Tibetan for four years (8 courses), without touching the colloquial language at all; in contradistinction, a B.A. student of Japanese would have already taken 4 courses of beginning-intermediate language + 6 courses of advanced language + 1 course capstone + 1 course classical = 12 courses (6 years worth, if taken one at a time), all before starting an M.A., much less a Ph.D.

language programs have teachers who specialize in teaching language as a second language, Tibetan programs do not; a strong foundation of spoken Tibetan should also be a prerequisite to begin classes on the classical language, as it is in other programs (when spoken Tibetan is even offered, it is optional).

(e) Overcoming Language Diglossia for TSL

However, if measured, methodical steps are taken to support the creation of educational materials for TSL students, there's no reason a bridge from spoken to literary Tibetan could not exist.⁵⁴ As we've outlined thus far, the Tibetan language diglossia has left us in a quagmire where native language reading material (material for *comprehension*), such as newspapers, magazines, and even educational readers and "children's stories," generally utilize an advanced level of the literary language.⁵⁵ This leaves beginning Tibetan language students without a clear, smooth path of transitional reading material to lead them from the basics of orthography up to the difficulty of the full literary form (sophisticated discourse). What is needed, then, is literary material designed for, and targeted to, early and middling students of the Tibetan language; material that uses a vocabulary and linguistic structure they can readily relate to their everyday use of Tibetan (their phonological foundation of the language). Furthermore, since writing skills are also important to supporting interpretive language skills, resources need to also support writing in the Tibetan language (material for *production*). This includes everyday tools that are available in other languages, such as spell-checks for word processors, Tibetan-only thesauruses (to assist in synonym and antonym searches and to help build a developing writer's vocabulary), readability formulas for authors, and graded glossaries built from researched headword lists (on which to base graded educational and reading material). Advanced, modern tools such as these will not only encourage and support writers of the Tibetan language; they will also be a useful resource for educators who teach Tibetan composition.

To support these educational goals, there needs to be research into the language based on the analysis of a spoken corpus. Headword lists may then be developed in order to inform the creation of truly graded educational material (via the application of graded glossaries) that fosters the student's gradual ascendancy toward literary sophistication (in a purely Tibetan context). Furthermore, this research will also cast a light on the creation of a leveling system for Tibetan language skills. This will help Tibetan language programs set certain specific goals for levels of language learning (i.e., a Tibetan system modeled upon the CEFR "can do" system), and allow such skills to be measured by standardized testing;⁵⁶ in the end, this will foster a more

⁵⁴ Again, as Tournadre points out (MST, p. 26), Literary Tibetan and Spoken Tibetan "share the same basic grammar and are very similar lexically, to the extent that with a knowledge of one it is possible to read the other without too much difficulty."

⁵⁵ For example, Beyer, p. 37, exclaims in a footnote: "...whether newspaper Tibetan will become a vehicle for a genuine colloquial literature remains to be seen..."

⁵⁶ [CEFR](#), the Common European Framework of Reference for languages, is an internationally recognized standard for assessing language levels. No such standard of measure yet exists for the Tibetan language. The US government uses the [ILR](#), and states: "Translation is the process of transferring text from one language into another. It is a complex skill requiring several abilities. Consequently, extreme care must be

professional approach to a field that has thus far lacked any overarching standards. Standardized testing could also lead to university level language credit(s) and/or certification that would assist non-experts in evaluating and assessing a professional translator's knowledge of the Tibetan language. By applying modern teaching methods with an understanding of language education research, alongside ancillary educational materials developed through the same, such programs would also have a leg-up in helping students overcome the difficulties of learning the Tibetan language.

4. Conclusion

Far from suggesting that language competence can come about by simply studying the vocabulary and grammar of a language, *all* second language research points to the importance of developing oral language skills in the appropriate cultural context⁵⁷ in order to build: **a)** a phonetically charged and culturally sensitive vocabulary (with which to recognize words and their connotations, since vocabulary is not isomorphic); **b)** an understanding of syntactical and organizational structure (at both the sentence and discourse level, in order to understand how groups of words form meaning);⁵⁸ **c)** an intuitive sense of the grammar of the language (an understanding of meaning that lies beyond the actual grammar rules, especially important in a weakly inflected language such as Tibetan); and **d)** a refined sense of phonology, in order to address automaticity, prosody, and access to the mental lexicon, all integral to reading comprehension. For these reasons, it seems that the Grammar-Translation method of 19th century scholasticism is an insufficient tool for a complete study of the Tibetan language, and that developing reading skills ought to be based on a strong background in the spoken language. This is the standard in Japanese and Arabic language programs, among so many others, which provide a much closer corollary to Tibetan in so many ways (i.e., both linguistically and historically) than *any* of the classical languages of antiquity for which Grammar-Translation is the only option. The simple question then is, why oughtn't Tibetan language education reflect the same modern standards that stronger language programs reflect?

exercised in hiring translators or assigning translation tasks to them. To do otherwise entails the risk that imprecise or even wrong information will be conveyed."

⁵⁷ Grabe, p. 377, and p. 381 "cultural knowledge has been shown to influence comprehension (Carrell, 1984b; Pritchard, 1990; Steffenson & Joag-Dev, 1984)"

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 388. "Linguistic differences at syntactic and discourse levels are more likely to have an influence on reader comprehension." Readers of different languages pay attention to different types of words—languages encode information differently both syntactically and organizationally.

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