REFLECTIONS FOR REMOTE LANGUAGE TEACHERS

How to Best Use Limited Classroom Time (Part II)

In the first part of these writings, I wrote about a number of convictions at which I arrived during 30 years of language teaching and which are developed in greater detail in my ebook, "In Other Words". I mentioned seven of them and, you will notice, they all share one theme. That theme concerns the primacy of listening and speaking skill development, particularly within the first two years of a student's language study.

During those crucial initial years of study, several things happen, primarily within the mind of language students, that will either determine their long-term success and enthusiasm or failure and disinterest in second language learning:

1) They will either acquire the 3-step thought process of the native speaker or the unwieldy 5-step thought process of the student who has received a premature exposure to the second language in written form and whose instruction has been predicated upon the written language.

2) They will either seek to reproduce authentic pronunciation or, if allowed to apply the English phonics system to the second language's written form, consider inauthentic pronunciation to be the accepted norm.

3) They will either become accustomed to hearing the "music" of the target language in class, and gradually come to understand it, or they will consider its use to be an unfair imposition not worthy of their focused attention.

4) They will consider regular participation in oral communication in the language to be a normal thing or they will see engaging in target language communication to be an awkward and embarrassing intrusion into their lives.

5) They will either see the ability to speak this new language as feasible and their success at that task as one of the elements composing their positive self-image or rather as just one more proof of their overall incompetence and of the irrelevance to them of the school environment. (Developing the skills of reading and writing is far less personally rewarding. No one stops the student on the street or at a party and says, "What?!? You can write in French. Wow! Let me watch you write!")

Now, what does this all have to do with the allocation of limited in-person time in the classroom with students to whom teachers often can only relate remotely? The application is obvious as to how one should allocate precious face-to-face time in class. If some types of activities and some skill development must be sacrificed when the usual routine of 45 to 60-minute classes, 5 days a week, goes by the wayside, let the sacrifice be anything but to listening and speaking skill development.

Listening, speaking, reading and writing can all take place remotely but, by its very nature and primacy, oral interaction must receive the priority when allocating in-class time with students. I can speak with my students via some video conferencing tool, but such communication cannot rival face-to-face communication for intensity, meaningfulness and clarity. Speech involves togetherness and community. Reading and writing causes one to retreat to one's den or office. Speaking and listening draws people out into their living room. By nature, oral interaction involves at least two. By contrast, reading and writing are singular activities conducted in quietude.

Oral communication is enhanced through eye contact, facial expression, body language, expressive gestures, tone of voice and audio clarity. All of those factors are muted and depersonalized when we are exposed to them virtually, as opposed to in the presence of living human beings, who in turn are observing our non-verbal communication and are using it to enrich and inform our oral interaction.

In short, if any second language skill development must be shelved for a time, let it not be that of speaking and listening when it comes to working with early language learners. And let not the necessity and challenge of creating a secure testing setting be allowed to compete with oral interaction for limited face-to-face time with our students. Rather, let's find suitable solutions to providing secure remote testing even though our students are at home…and that will be the topic of our next reflection.