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L2: Learner Autobiographies, vol. 1

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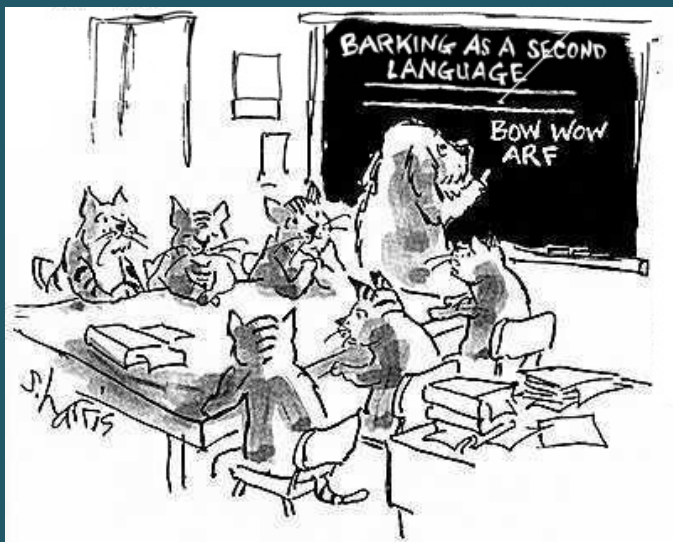
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L2 Learner Autobiographies



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Introductory Remarks

The papers collected in this volume contribute to the growing literature of the hitherto marginalized genre of the L2 (second language) learner autobiography. They were originally written for an assignment by participants in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) course at Connecticut College in the spring semester of 2014. The contributors responded to a prompt asking them to analyze their experience *with* and their beliefs *about* second language learning, the practices of and perceptions about foreign language teaching in their primary culture, and their personal idiosyncrasies as L2 learners. The essays reflect the biographical specifics surrounding the acquisition of another language by learners who come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. At the same time, most of them share privileged access to language learning resources, ones that usually include structured, classroom-based instruction. These statements also reflect the contributors' critical awareness of the role of L2 learning ideologies in the practices of mastering languages other than the ones they were first socialized in. *Connizdat* (a nod to Connecticut College and *samizdat*, the Russian for "self-publishing") makes them available in the hopes that they will productively contribute to our campus-wide dialogue on second language acquisition as an indispensable part of the intercultural competence that is needed to meet the challenges of global citizenship in the 21st century.

DESIRE TO LEARN

Jenna Gavrielle Adler

It took me most of my life to realize the significance of language. As a child, I was extremely precocious. I loved learning new words, and I was very proud of my talent when it came to spelling. My author grandmother was an inspiration in this respect, mostly through competitive games of Scrabble, which happened to be her favorite game. She never let me win as a kid, even though that's what many adults do when playing games with children in order to boost their confidence. If I was going to win at Scrabble, it was only going to be if I had the best words, and beat her fair and square.

Once my parents determined that I had a competent grasp of the English language, another language was presented to me. Growing up in the southwest, Spanish was the logical choice. I remember there being labels on various household items, particularly in my bedroom, and whenever we would take trips to Spanish speaking places like Mexico and Costa Rica, my use of Spanish was encouraged. However, Spanish was a language that I took for granted. So many people in my life were fluent or proficient that I never possessed true motivation to acquire it fully.

In lieu of my preconception that most of the people I knew spoke Spanish, when it came time to choose a language to take in middle school, given the choice between Spanish and French, I chose French. From middle school through high school, I went through a variety of instructors, all of whom had

different teaching styles, and while I succeeded academically, I struggled when it came to conversing confidently with native French speakers. Additionally, the French program at my high school was cut during my senior year, just when I really felt that I was getting somewhere in terms of proficiency. However, while I've had many frustrations with learning French, mostly with the inconsistency of teaching methods and lack of motivated classmates, I appreciate my background in it, as it has given me opportunities in travel.

