

THE ECONOMY OF LANGUAGE: AN ISSUE IN THE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND

By Michael Collins

Classroom Explorations is a forum within *Language Bridge Academic Journal* for ESL/EFL educators and learners to share personal perspectives, experiences, challenges, and successes. Author Michael Collins is a U.S. Department of State English Language Fellow currently serving in Baku, Azerbaijan and has more than a decade of instructional experience with ESL/EFL learners in the U.S. and abroad. He is passionate about sharing his experiences, to empower other teachers with trending methodology and broaden their horizons with perspectives coming from outside the classroom but applicable inside it.

How much is a word worth? One thousand of them are worth the same as one picture, according to an adage. But can we speak of words as having a monetary value? Certainly, we can, but there are so many factors to consider: the inventiveness of the phrasing, its relevance to the situation at hand, the status of its speaker, etc. In this article, the author wishes to examine the economic concept of "diminishing marginal returns" and its pertinence to the linguistic concept of "the economy of language." The article is partly the fruit of years of experience as a student and teacher of English, partly a gedankenexperiment. Diminishing marginal returns have been an axiom of economics since its formalization as an academic discipline nearly three centuries ago; the economy of language is particularly associated in the U.S. with William Strunk, Jr., who championed it, page after page, in 1918's *The Elements of Style*. By the very nature of the subject matter, it would make for a disagreeable paradox if this article were lengthy!

Fundamentally, the law of diminishing marginal returns states that the more a person engages in a certain activity the less he will get out of doing it for an additional unit of time. It can be immediately applied to language learning, in that a person should make fewer language gains in each individual lesson at an advanced level than at a basic level, *ceteris paribus*. Thousands upon thousands of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers have, in essence, discovered the law independently in determining that they should break their lessons into discrete sections (e.g., focusing on listening for part of the time and reading for another) because students lose interest if there is only a single approach or activity.

The law was initially elaborated in the analysis of returns to agriculture, in an epoch when the "primary sector" of the economy was indeed its primary one. Adding one more worker to a tract of land would generally augment its productivity less and less. Expanding farmland would necessarily entail, barring the discovery of new territories, cultivating fields with lower fertility, leading again to a diminution of returns. The eventual "stationary state" humanity would come up against according to the economists who wrote on this topic led to the unflattering nickname "the dismal science." Industrialization, entrepreneurship, and globalization have kept the economy growing, but there indeed does not appear to be any way to overcome diminishing marginal returns altogether.

Imagine your EFL classroom as one of the estates of old and then use your ingenuity as a teacher to imagine how you could become not only a more efficient "farmer" but also an expert in other areas, prepared to help your students in any number of ways. A teacher who does not treat his students

as individuals should just be getting another body to fit into the room, adding less than the previous one, when a new student is added to the roster. However, a teacher who infuses personality into his classes, playing off the students in the room in doing so, will see the newcomer as a boon instead of a burden. Lands believed to have lower fertility may prove the naysayers wrong if novel techniques are employed on them, be they the planting of new kinds of crops or the use of experimental fertilizers. Any seasoned instructor has had to take on a student with a history of underachievement largely given up on by others and helping such a student find his footing and come into his own is among the most gratifying experiences an educator could have.

Confrontation with the law of diminishing marginal returns might drive an individual to stop engaging in an activity at all. Whole hobbies and habits have been cast aside with the realization of this principle, by billions over the course of human history. The person listening to his favorite song for the umpteenth time stands an increasing chance of noticing that that song is no longer his favorite. Ceasing to speak is an extreme measure, though. A person who finds his words are not registering with his interlocutors as they once did might seek out new conversation partners. The person would be especially wise to look for other associates if (as economists have explained could occur) the diminished returns have turned into negative ones, with succeeding comments doing harm rather than reduced good. He might also try to discuss wholly untapped topics with the same old partners, but this can only do so much to refresh the relationship. Very few are liable to find themselves so frustrated at the banality of what they are saying and hearing that they retreat from all speech acts. So, what is the way forward?

It can, fittingly, be condensed into a single phrase: "the economy of language." The aforementioned law of economics explains why, in general, being a person of few words is better than being a long-winded one. "The more one says, the less important each additional word seems to be to the listener" holds universally; "the more one says, the less likely people are to be willing to listen to you even momentarily" holds with tougher crowds or with speakers who have already done substantial damage to their reputations with their actions (customarily held to speak louder than their words). Here, an economic law overlaps with a socio-linguistic one.

In *The Elements of Style* by William Strunk, Jr., an enduring guide for writers of American English, the economy of language functions as a unifying thread for his various prescriptions and proscriptions. According to its dicta, using ten words when five would suffice conveys the message that the encoder does not understand the full weight of the words constituting his statement. With greater literacy and discipline, Strunk points out in his work with a directness which would be frowned upon nowadays, the Anglophone would say less yet mean the same or more. Strunk would likely have branded it a cardinal sin had I written, in my earlier sentence, "making use of" in place of "using."

Strunk's work is like other style guides in concerning itself more with written expression than verbal. Standards for grammar and usage are, by convention, higher for writing than speaking, after all; the greater time one must collect — and potentially correct — his thoughts in composition makes this disparity justifiable. Nevertheless, the economy of language he held to be an article of faith applies equally well to speaking. In the case of explicitly requested summaries, there would appear to be even more inflexibility on the need for economy in speaking than writing. Evidently, there is, likewise, a more stringent adherence to the economy of language in spoken humor than written; long before Strunk or even the classical economists, Shakespeare wrote for utterance on the stage: "Brevity is the soul of wit."

The applications of the economy of language to EFL instruction are manifold. Firstly, the clock is ticking. A teacher who on a regular basis does not get across complete lessons in the time allotted by the schedule-makers is certainly guilty of not economizing properly. Many trainers of language

instructors point to "teacher talking time" as what separates the best from the rest. The teachers themselves are already supposed to have superior command of the target language, so it is the students who should be speaking for most of the class time, for practice; if the teacher cannot concisely convey the grammar point or theme, the students may be speaking aimlessly or, worse yet, not even speaking. A teacher should try to involve all students in the class, as close to evenly as possible; announcing that certain students have already spoken more than enough while others have not yet reached their quota should make this economy concrete and hopefully inspire broader participation. Time limits in student presentations and word counts in student writing are methods of enforcing the economy of language while preparing young people for the world of work.

Returns tend to diminish over time, but innovation and positivity can shield the managers of the economy and the managers of classrooms from the worst effects of any such diminishment. Applying certain fundamentals of economics to language is a reliable method to train people in speaking and writing more thoughtfully, therewith more valuably.