

Joy from the Ashes

In many world language classrooms, there exists a profound disconnect between the real world potential for exciting, life-changing experiences enabled by second language learning and the reality of our students' lack of passion for language study. This depressing disconnect was sufficient to cause me twice to give up on foreign language teaching by the age of 26.

Later in life, my knowledge of French would enable me to navigate effectively a life and death situation, to convey life-changing messages to a number of people, to be ushered into the presence of the powerful and influential and even simply to cope effectively with the mundane routines of daily life in a foreign country for 13 unforgettable years in France. However, during my first three years as a foreign language teacher, my French skills hadn't generated any enthusiasm among my students. What could explain this perplexing disconnect?

In studying French in school in the U.S., I had had teachers who believed that, if students could memorize enough charts and rules and could accurately translate written text from English to French and vice versa, they would inevitably be able to speak French fluently and accurately. Others relied on the faulty foundation laid by their predecessors to expose us to literature that they found of cultural interest, confident that we would share their enthusiasm and as they waxed eloquent on the topics they proposed, though they were topics totally unrelated to our interests and daily lives.

Once I began teaching French myself, it didn't take long for me, as I mindlessly replicated the techniques by which I had been taught as a student, to understand that my teachers' reasoning had been fallacious and their methods ineffective. The seeds eventually leading to the ULAT's creation were thus sown three years into my initially depressing teaching experience.

For profound change to take place in one's life, sometimes it first requires hitting rock bottom before one is willing to consider alternatives. That was the case with my life when, in 1980, profoundly depressed, jobless, penniless and seemingly without a future, though still only 26 years old, I found myself utterly disenchanted with language teaching. I had left the profession for the second time a year earlier and had spent the following year performing odd jobs totally unrelated to any of my strengths, experiencing a deteriorating self-image in the process.

1. Homeless and hopeless, with my lifestyle rapidly spiraling downward, thankfully, a friend came to see me one Saturday morning and invited me to go for a walk. As we ambled along together, seeing I was going nowhere with my life, he encouraged me to go home to my parents and to start over again. He said I needed to go back to what I did best, meaning teaching, though I myself was not

as convinced as he that teaching was one of my strengths. Nonetheless, as I listened to him speaking sense to me, I was convinced God was speaking through him and thus put up no resistance. No sooner had he left than I walked to a telephone booth, called my father and asked him to come get me and take me home. God bless my dad for climbing into his car the next day, for driving over 300 miles to pick me up and then 300 miles back home again to take me in without a question or hesitation.

After a few weeks of repentance, rest and reflection, I was ready to face the future again. The next school year was only a month away but, knowing no other professional direction in which to head, I decided to try one more time. Sick of the futility of the teaching methods I had been using, I admitted to God that what I had been doing in the classroom up to that point had been an enormous failure. Then I simply asked Him, "How is that that people learn a language?"

I would not wish on anyone that they sink to the level of discouragement to which I had fallen during that last year before I went home to start over. However, it was only when I had fallen so low that I was ready to completely rethink my approach to language teaching. What would it take for you? Would it be the loss or threatened loss of your teaching position? How about a moment of lucidity and honest evaluation of your students' inabilities? Whichever the case, I would posit that only those who teach out of a sense of conviction, and not merely for a paycheck, who will be willing to radically modify their current approach to language teaching. The rest will have too many years invested in ineffective but familiar curriculum and methods to go to the trouble of "starting over", even though recognizing that they are daily mired in mediocrity.

So, have you hit rock bottom when it comes to your job satisfaction as a language teacher? If that is the case, be encouraged! Your discontent may very well be the impetus that has placed you on the verge of entering the best, most fulfilling years of your teaching career.

If you are young and are just about to start your first teaching position, your situation is enviable. There is nothing holding you back except the challenge you may face from the established teachers in your language department who may oblige or pressure you to "toe the traditional line". For that reason, give serious consideration to starting your career in a small school in which you will be the exclusive world language teacher and thus will have the freedom to experiment. Typically, administrators are less confident about critiquing the pedagogy used in language classes than they are about any other discipline in their school. If you are convinced about what you are doing, and can get parents and students to buy into your approach, your superiors will be only too happy to let you do your own thing.

In any case, after praying, I came to two simple conclusions. First, as nothing I had done in the classroom thus far had brought satisfaction, I would throw out all of the assumptions I had inherited from my grade school teachers. In the revolutionary words of Georges Moustaki, « ***Tout est possible, tout est permis!*** » ("Everything is possible,

everything is permitted!") I was completely set free to reconstruct my approach to language teaching in a way that made sense to me. Frankly, with that freedom, I started to get excited about a profession that I had come to abhor.

