

Sabbatical report 2010

Language teaching: comparing pedagogies

I would like to briefly share with you the highlights of my sabbatical. Everything unexpected and more happened during this journey that had carefully been planned. I learned many lessons from this experience. It started out with the volcano erupting in Iceland which delayed my departure for two weeks. This had unfortunate repercussions on the timeline and appointments I had made for my project at various universities and schools in France and in Spain.

A week after my arrival, as I had rescheduled my visits and classroom observations, my father became severely ill.

Needless to say my sabbatical leave was a roller coaster full of mixed experiences and emotions on a personal and professional level.

It was positive and negative, frustrating and exciting, disappointing and inspiring. In spite of all these challenges and complications, I was able to fulfill the goals I had proposed.

My goals for this sabbatical were threefold.

First, I wanted to increase my awareness of the pedagogies used to teach both French (my native language) and Spanish (which I teach here at L.C.C) in various educational settings in France and Spain. The objective was to learn new techniques and pedagogical approaches by observing classes for adult learners in various universities in France and Spain.

Secondly, I had a strong desire to be immersed in the French and Spanish culture to become more aware of their dynamic nature and improve my cultural competency to enhance my language teaching.

Thirdly, I wanted to create a library of photos and videos that could become learning modules to teach French and Spanish.

As many of you already know teaching is truly an art. Having taught languages for the past thirty plus years has convinced me that it is not so much the body of materials and the skills that are taught that are essential but rather the process in which we guide students to learn through discovery and exploration to become more aware and responsible critical thinkers. Language is a socially engaging activity and it takes a lot of commitment, desire, expectancy and trust from the learner to engage and cooperate to be able to meet outcomes and achieve success.

For the teacher, it takes creating the right environment and the opportunities, the types of contexts to engage the students both as autonomous learners and as members of a learning community.

I found out through the many classroom observations and through informal interviews of students that it is not how much they have learned and how well prepared they were for an exam but how they are engaged as learners that makes a difference which in turn has a positive impact in their academic, personal and professional lives .

My first destination was “Le Centre de Linguistique Appliquée”, which is part of the Université de Besançon where students can choose between 10 languages and teachers from all over the world come to attend training sessions and also receive mentoring as new faculty, I was struck by the differences between the beginning and intermediate French classes using the popular communicative task-based method and the approach used in the English as a foreign language classroom I observed for a week. Even though the size of the groups was ideal for learning (8 to 15 students), the French classes were taught in a more teacher centered approach which decreased the opportunities for students to participate and to actively engage in their learning. Some lacked confidence and seemed very challenged even though they were motivated. I learned that most of the materials were designed by the teachers themselves and that the students also had the opportunity to practice in the computer lab once a week with additional exercises designed to focus on specific skills. The 12-16 hrs of language classes a week were divided amongst different teachers and by skill areas. Even though the classes were taught in the target language, some students expressed anxiety and lack of confidence when having to interact in the real world where they had to use French daily. The exposure to French culture was somewhat fragmented and presented in discreet units rather than integrated in the curriculum.

It was easy to identify the students who were very driven and only interested in improving oral and written proficiency to be admitted in the French university system. Others were new immigrants who enjoyed the classes but wished for more human interaction in the classroom and verbalized it during an evaluation with the program coordinator. There were many mixed feelings about the student satisfaction with their language learning experience. Personally, I have to admit some of the classes I observed were very monotonous and did not challenge students to actively engage in their learning but simply gave them busy work. Some students had a lot of problems with pronunciation , intonation and rythm and were either directly corrected or ignored. I found this approach very linear and

fragmented and there were never any smooth transitions that led from one activity to another helping the students to create mental connections.

On the other hand, my observation of an English class designed for French working students, which was originally not part of my plan, became the highlight of my journey. Besides attending the class, I also learned more about the approach used by the professor through daily meetings and a lengthy interview with the director of Une Education pour Demain, an international organization based in Besancon dedicated to the dissemination of information and materials about the subordination of teaching to learning through seminars and workshops.

The class I observed 3hrs daily for a week taught me a lot about how to deal better with the challenges French speakers have with the English language and how an approach that subordinates teaching to learning offers the students unique opportunities to become aware of their own learning process through guided discovery and exploration. This was a small class of 8-10 and the seasoned teacher who also happened to be a professional story teller, interpreter and traditional healer integrated techniques to bring his students in touch with themselves and their own potential for learning. The class was so smoothly orchestrated and flowed in such a way that it allowed to use each context created through story telling to engage the students physically, emotionally and intellectually to come up with the answers, create hypotheses and test them as well as problem solve. Through the use of the Cuisenaire rods, the students were involved in creating/telling a story their teacher carefully led them into and they worked together and individually to develop and fine tune their listening and speaking skills and later their reading and writing skills. The focus kept shifting, integrating the use of the word charts and fidel (the phonic chart) for pronunciation and word recognition while consistently working on the rhythm and melody of the language. I had many opportunities to talk with each of the students as well as engage socially with them at the end of the course. No matter how challenged these adults were, they had come to welcome the challenge, learned criteria for correctness, and saw the benefits of autonomous learning and cooperation. Every one of them felt that this was by far the most enriching language learning experience they had had in their career or studies. They spoke of how this approach they had never experienced before allowed them to build confidence over the course of 8 weeks more than any of their other classes, how it challenged them to get out of their comfort zone and allowed them to build trust in themselves, the teacher and the process itself. They also talked about how this dynamic process had awakened them, made them feel capable and responsible for their learning and how that

applied in their professional and personal lives. It was inspiring to be there everyday at the end of this 8 week course. It was a confirmation that the energy we invest in the approach we use to teach Spanish here addresses many different learning styles. What we believe and practice here is an approach that humanizes teaching still allowing us to be creative.

