

Personal Reflections on Life as a Language Learner/Teacher

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When asked about my experiences in language teaching and learning, they are often difficult to summarize given the dynamic nature of my experience and the motivations for language studies and teaching in the first place. Over the years I cannot point to one time in my life where language learning became more meaningful to me. From a young age I always enjoyed reading and writing and desired to know more about the world outside of my own context. Although this was limited to my first language, I felt that there was more out there to learn from and understand. In reality, my true motivation and interest in learning a second language, and eventually teaching languages, came about through my encounters with people from various cultural backgrounds. In learning about cultures, I was then motivated to learn the accompanying language of those cultures.

#### *FFL in Atlanta, GA and international experience*

I began my formal second language studies in a middle school French class which I took as an elective course. I chose to study French over the practicality of studying Spanish because of how beautiful it sounded when spoken and the eccentric nature of the school's native French teacher. After middle school, I continued my French studies through high school and one semester of college. In most of my French classes, I remember explicit grammar instruction, prescribed dialogues, cultural traditions, and watching movies with English subtitles. Practical language use was not a focus in most of my classes and although I made excellent grades, I didn't feel confident in speaking French. I continued my French studies in college but after a bad language encounter in a Parisian café when studying abroad in Europe, I decided to discontinue my French studies. However, my study abroad program in London, England in 1999 exposed me to much diversity as I was interning at a primary school where the majority of the population consisted of refugee children from around the world. Consequently, upon returning to the United

States to finish my university studies, I felt a desire to work with at-risk children from other cultural backgrounds.

### *Second Language learning in Russia*

In the summer of 2000, I participated in some summer camps for orphan children in Vladimir, Russia. I traveled with a team of American college students and local church laypeople to a camp where we lead sports, drama, and craft activities for over 200 orphan children from the region's orphanages. I left Russia that summer with a desire to return and learn more about Russian language and culture of the people whom I had befriended. After graduating from college, I decided to move to Vladimir the following year with the initial purpose of learning the Russian language. The motivation to learn such a difficult language stemmed from my desire to directly communicate with my new friends in the surrounding orphanages and technical schools. In the camps, we had been assigned translators to help us talk with the young people, but I could see in their eyes so much more that could not be communicated through a translator in English. I wanted to know their history, passions, and culture in general. In realizing these desires, I knew that in order to accomplish them I would have to devote myself to language and cultural learning full-time by being immersed in the culture itself. As I had previously studied in England for a semester in college, the idea of moving to a foreign country fuelled my adventurous tendencies and, after thinking about the decision for a few months, decided to take the plunge with an American friend who had worked at camps in Vladimir with me.

I should point out that my friend and I had no previous experience with Russian language and culture other than our brief, two-week trips to camp in Vladimir during the summer, and one winter camp. I had learned a few words and phrases from the orphan children and translators at camp, but was by no means able to get around on my own. One blessing in moving to Vladimir was that we had an English-speaking Russian roommate who was studying English in the local

university and had grown up in an orphanage nearby. She, along with our translator friends from camp, was able to help us adapt those first few months. Without their help in communicating with our landlord, neighbors, friends, and market vendors, I don't think I could've survived.

Since we had an entire month before classes started at the university, I spent my time learning how to count money and identify foods and household items in order to venture out to the market by myself. I wanted to quickly reach a point where I could communicate with people so I could then focus on the various themes my studies would cover at the university. I took every chance to speak with people, even when I knew there were many mistakes in my speech. I started to notice a difference in the way I was communicating and that of my American friend/roommate. In her efforts to speak Russian properly and with correct grammar, she would not talk unless she felt the phrases were totally correct in her head beforehand. In this instance, learner differences come into play. According to Krashen (as cited in Gass and Selinker, 2001) each learner is equipped with a monitor mechanism, or editor, which modifies output constructed by the acquired lingual system. There are those that over-use these monitors and are constantly checking their production and trying to avoid making grammatical mistakes in their speech. By contrast, there are under-users who don't give much regard to error as speed and fluency is of more importance. I think I fall into the latter categorization while my roommate would be labeled in the former. My goal was to become fluent in Russian, and I now realize that in order to accomplish this feat, I had to speak as much and as often as possible when the opportunities presented themselves. This outlook on language learning hinged on my own personal motivations but I feel it also continues to influence my attitudes about language learning in the belief that fluency in a second language can be achieved as an adult.

Luckily for me, these opportunities would happen everyday as I was immersed in Russian culture and language on a constant basis. I have to give my Russian friends credit for pushing me to speak and talking with me as they would their other native Russian-speaking friends.