Looking back again, another language that was thrust upon me was Hebrew. In the 3rd grade, my parents, who are of different faiths, decided that it would be in my best interest to attend Hebrew School. Once a week, from 3rd grade until 8th grade, I spent an evening at our synagogue, learning how to write Hebrew, and read from the Torah, as well as the symbols used for chanting and some conversational words and phrases. The best part of this experience was the bonding that occurred within my B'Nai Mitzvah class. We became a tightknit group, learning together and helping each other when one of us didn't understand what was going on. Our closeness and the ability to help my peers learn as well was what really pushed my desire to learn.

At the age of eleven, a new girl joined my public school class. In preparation for her arrival, we were taught the American Sign Language alphabet to ease our new Deaf student's transition to our school. She and I developed a friendship and she gave me my signed name, a rite of passage that only someone from the Deaf community can bestow. It was through this friendship that I realized the importance of communication. No matter what culture we come from, what

groups we identify ourselves with, we communicate with each other, whether through a verbalized language or a signed one. Language is something so fundamental, something so powerful to human existence. After high school, I chose to continue my education in American Sign Language (ASL), eventually reaching proficiency. I took classes during the summers at my local community college, and truly fell in love with ASL. There is huge importance placed on the ability to be expressive, and the movement of the hands and arms felt so fluid and beautiful to me. During one class, my instructor mentioned that my “accent” in American Sign Language reminded her of the character Bambi from the Disney movie, and she felt as though it would be appropriate for me to pop my foot up behind me as I spoke. This is a language that I am so excited about and eager to learn more of, and clearly, it shows through my hands.

My most recent language learning experience may come off as a little bit silly. Last year, I spent seven months on the southern coast of England. During those seven months, I did not hang out with any Americans. I joined an English cheerleading squad, and did my best to surround myself with English culture. Yes, English people speak the same language as Americans. However, there are cultural idiosyncrasies that presented themselves to me during my time there. Not only are there plenty of words and phrases that I would say that would throw them for a loop and cause eruptions of laughter (“restroom” and “have a blast” among others), but there were plenty of foreign words and phrases that I heard as well (“You alright?” as a greeting, “knackered” and “chat up”). Next year, I will be spending a year studying applied linguistics in England,

and one of the many things I hope to gain knowledge in is the differences and similarities between American English and British English. While they are technically the same language, they are still unique. Language is certainly a topic that I hold near to my heart.

WE NEVER KNOW THE WHOLE LANGUAGE

Dagna Bilski

Being exposed to two different languages from a very early age was a result of growing up in a country where English was the official language and living with parents who spoke Polish. I can't remember the times when I did not understand English, I only know them from stories told by my parents and grandparents. The story I hear most often, is about how I went to a park in New York when I was three years old and wanted to play with other children. I only knew Polish at the time, because that was the language we spoke at home. When I heard the children speaking English I thought they were simply speaking a made up language, so I decided to join them and make up my own words that were complete gibberish to others. The children responded by giving me a weird look and went on to doing their own thing thinking I was being silly. Once I was in kindergarten I remember not having any difficulties communicating with children or understanding the teachers. I remember learning the alphabet and how to spell basic words just like any other children in my group, whose first language was English.

When I moved to Poland at the age of 7, Polish became my language of instruction in school. Speaking Polish was never an issue for me, I didn't have any difficulties with getting my message across or understanding others. I did however have to learn the alphabet and how to read. I did quite well in first grade which might have had something to do with the fact

that I had some exposure to spelling and reading in the U.S. The problem was, the better I got at Polish, the more I lost my English. I was no longer surrounded by people who spoke it, there was no English on TV or the radio, except for some songs. My only contact with the language was limited to a few hours a week in class where it was taught as a second language, on top of that it was the British version of English. I found myself learning new words for basic objects such as “trousers” instead of “pants”, “chips” instead of “fries” etc. I think one of the reasons I didn’t forget how to speak English was because I watched a lot of cartoons, films and TV shows in English and took English classes outside of school. Through all the years I have studied English, I never learned the grammatical rules properly. If I was ever confused when taking a test I would whisper the sentence quickly and write down what I thought sounded right, I was never able to refer to the grammatical rules. Even though I was taught British English grammar rules for many years, I never fully learned them and used them as a basis for constructing sentences.