My journey continued on to Lyon where I was unable to observe classes since the school year had already ended but I had 2 meaningful meetings with the French and Spanish faculty members who described the various language programs, spoke of their challenges with the bureaucracy and the rigidity of the university system and their attempts to change the way language classes are offered to diverse students groups. As far as methodology was concerned, instructors shared common materials they wrote themselves. The size of their classes varied from 10-20 students. One teacher is in charge of writing exercises for the computer lab but the students are only required to complete 2 modules per semester. The faculty addressed the importance of in class practice and homework outside of class where students had to relate to the real world. The facilities were very limited and even though there was access to the internet there was only one smart classroom to be shared for more than 800 students.

I found out throughout all my visits and observations that there was very little emphasis on technology but reference to it if students were interested to explore it.

My next visit and observations were at Paris III, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris. This is where I had gone to college to obtain my 2 language degrees and nothing had changed physically speaking since the 70s. Same chairs, tables, a tiny white board had replaced the tiny blackboard, difficult access to equipment, very limited technology. However I spent an interesting week with 15-20 students daily for 4 hrs observing 2 different levels using different approaches. One intermediate level class was taught through classic and modern French theater and this allowed the teacher to bring up many cultural elements imbedded in the plays, All the students were involved individually or as a small group through a combination of reading, speaking and acting. It was definitely teacher centered class but there was a wonderful spontaneous communication between students as well as with the teacher. This was a group of very motivated and respectful foreign students who had already spent 12-16 hours together for one or two semesters. The teacher had had classical and modern theater training and was also the coordinator of the French program. She was also teaching a class at the Master level for future teachers of French and the other class I observed gave me the opportunity to observe these graduate

students teach a more advanced group of students and be part of the critique they shared after class. It made it very clear that mentoring is such a critical part of our growth whether we are on the giving or receiving end. This aspect of French education is undergoing changes at the secondary level and will impact the university level as well as the professional world. Having these conversations with a group of French professors and future teacher was very enriching and made me value what I do here for my students and my colleagues.

Finally I will speak of my experience at the Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona in Spain where I spent 9 days, observing 3 different sets of classes. They ranged from an intensive 4 week program for American university students to a semester class for students preparing to enter the university to a bi-weekly 4hr class for a mixed group of foreign professionals and immigrants needing to improve their oral and written language skills. The students only had access to the computer lab once a week and hand wrote all their assignments. In the class with 15 Americans I was very surprised to see that their teacher would translate any time the students asked for vocabulary and that in the course of a 90 minute class the teacher would talk for almost 50 minutes only asking students for short answers. It seemed that except for one class the students spent more time listening, losing focus or interest or getting distracted talking to others for feedback. The groups were also very small (6 to 10 students). The communicative approach ignored many important aspects of the reality of the language that needed to be presented to the student such as the melody of the language, pronunciation, intonation and rhythm, the behavior of the language which is the order in which the words appear in various structures, the meanings that reside in the contexts or situations. There was more focus on discreet elements such as learning lists of words and repeating small conversations without any modeling. There was hardly any correction for provided unless the students all sat taking turns correcting an exercise with the teacher. There was no transition nor continuity from one activity to the next and only the motivated students were engaged by asking questions or clarifications.

In one class I saw the teacher deliberately ignore 3 Arab male students who were very challenged with the material while she provided translation into English for the other students who could understand it. It created a divided classroom and contributed to the frustration and negative attitude of the students left out as well as their lack of motivation to engage during exercises. The teachers were all enthusiastic and very personable but were sometimes unaware of how repetitive the exercises were to the students and

how the ones who did not volunteer were left out to fend for themselves. When interviewing the students informally, it was obvious that some of them were simply there to have a good time in Barcelona while others felt they needed more practice and exposure to function in Spanish social situations and understand better the Catalan and Spanish culture they were living in.

While my academic experience was frustrating and disappointing, I focused on photographing daily scenes, immersing myself in this vibrant bilingual and bicultural city, its diverse people and traditions. I also spent time discovering and exploring what is considered today to be one of the most cutting edge cities in Europe for 20th century avant-garde architecture. The capital of Catalunya is famous for its "Modernista" style, a Catalan Art Nouveau movement launched at the end of the 19th century and made famous by Antoni Gaudi. I hiked all over town with my camera and met many different people of all ages who shared their knowledge and love for their native or adopted city.

All in all, my sabbatical renewed my love for exploring language and culture through social interaction and my commitment and responsibility to better understand my students and to be more aware of their needs and challenges throughout their language learning process. In closing I would like to quote Shakti Gattegno, my mentor and now retired director of Educational Solutions, an organization dedicated to the subordination of teaching to learning. I was able to interview her on the phone and regretted not having being able to meet with her in person. Shakti concluded her plenary address to the Fourteenth annual Applied Linguistics winter conference with these words: "Since teaching is an activity human beings chose to conduct in relations to other human beings, it is but human to reflect on the the purpose of one's teaching and to remain open to understanding how one's teaching affects those at the receiving end.