The Teacher, the Time and the Task

Have you ever felt utterly insufficient for a role that, for some reason, you were going to be obliged to undertake? What was that role and how did you survive? For me, it was probably during the dark period in my mid-20's to which I referred in the second chapter of this writing. I had just given up on teaching for the second time, disillusioned with my results in the classroom. However, not yet ready to return to my childhood home and to start over again, I needed a way to support myself.

I found a job working as a house parent in one of a series of group homes for mentally handicapped adults. My job was to help the residents learn to cook their own meals, balance their own checkbook and perform domestic chores to keep the place looking nice. I have no idea why I was hired. I had never been a parent, I couldn't cook, I hadn't a clue as to the exact state of my own bank account and I took no interest in housekeeping. Nonetheless, the organization must have been desperate because they hired me.

I only worked there about a year but, by the end of my stint, I was told that mine was the best run of the 12 group homes. How had that happened? I suppose it had to do with keeping things simple, consistent and organized. I didn't know much about the tasks I had been given to perform but, what I did know, I stuck to assiduously and provided the residents with structure that helped them to feel safe and even to learn the skills along with me. In my case, methods trumped knowledge.

But what about when it comes to teaching? Can methods still trump knowledge? Have you ever been given an assignment for which you felt you were completely unprepared? I have.

I graduated from Michigan State University in 1975 with a BA in French and having minored in history. I had studied French throughout the totality of my secondary years, spent 10 weeks living in France prior to my senior year of high school, spent a semester in college studying in Rennes, France, majored in French and, thanks in large measure to my facility with it, was inducted into Phi Beta Kappa while attending MSU. Later in life, my family and I would spend 13 years living in France where I worked as an assistant pastor, English teacher, sports director and small business owner.

Does it not seem to you that something is strikingly missing from my list of learning experiences? If you have looked at the French and Spanish lessons found in the ULAT, at least as of the date of this writing, you'll notice that the aging instructor found in the French videos is the same one in the Spanish ones. Hmmm. Where is all of the Spanish training? Time for full disclosure. I want to share this with you to make a very important point that I hope will encourage you - encourage you to persevere with confidence or encourage you to rethink what you're doing in your classroom.

Singularly unprepared for the Spanish classes I would be teaching just three months after this photo was taken, I would soon be off to Guadalajara and then to northern Illinois to try to bluff my way through. (I probably should have taken the gown out of its package before Graduation Day arrived.)

I only started studying Spanish during my second year of college and never obtained enough credits to even minor in the subject. Consequently, I was never certified to teach it. More significantly, I have scarcely set foot in a Spanish-speaking country.

Upon graduation in 1975, despite the paucity of my background in Spanish, I was offered a job teaching the language in the northern suburbs of Chicago. I had so few credits that, before I had even started working for them, my new school system insisted that I take summer classes at the University of Guadalajara so that I could obtain certification to teach Spanish in Illinois. I had to take so many courses that summer that I had little time to get to know Mexican culture or to interact with the people around me. I only emerged from my lodging to attend class and then would hurry back home to study some more. Thus, this first stay in a Spanish-speaking country, which lasted a total of two months, took place over 40 years ago. My only other such experience occurred in 2008 when my family and I helped out for three weeks at a music camp near the city of Puebla. In short, such is my experience with the Spanish language...short.

Before you write me off as patently unqualified, now allow me to tell you the rest of the story. Over the course of my 30-year teaching career, despite the preponderance of French training and experience in my past, I rarely ever taught it. Such is the demand for Spanish in American secondary schools that it was either teach Spanish or go back to being a house parent. And so, what of my results?

