

How My Learning and Teaching Paths Have Finally Crossed

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After 15 years my teaching career is still in the process of growth and development. With every year I become more and more convinced that it has been deeply influenced by my language learning experience on many deep levels. Inspired by my long journey as a language teacher and an even longer journey as a language learner, it is only recently that I have started to set aside some time to properly self-reflect on all the progress I have made in both areas as well as point out all the possible connections between them. I truly believe an outstanding language learner can make an outstanding language teacher. My experience as a learner of the three foreign languages was gained in diverse learning environments outside the classroom and in equally diverse classroom settings. That multilayered language-learning process has determined my teaching style and without fail also supports my teaching practices when it comes to identifying students' needs and curriculum planning. In this reflection paper, I will highlight the “DO’s” and “DON’Ts” of teaching by describing the benefits and drawbacks of my learning experience that are applicable in the context of teaching college-level ESL in Japan.

My multi-lingual and multi-layered journey as a native Russian speaker who began as a learner has started from English acquisition in an immersion elementary school in Soviet Russia, followed by Hebrew acquisition at Israeli high school and ended in college as a student of Japanese. In Russia, I was exposed to an extremely intense course of seven academic hours per week at a relatively early age of seven. Language of instruction was mixed: L1 of Russian at the first grade with gradual shift to L2 of English in the later stages. Pedagogy was featured by pronunciation drills that reminded me of audiolingualism. It was also heavily focused on a grammar and memorization style that is similar to the Japanese English grammar translation method. The classes were lacking in sufficient independence and creative oral production opportunities for the learners. High grades and the possibility of immigration could be seen as the only motivating factors for the students.

My Hebrew studies began when I was 15 years old, in a less receptive age than the English studies. The course was fairly intense with five hours of daily exposure with the L2 as a language of instruction. Pedagogy was written production with an emphasis on reading grammar. Oral production was the absolute responsibility of the students and was supposed to take place voluntarily outside the classroom. The motivational factors were the necessity of survival and high school final exams.

Finally, my Japanese acquisition occurred when I was 21 years old in college in non-Japanese speaking environment in the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Hours of exposure was composed of three ninety-minute classes a week. The language of instruction was a combination of L1 and L2, but was mainly L1. The teaching method could be referred to as situational language teaching with reading and writing acquired initially. The grammar points and vocabulary in focus were introduced in the form of a text reading followed by guided oral practice or a role-play, that partly reflected the points previously covered. Learner-initiated oral production rarely took place as the opportunities to meet the Japanese native speakers, and to practice listening and speaking skills were also limited. I suppose that the cultural aspects and fare usage of

realia during class sessions could be named as motivational factors. Instances of cultural aspects were student-led cultural events initiated by the teacher and planned by the students as an example of an outside classroom activity motivator; bringing Japanese pop culture along with traditional culture to the classroom by introducing traditional poetry along with modern Japanese pop music; introducing the students to daily life routines of Japanese such as chopsticks usage; etc.

Although the age of acquisition, hours of exposure, language of instruction and motivational factors varied, the teaching methods maintained one common point. In all the three cases reading and writing were taught first, grammar and pronunciation drills heavily featured in the curriculums. Lacking sufficient opportunities for independent oral production, the learners, myself included, comprised most of the language sessions. In the language classes I teach, I usually follow some simple rules which I have used in my own experience and these rules were offered to the attendants of my presentation. The first rule is that I encourage my students to guess the unknown words based on their prior knowledge of the language. In other words, my students are encouraged to activate their knowledge of language that they already have. In the case of Japanese students, they already have a significant knowledge of English which they acquired before entering college. The second rule is to encourage the students to use body language while communicating in a language that is completely new to them. Finally, the third rule is that I usually share with my students is to use the acquired language on every opportunity even if they don't feel confident enough with their abilities.

In the last part of my presentation I suggested some "DO's" and "DON'T's" of the teaching strategies in the second language classroom. As for the "DO's", I suggested to limit teachers' input and provide more room for students' output and to offer slots for critical thinking during each session. Another "DO" is to bring the cultural context into each language classroom to increase the students' motivation. In addition, I suggested combining instruction in L1 and L2 based on the students' level to avoid confusion and overwhelming them with new vocabulary. The final "DO" I referred to was including more creative activities as opposed to drilling.

As for the "DON'T's", I emphasized the danger of over drilling grammar and over implementing grammar practice in general. I encouraged my colleagues to raise the level of instruction gradually and try to avoid overwhelming them with amounts of new vocabulary and in that way over-challenging the students. Finally, I emphasized the importance to minimize memorization-based activities, such as recitations of whole texts, gap-filling etc .

I hope that the suggestions based on my experience as a learner can shed some light on the teaching paths of my colleagues and help their students to excel in English or any other foreign language studies as the insights I offered can be applied to any foreign language classroom context.