When I was in school I studied a few languages other than English. The first language that was completely new to me was German, which I took for 3 years. I remember close to nothing from the language apart from a few songs that I learned which contained a lot of key vocabulary in them. When I went to middle school I started studying Spanish. I really enjoyed it and I felt I was learning it quickly. At that time I discovered that learning foreign languages was something I was genuinely interested in and it didn’t seem too difficult for me, at least in the beginning stages. I found the process of learning a new language very exciting and rewarding. Over the

past 10 years I've tried learning at least 5 different languages, most of them by myself. Even though I haven't been very successful, I still learned bits and pieces of them, which I feel in some way enhance my linguistic awareness.

I think there is a key point in language learning that is once reached, it becomes easy to retain the language despite the lack of practice and exposure. Even though I studied Italian and Spanish for a few years and reached the intermediate level, I would be able to construct only a few basic sentences. If I were to go back to studying Italian or Spanish, I would probably have to start from a level lower than where I discontinued my learning. Since I reached the advanced level with Russian, I think my comprehension of the language is much more solidified. Even though I don't use Russian on a daily basis I don't have trouble understanding it and it's fairly easy for me to get my message across even though I make some mistakes. One of the things I noticed that is similar to my English learning experience is that I learned Russian grammar intuitively. Probably because of the similarities between Polish and Russian grammar. It's not that I didn't learn the patterns, I just couldn't really refer to specific grammar rules, I would say whatever sounded right, which meant I made mistakes quite often. At the same time I feel that my approach might have been more natural because I learned my mistakes through practice and learned the correct forms by listening to others speak.

The truth is, we never know the whole language, we always know a specific part of it, including our mother tongue. At this point in life I would consider myself trilingual since I'm fluent in both Polish and English and I know Russian well

enough to communicate. While I tend to say I “know” or “speak” those specific languages, I would consider my language repertoire to be truncated as described by linguist Jan Blommaert (2010: 103-106). Depending on the situation, it would be easier for me to use one language more than the other. For example, when talking about sports, my vocabulary is much richer in Polish compared to English or Russian, because that’s what I grew up with. If I were to write an academic essay, I would probably do a better job in English because of my experience with writing papers in college. Overall I really enjoy learning different languages, I think it becomes easier to learn a new language if you know, or at have least studied a few. It’s interesting to compare languages and find similarities and differences between them. I also think a lot of cultural understanding comes with learning languages. Certain aspects of a language are often very difficult to translate because of their cultural and social context, which is why learning the language helps break down that barrier.

LANGUAGE STUDY IS ALL ABOUT RELATIONSHIPS

Lyla Bloom

Both through conscious choice and mere circumstance, language learning has always been prevalent in my life. From the age of one and onward, my life has always involved multiple languages. I have grown up bilingual but have also found a passion for learning languages and have pursued a variety of them when at all possible. I have learned from my environment and in a classroom setting and I have had less than great language learning experiences as well as entirely inspiring ones. While I may not have experienced every possible language learning scenario, I certainly have experienced many.

To begin, I will start with my learning to speak for the first time. My family moved to Israel when I was a baby and when I reached speaking age, I was speaking both in Hebrew and in English. My parents are native English speakers and my Hebrew far surpassed theirs even when I was only five. While perhaps not a very nice habit, I constantly corrected their Hebrew grammar and used words that had not yet become a part of their vocabulary. In my defense, I was still in my egocentric phase and didn't know any better, but nonetheless, when not slightly annoyed at me for correcting them in front of others, they were pretty amazed by how easily I picked up a language that they were still struggling to gain mastery over. When my grandparents came to visit us from the United States, I knew that I was supposed to speak English with them

but I could quite easily flip and speak Hebrew to the friend standing next to me. I never had any trouble keeping each language in its proper context.