According to Dalton and Tharp (2002), “development and learning proceed best when assistance is provided that permits a learner to perform at a level higher than would be possible alone” (p. 181). Many of the visitors to our apartment that year were young people who had lived in the regional orphanages. Their version of the Russian language was peppered with slang (almost a different language at times) so I learned much of my conversational speech from my interactions with them. Since most of them did not speak English, I was also forced to listen and speak to them only in Russian. Many of these orphans did not have many opportunities for someone to listen to their problems and I became a listening ear for many of them. Looking back, I can see my progression of language learning just in those informal conversations. I could understand little of what they were saying in the beginning, but then gradually came to more understanding of the main themes of their speech. From there I was able to verbally participate in the conversation and even offer advice.

My experiences in studying Russian formally came from my time at Vladimir State Pedagogical University. I was enrolled in conversation and grammar classes for an entire year, 10 hours a week. The foreign language faculty at VSPU, which trained students in learning how to teach English, French, and German, also included a small department for students learning Russian as a second language. The general methods implemented by my Russian teachers related to the Direct Method and the Audiolingual Method (Richards and Rodgers, 2001). For the first two weeks, one professor taught us the “basics” in English, such as conversational phrases and survival Russian. She was the only faculty member in that department who spoke English and warned us that after those first two weeks we would be taught primarily in Russian by her and other faculty members. Those first six months were a blur of classes and conversations and I feel as if I learned the most in that time.

My teachers were strict in regards to pronunciation and proper language usage. I had to learn what kind of speech was appropriate in the classroom and what was accepted at home and

with friends. The English language seems to be less distinct in regards to formal and informal speech when compared to other languages such as Russian. For me, this was a difficult point because I had to force myself to analyze my speech before the output stage, whereas I always wanted to speak quickly and directly to maintain fluency of speech. I also had to think about the cultural implications of my speech and interactions with people of different ages and statuses in Russian society. Language and culture are so intertwined as they speak to the social and historical factors that define a nation and its people. In an effort to learn Russian, I wanted to embrace these aspects.

In learning Russian as a second language, I feel that I am better able to empathize with those learning English as a second language in the United States. I know what it's like to be immersed in a culture and not understand the language and cannot communicate my basic needs. I know the feeling of sitting in a classroom and not understanding a single word the teacher is saying. Given my experiences in learning Russian as a young adult, I was able to quickly establish rapport with older ESL students by offering encouragement related to my language learning experiences.

### *EFL teaching in Moscow, Russia*

After a year of studying Russian as a second language, I was given an opportunity to teach EFL at a public "gymnasium school" in Moscow, Russia for two years. I was given classes to teach in conversational English and home-reading, with each class accompanied by a predetermined state curriculum that all English teachers had to adhere to. I found that the students in my classes and the other English teachers were well-versed in grammar explanations, dictation, and translation of texts but were unable to converse freely in English. Many of the practices I had encountered in my second language learning of Russian (Audiolingual Method, Direct Method) were reinforced in the EFL classes I observed my first few weeks in Moscow.

Although I had to teach from the textbooks and materials provided (which mainly consisted of prescribed dialogues, texts, and cultural explanations) I would also develop supplemental materials and activities which required students to interact with each other and me. Additionally, I tried to expand on materials that would require students to think critically about the texts they read or the topics we discussed.

My methods were not always met with positive feedback from fellow teachers, but I felt that in developing alternative practices I would motivate my students to learn English and feel comfortable expressing themselves in their L2. I also wanted my students to feel more comfortable talking to me in English outside of class and to understand that speaking English does not have to be confined to the classroom. This concept was something they were not accustomed to in their studies and were not as motivated to practice. However, in an effort to motivate students to practice their conversational English outside the classroom, I invited native-speakers of English to visit my classrooms and interact with students. For my students, this was something out of the ordinary and they were thus more motivated to learn conversational English in order to communicate with native speakers.

I also came to a better understanding of the EFL learning in this school's context by recognizing the limits to English usage in students' everyday lives and the social implications in speaking English in Russia (one teacher informed me that speaking English outside the classroom is viewed as trying to act "superior"). In reflecting on my teaching methods, I may have tried too hard in encouraging their conversational performance. My expectations may have been too high as I was trying to recreate my RSL learning experience in an EFL context. The students in this school had different motivations for learning English than I had in learning Russian. Therefore, I needed to renegotiate my teaching approaches to accommodate their language needs, while recognizing my own ideas related to language acquisition. I still believe that language should be taught in relevant contexts, and giving students meaningful contexts

related to their social and academic lives allowed for more overall successful language acquisition.

### *ESL teaching in Atlanta, GA*

Having taught English in a Russian school for two years, I also know what it's like to teach English as a foreign language and can therefore glean effective methods from that experience. Any instructional methods or approaches I use in my ESL teaching reflect some important aspects I consider to have been effective in my own second language learning combined with my foreign language teaching experiences. I can also contrast those methods with those that I observed as being ineffective. According to Tinker-Sachs (2003), offering instruction which is student centered rather than teacher-focused will also allow students to find their own voices and create interest in learning a second language. Presenting meaningful material to second language learners, where they can use what is learned in the classroom and apply it to their daily experiences, will result in a quicker acquisition of the second language.

