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Professor Fischer

Methods

March 22, 2002

Language Teacher Credo

My literature teacher spent hours talking in our class and my hand was getting tired as I tried to keep up with his speed. The way he introduced us to certain texts and summarized the information for us in the talk was an enjoyable experience for me. His approach was teacher centered and I did not mind it one bit.

However, last fall term when I observed a Spanish class of one of my TA colleagues and saw the same dynamics occurring there, that made me really worry. The students did not have a chance to talk. The Instructor dominated about eighty percent of the class time. I left the classroom in horror. What I saw conjured flashbacks of my own high school English class. The teaching style had been the main reason why the class had not been rewarding. Afterwards I no longer enjoyed English and I deprived myself of learning it well. You see, we as students did not have the time for a hands-on interaction with the language; instead, we just passively nodded yes each time the instructor asked, "Is that clear?"

After observing my colleague's class I promised myself not to try to speak overly much in my classes. The experience had been a visceral revelation. Let me explain.

First revelation: as there are methods particular to teaching math or history, so there are to teaching a language course.

Second revelation: a language instructor should let students do a majority of the talking.

Third revelation: our values influence our approach to teaching.

Fourth revelation: the language instructor must rely on adequate methodology.

The reason I describe this insight as visceral is because at the time I did not as yet have the requisite pedagogical knowledge to support my intuition. My initial reaction pointed the way to what I now believe is the appropriate attitude toward teaching. I had started to read Omaggio's Teaching Language in Context. There I learned about functional approach or communicative language teaching. Then in methods class, there was a discussion and project about PASS and the standards-base instruction model prescribing a less teacher-centered classroom.

As a language instructor I underwent a transformation between fall and winter terms that effected a shift in my beliefs about teaching and ability to teach.

I want to facilitate my students' interaction with the language. As explained by Richards and Rogers in Approaches and Methods, this is "[t]he communication principle: activities that involve communication promote language learning" (72).

I have to relate my own experience as a language learner to my students' experience.

I have to acquire pedagogical knowledge to better enable students' language acquisition process—for instance, by taking more pedagogy classes, reading language journals, comparing Spanish textbooks, keeping in touch with colleagues, and learning or unlearning from them.

As human beings we possess a basic and universal desire to connect communicatively with others. Teaching a language promotes this process among individuals of diverse ethnic backgrounds, different walks of life, etc. Sharing a language in common provides the opportunity of understanding each other through a variety of cultural contexts, thereby fomenting societal health. The chance to participate in that process is what motivates me to be a language instructor.

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Professor Fischer

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Proficiency Self-Evaluation

It certainly is not difficult to realize that my proficiency in French is not that of an Intermediate level. Though I have the ability to ask some simple questions—who, when, where, why, how much—the questions are essentially limited to the interrogative word. I would have a rather difficult time getting in and out of basic survival situations. My speech is characterized by some sentences but the majority falls into simple responses to simple questions. I certainly lack the ability to narrate or describe situations be it in the past, present or future but I can express where I want to go—*je voudrais aller au Mexique*—an example of memorized text as I have no idea how to form the conditional, *voudrais* “I would like,” across other verbs.

Contextually, I am very limited. I struggle to recall vocabulary of basic objects; those words that I do remember are typically cognates—*l'hopital, télévision, ordenadeur* from ‘ordenador’ in peninsular Spanish which curiously borrows from the French, and so on. I am unable to get/ask for directions aside from asking directly, *ou est le Louvre*, but can tell you what the date or time is as well as talk about the weather. Colors and clothing are also not my strong points. After sitting in on a French 102 earlier this term, I could see that I had some accuracy with what I had attempted to say in class—at least the instructor knew what I was attempting to communicate. Errors in grammar and pronunciation were frequent although pronunciation seemed to be my “strong” point.

These characteristics of function, context and accuracy reflect a Novice-High rating. The Novice-High is:

Able to satisfy immediate needs using learned utterances. There is no consistent ability to create original sentences or cope with simple survival situations. [...]. Can ask questions or make statements with reasonable accuracy only where this involved short memorized utterances. [...] Speech is characterized by enumeration, rather than by sentences [and] vocabulary is limited to common areas. [...]. There is some concept of the present tense forms....

The description goes on to say that pronunciation in isolation is correct but not quite possible in groups of words. It could very well be that my speech was intelligible to the instructor because she was familiar with non-native French speakers. It could be, too, that I am "above average" for a Novice-High speaker of French with respect to pronunciation (a task quite important to native French speakers I might add!). Despite this fact or the possibility that I may be more proficient in certain areas my lack of vocabulary, inability to even think in the past tense, and get along with some sort of ease in basic travel and survival situations prevents me from reaching the Intermediate level.