My family moved back to the United States when I was about to turn six and I was then enrolled in a private Jewish day school. At this school half of the day was taught in Hebrew and the other half in English. My parents were really hoping that I would maintain my Hebrew, and truthfully, were it not for attending this school for seven years, my Hebrew would probably have been lost, just as it vanished for my younger siblings. The biggest language struggle I encountered was actually learning to read and write. This I attribute to having been moved right at the age where schools typically introduce the written language to children and I missed this instruction in both of my native languages. The result, unfortunately is that even today, I'm an atrocious speller in both languages. My reading, comprehension, and speech are however, just fine in both.

A different struggle I encountered is a struggle that I believe is common to most people: learning grammar concepts for a language one already speaks. I hated my Hebrew classes at school. The teacher would explain how to conjugate and we had to fill out endless charts to help us practice conjugating the roots of words into present, past, future, infinitive, noun, feminine, masculine etc. forms. I intuitively knew how these words were supposed to be composed, and learning the actual rules was very confusing to me. In the same way, I probably would have a very difficult time explaining English grammar rules to a non-English speaker. When it is the language one

speaks, breaking it down into its linguistic components is incredibly difficult and often very taxing.

After I left the private school in favor of attending public school, I was told I had to choose whether I was going to study French or Spanish. I had barely any knowledge of either and my choice was pretty arbitrary but at any rate, from seventh grade through all of high school I studied Spanish. Freshman year of high school I studied French as well. I later decided to switch from French to Latin because of the teaching staff. So in public school I took one year of French, three years of Latin, and six years of Spanish. During the summer between my junior and senior year of high school I enrolled in an intensive beginners Mandarin Chinese course. As it turned out, I was the only one that enrolled so for six weeks I met with a teacher and studied Chinese. At present day, in my freshman year of college, I am studying Arabic at Connecticut College. In total, the number of languages I have studied by my own choice is five.

All of the languages in the above paragraph represent my formal, typical, classroom setting of language learning. I could probably write a paper on each of those language learning experiences individually, but I will try to discuss the most important elements of each. One important conclusion I have come to is that being a foreign language teacher is far more difficult than its given credit for. Considering all of the different instructors I've encountered, a very select few were actually really good at what they did. It's not enough to be passionate about a language to teach it, and unfortunately the lack of enthusiasm for learning other languages in the United States leads to a lack of viable candidates for teaching, which

means that being selective and choosing competent teachers is barely an option. The classes I've flourished most in are the ones where the teacher expected more of me than I even thought I was capable. There were too many language classes where I got into lazy habits because the teachers expected so little of me and my peers. I have found that when I developed a personal relationship with an instructor and knew that they expected me to perform well, I worked harder and succeeded more often. I also found that I did better in classes where I was encouraged to speak relatively often. I'm shy when it comes to vocalizing in a language I do not feel I can adequately express myself in, and my language skills hit a wall if I don't have to use the oral component often.

Learning a language, for me, is so much more than just learning grammar rule after grammar rule. A language clearly represents the people and cultures that use it and learning about them is just as important. I want to be able to use languages to the point where I can translate not just a literal word for word translation, but to translate the subtle nuances that words leave out but are essential to the meaning when spoken by a native. However to get to that point of expertise, the occasionally tedious basic language drills must be done. Though, I honestly usually enjoy the drills more often than not, even if they are repetitive because the practice is extremely helpful. I like to feel like I really know what I'm doing and that's one way to find out if I understand the rules I've so far been taught. In addition when the vocabulary is used repeatedly even if it is no longer in the chapter being studied, I find that it continues to stick. I am an auditory learner and while I could attempt to learn a language on my own, it is

immeasurably helpful to me to have people to speak with in order to practice and internalize.