Secondly, I reasoned that if 99.9% of the world's people learn to speak their native language fluently, why would I modify the natural sequence by which they had learned their first language in teaching them a second? Why would I use translation and analytical grammar presentations to get my students to where I wanted them to be? Were such activities those that had taught me to speak English as a child? Why would I give them written homework assignments from the very first day of class? In fact, why would I expose them to the written word before they could speak this new language with a certain degree of fluency, albeit with some grammatical errors? Don't we spend the first year of our life listening, observing and experiencing, followed by our first tentative efforts to utter words to bring about a desired end? We quickly learn "Mama!" to have our basic wants and needs met. We slur "G'up" to convey that we want to be picked up out of our crib and held. We demand "muck" to be given a glass of milk and "book" to be read to. And, through it all, our parents delight in and encourage our imperfect communication. So why would I come down hard on grammatical errors in the first-year student and give form as much emphasis as essence? And doesn't dramatically increased native language fluency develop in a child go for four or five years before they are ever exposed to elementary reading and still later before asking them to write? Why would I expect success in teaching them a second language without using that same approach?

Once the dam had burst in my thinking, the questions and logical conclusions came pouring out in rapid succession. In short, whereas the duration of each step in the sequence could be significantly reduced in the adolescent or adult learner, who already understood, spoke, read and wrote a native language, the sequence I would mimic thereafter in teaching them a second language should be the natural one by which students had learned their native language. They would first be taught to listen and comprehend speech, then to express themselves orally and then, months later and only once relative oral fluency had been attained, would they receive phonics instruction and begin to read, followed even later by elementary written work.

With these thoughts in mind, knowing that translation was a highly destructive technique, establishing unhealthy mental links between the students' native language and the new one they were learning, I began thinking about the critical issue of how I would convey meaning. One morning, over breakfast, while musing about the question of how to communicate meaning without translation, I looked at a basket of fruit placed in the middle of the table between my mother and me. I decided that I was going to communicate to her, though without speaking, that I wanted her to give me the banana resting within the basket. To make the task similar to what I would face if ever again in a foreign language classroom, I determined to use French sentence structure in making my request. Wordlessly, raising my hands in front of my chest, and looking meaningfully at my mom, I got her attention. Then I pointed at her with my index finger (You). Next, I stretched my index finger out horizontally and then arched it back toward my chest (to

me). Thirdly, I extended both of my forearms toward her with my palms open (give) and finally pointed at the banana. Thank God for mothers, who tend to think brilliant all that their children seek to create or accomplish! In any case, she patiently took me seriously, as I repeated the sequence two or three times, and then, once she had understood what I was expressing, passed me the coveted piece of fruit.

From that simple experiment, it dawned on me that I could assign gestures to the most important vocabulary that students would learn during their first year of study. These gestures would be so evocative of meaning that there would be no need for translation nor, for that matter, for any thought about the word in the students' native language.

From that breakfast table insight, I was able to generalize the idea about gestures and extend it to all forms of visual and auditory stimuli. I saw that I could use mime, skits, video clips, still images, drawings and sound effects to accomplish the same task of conveying meaning to my students. For example, if I wanted to express the idea of "to listen", I could trace in the air with my fingers the outline of an imaginary radio, pulling up its antenna and turning an imaginary knob, then humming a tune while grasping an imaginary handle and pulling it up to my ear, bobbing my head and tapping my toe to the beat of the music. With a glance at the students, I could continue the same activity while articulating and repeating the word "to listen" in the language I was teaching. From there, I could dispense of my imaginary radio, raise my hand to my ear and repeat the word a couple of times. Finally, making it clear that I wanted my students to imitate the hand-to-ear gesture, I could have them perform the gesture themselves and repeatedly say the word with me. Thereafter, until the word became so deeply ingrained in their thinking that gestures would no longer be necessary, I could perform that same gesture every time I would refer to the word "listen".