Glance through the "Testimonial" section of the ULAT website, where you'll find a number of testimonials regarding the Spanish courses I taught. You'll see statements like the following:

> "I felt like I was observing a beginning college course rather than high school Spanish students." (comment written by a local high school Spanish teacher visiting my classroom)
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> "In a little over two years Steve reversed the trend before he arrived of discouraged students and declining interest in a foreign language to a program in which students are pursuing AP and CLEP test opportunities in Spanish. Students are clamoring to take 4 years of Spanish when only 2 are required." (superintendent of one of the schools in which I taught)
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> "I really enjoyed your Spanish classes in high school, and found them to be more useful and well-run than the Spanish classes I took at the collegiate level, in fact, there really is no comparison. Because of my solid background in the Spanish language from your classes, I was far, far more

advanced than my peers in speaking the language." (former student who attended the currently top-ranked public university in the United States)

"I had my first Spanish class (in college) ...it was AWESOME. Suffice it to say, I am not nervous. I was one of the best speakers with basically the best accent when we were practicing in class. One girl asked me if I had lived in another country. I am not saying this to brag, but rather to tell you that you prepared me more than I could have asked." (former student)

"I went to orientation the other day, and I was asking about class credits. Since I was there, they told me I should take the 15-minute test that determines your real capabilities in the language. So, I took the test, and, as it turns out, I'm actually taking a 300 level Spanish class, and if I pass, I'll already have a minor in Spanish." (former student and college freshman)

These are only a smattering of the many similar comments you will find in the "Testimonial" section, but they serve to demonstrate the first of three very important points I would like to make. Many times over the years I felt embarrassed and insecure by what I perceived as the insufficiency of my knowledge of Spanish as compared with the confidence I felt in French, but it was my lot to teach the former language because of the simple question of demand. Nevertheless, as I saw the results with my students, I became convinced of the following truth. Instructors with only a modest level of fluency in the language they are teaching, and yet who understand how language is learned and respect the corresponding pedagogical principles, will be able to take their students farther, and help them establish a stronger foundation for future learning, than the most fluent native speakers who haven't a clue as to how to transmit a knowledge of their language.

A teacher with only modest language skills, but a clear understanding of how language is actually best learned, will be able to take his or her students much farther toward fluency, than will the native speaker who hasn't given the issue of pedagogy much thought.

Of course, we would all desire to be a native or near native speaker of the language we are teaching and as well as to employ effective pedagogical practices. Upon my retirement from classroom teaching, I was replaced in my last school by a young man who several years earlier had been one of my students and had been trained with the ULAT program. He had gone on to major in Spanish in college, to spend considerable time developing his fluency in Central and South America and then (and this can't hurt) married a wonderful young woman from Venezuela. Still just in his mid-20's, he represents for me the pinnacle of what a world language teacher should be, possessed of a fluent knowledge of the language he is teaching and endowed with an acute understanding of how languages should be taught. The fact that 88% of his students have received 4's or 5's on the Spanish Language AP test and that none has ever

received less than a 3 is testimony to the potential unleashed when a teacher's knowledge is paired with his methods.

However, the reality is that we won't all have the same opportunity to obtain training nor the same life circumstances. (Besides, we may already be married!) But don't focus on your limitations. Just control what you can control, and one thing we can all control is the approach we use in teaching our language. Choose your methodology on the basis of conviction, not as a product of convenient conformity to traditional, but failed, methodology.

This chapter is entitled "The Teacher, the Time and the Task". So, if the most important quality of language teachers is their adherence to sound language teaching principles, even beyond their mastery of the language itself, what is the most strategically important time for students to encounter such outstanding teachers? Without question, it is during their first year of serious language study. Why? In light of the preceding discussion of three-step speech, symbolization and linguistic reflexes, the reason should be obvious. Through conveying meaning to beginning students via text and translation, and obliging them to engage in written exercises before relative oral fluency has been attained, misled first year teachers can condemn students to the 5-step thought process that is nearly always fatal to their eventual attainment of fluency and their long-term interest in language learning.

Interesting, isn't it, to realize which courses schools typically designate for their most fluent and most experienced foreign language teachers? Normally you will find them responsible for the upper level courses, while new teachers, fresh out of college, are assigned the beginning language courses. You often see the same dynamic in place at the university level where it is the international graduate students, without teaching experience and possibly even with no intention of making teaching a career, who are assigned the 101 classes. Such assignments turn logic on its head and do beginning students a grave disservice. It makes far more sense to assign the most experienced instructors - those with the best grasp of sound language teaching principles - to work with the beginning students because there is no more likely time to ruin a language student than in his or her first year of study. The first intensive year of language study lays the foundation, solid or crumbling, on which all future teachers will have to build. Additionally, native speaking graduate assistants, for example, without training in pedagogy, cannot damage the thought process of students who have already received two years of the proper training in how to think as they speak their new language. All they need is a native speaking linguistic model to emulate.