Language learning should not be mere repetition and mimicry, but hearing the accent and the words being spoken helps with the oral comprehension as well as appropriate pronunciation and instructors should not neglect that component. Writing and expressing oneself aloud can ultimately deliver the same message, but they are two different processes and require different mastery of the language in question. From my experience, it is easiest to understand by reading, then by listening. The next more difficult task is to be able to write. But the hardest of all is being able to actually speak. Speaking involves retrieval of vocabulary as well as recovery of grammar rules and irregularities, while also concentrating on pronunciation. Reading or listening seems to be easier because the retrieval then is in one's native language instead of in the newly acquired one.

Language study is all about relationships: student and teacher, language and culture and word and meaning, just to name a few. With proper structure, those that truly want to learn will be able to learn as much as they challenge themselves to know. I intend to follow my passion for language study and I can only hope that I find the support that I need to excel.

I NEVER STOPPED STUDYING

Sybil Bullock

I don't have a second language – I have two “first languages” (English and French) and one language “disease” (Arabic). I was born in Paris to a French mother and an American father, with whom I subsequently lived in Russia, Tunisia, Morocco, the United States, Egypt, and France. This lifestyle made me understand and relate to French, English, and Arabic in complex ways. It is somewhat similar to what Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (2000: 17) writes in *Language Crossings*: “If German resides within the marrow of my bones and English is a well-designed costume, French is the light outergarment that enhances my appearance and provides protection in inclement weather.”

Each language envelops and fills parts of me differently. French is the language of my mother, my mother's family, my grandmother's beautiful dusty apartment, family reunions in the countryside, summer camp, and my marker of deviance in the United States. English is the language of my father, my father's family, my aunt's beach house in Texas, trips to Six Flags with my cousins, my path of education and, consequently, most of my friendships. I grew up with this French-English tug-of-war, my parents constantly competing over my language development by signing me up for French theatre classes, then the English-speaking Girl Scouts, then French-speaking catechism, then English-speaking soccer club...

While I enjoyed all of these activities, I was not as conscious of their linguistic mediums until much later. As a child growing up in expat communities, I came to understand that French and English were the languages of “us,” while Arabic was the language of “them.” I can remember dancing and singing along to Moroccan pop music with the housekeeper, Fatima, and her daughter – I must’ve been about four, and though I could not understand the Arabic words, I could say them and I associated them with joyful moments shared with my first friends. The “us v. them” separation does not paint a full picture. Not even close.

As a teenager in Cairo, I developed close friendships with many Egyptians who made Arabic form a strong additional layer of my identity. Arabic was visually present in my home, but it was largely because of the deep social interactions with Egyptian friends that I came to adopt Arabic – or, rather, it came to adopt me.

In a way, these early interactions with the Arabic language made me relate to it in much the same way that Nemiroff (2000: 15) describes her relationship with French: “It works for me in numerous contexts, but I do not dare get too attached to it, since I have been constructed as an ‘other’ both within and because of it.” Except, I am deeply attached to it. Arabic is the language of my youth and of the cultures in which I feel most at home. This is why I took a gap year after high school to return to Egypt and study Arabic in an intensive language program. My motivations were, unlike everyone else in the program, purely emotional and personal. I wanted to tap into the culture in which I felt I – to some extent – “belonged.”

As a result, I had many Arabic teachers before I ever entered an Arabic classroom. My friends, my parents' friends, housekeepers, taxi drivers, shop owners, and essentially most people in the community were my first teachers of Arabic. Yes, I acquired the bulk of my vocabulary and grammar lessons from the formal classroom setting. But the relationships I had developed with Arabic-speakers were important in making me love Arabic, and I believe this love helped me learn Arabic faster than any other student in the language program I was in.

During that entire year, I never stopped studying. I lapped up every word and grammar construction in class, and would immediately go out with Egyptian friends afterward and try to use everything I had just learned. While I think my exposure to French and English simultaneously at a young age may have helped me adopt alternative systems for linguistic organization, the way I learned Arabic was primarily by loving it and by loving the people who speak it.