In my current ESL classes for adult refugees, I put these theories into practice in making my classes relevant to students' immediate needs of community and workplace adaptation. By taking a communicative approach to teaching a language, I encourage my learners to interact with one another in a meaningful way that will help them meet their learning goals.

Additionally, ongoing personal reflection of my instructional goals and objectives, interactive classroom practices, and evaluation methods will enable me to critically evaluate my teaching practices (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Some aspects are focused on in my language teaching and learning more than others, and from my experiences I attempt to utilize the most effective and appropriate pedagogical methods. In doing so, I will be able to transfer and adapt my methods to other language teaching contexts in the future.

*Intensive English Program- Classroom Observations*

During my practicum course this semester, I was able to observe a classroom within the Intensive English Program at Georgia State University. This experience gave me the opportunity to observe ESL being taught in a college-level, academic setting. As I had previously never taught in such a setting, I gained a different perspective of teaching ESOL in this type of context. My Cooperating Teacher (CT) allowed me to observe his class on for an entire semester and perform a micro-teaching lesson towards the end of the semester. We maintained a positive relationship by communicating ideas and reflections of classroom practices and experiences to each other on a regular basis. Developing rapport with co-workers not only promotes a positive atmosphere, but allows for collaboration in developing appropriate teaching methods for classroom use. My conversations with my CT were very insightful and he provided additional rationale about his classroom practices which were sometimes not observable to me during class.

This particular class, on the highest level in the IEP program, involved the teaching of listening and reading skills through the content area of sociology. The CT taught reading and listening skills within the context of units in an undergraduate sociology textbook. Throughout the semester, he was able to balance the teaching of academic skills with content area knowledge. He utilized the technological medium of Microsoft Power Point to organize his lessons and students seemed to adapt to this technique as it became a routine feature in the classroom. They came to expect the format of lessons to include Power Point, so when conducting my micro-teaching activity, I conformed to this practice as well. My rationale in doing this was that I did not want to introduce unfamiliar methods to students and confuse them. In reflecting on my EFL teaching in Russia compared with this ESL micro-teaching, I realize that this type of approach would have probably been more effective in helping meet students' expectations. As Allwright & Bailey (1991) point out, teachers must recognize students' expectations and levels of receptivity in the classroom. They also observe that understanding

students' focus of attention in the classroom would help teachers know what their students are actually thinking about during a lesson and their receptivity to the lesson topics and tasks.

Therefore, in an effort to keep the lesson's focus on the topic, I used the Power Point format that my CT had provided.

### *Conclusion*

In reflecting on my language learning and teaching, I have begun to recognize the relationships between student learning and how it affects teaching practices. My diverse experiences in learning languages in the second and foreign language contexts shed light onto my various motivations for learning. In addition, the teaching of English as a foreign and second language gave me a better understanding of the choices I must make in adopting appropriate teaching methods that are relevant to my students' motivations and learning needs. By viewing my teaching through the lens of my language learning experiences, I have been able to critically evaluate the methods I use and how they affect my students' learning. It is my hope that through the ongoing reflection and testing of my teaching philosophy and methodology in the various teaching contexts I find myself, I will be able to recognize the learning motivations and needs of my students and teach accordingly.

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Do you consider yourself a reflective teacher? Learning and understanding how you can use self-reflection and evaluation in education to move your career and personal life forward to achieve your goals. Self-reflection and evaluation are an important part of my daily routine. Trust me, it works. As a reflective teacher, you know that "reflect" means to "contemplate; to think seriously." However, reflection goes far beyond this meaning in an educational setting. It's a critical self-regulation factor that motivates teachers to monitor their performance and evaluates their progress against specific criteria. Through the self-evaluation stage that follows, they can recognize their strengths and identify weaknesses, which, in turn, allows them to formulate strategies for challenging situations. Teaching this course was my first time teaching adult learners, and working with a native teacher. This experience transformed my perspective on teaching English as a Second Language, as working directly with a native speaker proved to be a wonderful experience. During teaching this course, I was able to really hone and develop my lesson planning skills. I now approach this task with greater vision and ability to think about my lessons contextually, and to shape them in a manner that will be of the greatest benefit to my students. You're lucky! Use promo "samples20" and get a custom paper on "Teaching Experience Reflection" with 20% discount! Order Now. The most effective language learners spend time and energy outside of classes and lessons trying to understand the language's clues, patterns, structure, and organization. Pay attention to the pronunciation of sounds and look into grammar rules and exceptions. What do you notice? This includes an active approach in tailoring your personal preferences and needs in all learning situations, so you don't waste time on what is ineffective for you. Tap into the ways that you learn best. In my five years of experience as a tutor and 12 years as a Spanish language learner, I have seen that one's attitude, including patience with the process, can be more important than your initial skill level and intelligence. Whatever you do, don't rush the process.