Within a couple of weeks of such reflection, I had settled on a number of principles and practices that I would respect, if ever I got another teaching job, however inconvenient it might be or odd it might seem to others. Those principles and practices were as follows:

1. I would respect the natural language acquisition sequence proceeding from listening to speaking to reading and finally to writing
2. I would not introduce the written language until the student had acquired a strong oral foundation of syntax and vocabulary, acquired exclusively through speaking and listening
3. I would reject translation as a teaching tool, as it creates destructive mental links between the learner's native language and the language to be acquired resulting in slow, stilted and embarrassingly awkward and mispronounced speech
4. I would instead convey meaning in a visual and auditory fashion and in context, by means of stories, mime, gestures, drawings, sound, video clips and still images
5. I would avoid the use of analytical presentations of grammar, which are largely useless and tedious sidetracks for beginning language students and tend to push them in the direction of translation

6. I would see training students in **how** they think (in the three-step thought process of the native speaker) as they speak their new language to be just as important as **about what** they think (meaning expressed via vocabulary and a certain sentence structure)
7. I would teach my students to perform and understand gestures representing key elements of the language every time they say or hear that word, during their first year of study, until that gesture is no longer necessary
8. I would establish a pace of instruction rapid enough that students would not have the time to reflect in their native language, my goal being to develop "linguistic reflexes" in my students whereby, over time, they would be trained to employ proper sentence structure as a reflex response without needing to reason their way to proper speech through the recalling of grammar rules, charts and diagrams
9. I would give priority to substance over form, particularly in the first year of study, affirming speech, even though grammatically imperfect, which succeeds in conveying meaning. Only gradually and progressively would I raise the bar when it comes to my expectations for the structural accuracy of their speech
10. I would be careful to give only proportional importance to the irregular aspects of a language, rather than overemphasizing them beyond that which their actual frequency in speech justifies, so as to give the students the sense that this new language has some predictability
11. I would ensure that my testing methods and emphases remained consistent with the above principles and practices, despite the greater challenge of creating objective testing measurements for oral speech. That is, if I claimed that I truly wanted my students to be able to speak this new language, and not merely be able to explain and analyze it, I would need to test and weight the elements contributing to their grades in a manner that would reflect and respect that priority.

With those ideas in mind, I now found myself excited to get back into the classroom. However, there was one problem. I now had less than two weeks before the 1980-1981 school year would begin and my initial letters of application had failed to result in even an invitation to interview.



The author directing a rapid-fire review of key gestures to the end of producing "linguistic reflexes", that is, instant recall while training the students to speak without passing through the grid of their native language.

In God's economy, time is no obstacle, as He puts each element of His plan in place in just the right order and at just the right moment without the need for haste or panic. Six days before the start of the school year, a well-respected middle school in mid-Michigan, to which I had not even applied for work, invited me to drive 100 miles to their site and interview that same day. And that same day I was hired to teach French in the best environment imaginable. I would work under a wonderful principal – the ultimate encourager of people and innovation – who trusted me implicitly to teach as I saw fit. Additionally, just through the woods in the back of the school's property lay the church I had attended while in college years earlier. There I would meet people, including my wife-to-be, who would

support the continued restoration of a life that a mere three months earlier, languishing hopelessly in a tent, had appeared wasted and over.

With the freedom to teach in accordance with my new convictions, the transformation of my classroom experience was instantaneous and almost unbelievable. It was like a bright light had been switched on in a room where there had been pitch darkness for years. Just two months into the school year, having taught my first year students the gestures and words corresponding to the first half of what would later become my list of the 60 most common verbs in any language, I tested them one-on-one over their ability to tell me all that they could about themselves during a two-minute extemporaneous talk. Upon completing her talk, one twelve-year-old girl, with an enormous grin of self-satisfaction, looked at me with wide-eyed amazement at what she had just done and said, "Mr. Nesbitt, you must be so proud of us! We can already say so much!" She wasn't boasting. She was merely speaking the truth of which I too was somewhat in awe. With that sense of awe came the realization that God had mercifully led me to an approach and to a profession to which I would dedicate the remainder of my professional life.

Language Teachers' Topics for Reflection

1. If the ULAT represents a radical departure in methodology from that you have thus far employed in the classroom, or which you yourself experienced as a language student, why might you be willing to embrace it at this point?
2. How would you answer the question, "How do people learn their first language?"
3. Do you believe their second language learning will succeed as well by a manner that differs from what you described in question number 2?

4. How would you describe the approach to language instruction currently employed by your colleagues in the school where you are employed or, if there is a complete turnover in foreign language faculty in your school, that which preceded your arrival in your new school?
5. Reread the eleven foundational principles and practices of the ULAT program. Express your perspective on each one, as well as any lack of clarity as to what they are suggesting.

NEXT CHAPTER