Consequently, if the best teachers respect the best practices and the most important time for them to intervene is in their students' first year of study, what is their most important task? You may already know what I am going to say. It was written in the second chapter's list of principles for language study. The most important task in the first year is to train student in ***how*** they think as they speak their new language. More important than *about what* they think (vocabulary and syntax) is *how* they think (3-step thought process). A knowledge of vocabulary and sentence structure can always be

augmented in the second year, but a faulty thought process, established in Year One, will plague them for as long as they study the language. Only an extended overseas stay or cross-cultural experience can undo the damage of inappropriate teaching methods used with the beginning student, and most will never have that opportunity.

Let me share with you one more reason that the best teachers need to be focused on the first year of study in order to train students to think rightly. It's because students are not stupid. They can discern whether or not they are genuinely becoming able to speak their new language. They run into friends from other schools and compare their level of fluency, favorably or unfavorably, with what is being cultivated elsewhere. They are challenged by well-meaning adults and older family members, who hear that the students are studying such-and-such a language. When the adults ask them, "So, how do you say...?", or when those same adults try out phrases they recall from their past, and when the young people can only stare blankly in response, the students quickly recognize that they've been fed a bill of goods. It is the ability to actually speak the language that students want to acquire and about which others want to know. No one brags about being able to write in a new language. No one asks young people to read them a passage in their second language. Young people want to show that they can speak it and to know that they are progressing toward fluency. You can lose their enthusiasm in the first year if they can tell that this whole language study business is a dead end and getting them nowhere.

The best language teachers are those who respect the natural language acquisition process, the best time for their intervention with students is in the first year and their most important task is training their beginning students to think in the 3-step manner of the native speaker.

Upon returning home from my 10-week stay with the Dupré family, it wasn't long before school started again in September. On the first day of classes, I couldn't wait to get to French class so that I could show off all that I had learned. Mr. Mueller, in creative fashion, asked us to share with one another, in French of course, what it was that we had done during our summer vacation. I couldn't believe it! He was unintentionally setting me up! It was like a pitcher informing the batter that he is going to lay a nice easy fastball right in there on the next pitch.

Trembling inside, I listened to my classmates unenthusiastically mutter something about how they had gone to the beach or slept in. What it was my turn, I jumped all over the opportunity. Speaking at a rate of speech that caught my classmates off guard, I went on about the Dupré family, about camping along the Mediterranean, about my daily bike rides into Laon to play basketball, about how Valerie was a cheater, etc. Finally, having heard enough, Kathy Stovall - she of the beautiful, long black hair - turned and, glaring at me, emphatically commanded: "Shut up!" I did, but I was still smiling inside.

Use the right methods and don't apologize for how little you feel you know. Use those methods with beginning language learners. Catch them before another teacher can ruin them. Above all else, train them to think like a native speaker. If you do those things,

bursting with pride and confidence over their growing fluency, they may never shut up, and you'll be the one smiling inside.

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Language Teachers' Topics for Reflection

1. How you ever been assigned a task for which you felt entirely ill-equipped? If so, what was it?
2. If you had to choose between having a thorough mastery of language teaching pedagogy, albeit a minimal knowledge of the language you were teaching, and a profound knowledge of the language, but a poor idea as to how to teach it, which would you choose and why?
3. According to the author, which year of language study is the most important when it comes to the hope of attaining fluency? Do you agree and why or why not?
4. Contrast the profile of the typical first year language teacher with that of the one teaching at the AP level?
5. Why does the author believe that the most experienced and competent instructors are more necessary at the first year level that in advanced courses?
6. What role can untrained native speaking graduate assistants perform and why is it safe for them to do so?
7. Were you to ask most Spanish teachers, for example, what content they teach their first year students, what do you think they would likely respond?
8. What does the author suggest should be the beginning language teacher's primary task?
9. There is a motivational reason that is likely overlooked when one weighs the relative importance of students making significant progress in the spoken language during the first year. What is it?

NEXT CHAPTER