*I WILL CONTINUE TO BE A LANGUAGE LEARNER
THROUGHOUT MY LIFE*

Kayla Cogle

My first language was middle class New England English with hints of a more regional Maine influence. My step father was from a long line of Kezar Falls Pease's, some of the most strongly accented English speakers I have ever met, and his slang and intonation became merged with my mother's more generic upper middle class Massachusetts accent in my head. Living away from Maine, many of my regionalisms have faded, but I still sometimes catch myself saying "ayuh" instead of yes or yup. Although they would be considered by many to be the same language, I think my true first exposure to a second language was when I realized (subconsciously of course, because a five year old doesn't really ruminate about class) that I felt comfortable speaking a certain way around my mother's family, but when we were with Scott's family the register switched. Mum was never comfortable or adeptly able to switch registers, but I learned instinctively. Since high school this is not really something I have had to do, and I am curious whether I can still convincingly switch my Englishes, or whether I have been so long in an upper middle class New England academic setting that I'd sound like a poseur.

My mother is a French teacher, and since Maine has a long and intertwining history with Quebec and France, it makes sense that my first exposure to second language acquisition was with French. I can remember my mother not

exactly giving me French lessons, but using French idioms with me and giving me commands in French from a very young age. I had many cassettes of French children's songs and stories, but as far as I can tell all of this gave me only the slightest advantage when I formally entered a French classroom in the third grade. Based on how much of language is socialization, I question that a child can grow up bilingual from hearing the language from only one parent, while at the same time being immersed and constantly exposed to a more dominant language. I studied French for nine years, from age seven to age eighteen. French in elementary school was extremely simple. By simple, I mean that in each of the three years I was in a French class in elementary school, the goal seemed to be to make us a proficient as possible by the standards of a Lonely Planet phrasebook. I cannot remember more than two or three grammar lessons. Classes mostly focused on games which taught set patterns of speech. These patterns were supplemented by units with themes such as weather, shopping, time and date, and clothing. We usually had coloring sheets or a bingo game to help memorize vocabulary, and then the vocabulary would be creatively used with the speech patterns we were taught in game playing and play acting. I thought of my elementary school French classes when I read Robert Lado and Charles Fries' *English Pattern Practices* (1958).

I do remember that although they were corrected gently, mistakes were not considered anything but mistakes. At least we were not treated as pigeons in Skinner's box. The teaching methods used were more along the lines of Vygotsky's methods. At home in the evenings I often watched

my mum designing projects and games for her students, and I would have felt there was something wrong if my French classes were nothing but memorization and grammar. I have also had the experience of studying French in the Czech Republic, and issues of language interference aside (what I wanted to say in French often came out in grammatically incorrect Czech, and the better at Czech I got, the more I would translate vocabulary from Czech to French instead of vice versa) I believe that I had a difficult time in the class because the teaching methods employed were completely different from those I was used to. In Prague, we mostly read dialogues out of the textbook, and filled in the blanks of blocks of text with appropriate vocabulary. We were rarely given the opportunity to be creative with our speech, and the only real opportunity for self-expression was in short written essays, which is different from conversing with peers.

My third language is Czech, and motivation and immersion were undoubtedly the key factors in my rapid acquisition of it. Two weeks before I left for the Czech Republic, my stepfather died of a very sudden heart attack, and so upon my arrival in Prague I felt very disconnected from my life in the U.S. and threw myself into my new life with a very stubborn will. I covered everything in my host families house with vocabulary post-it notes, studied every night, and, most importantly, attended a gymnasium where I was the only native English speaker and where nobody seemed inclined to treat me very differently from the Czech students. My situation was sink or swim. My experience learning Czech differed from my experience learning French in that I didn't have a teacher whose job it was to teach me Czech. All I had

was a language activity workbook that I would do a bit of each night. I don't think I would have managed very well with aspect and prefixes without the book, but the most important factor in my language acquisition was exposure and will power. For the first three months I was there, I spoke very little, and mostly listened and nodded. After three months, I went from listening to asking a lot of questions. I asked questions even when I knew the answer, just so that I could have a conversation and hear what the answer was in Czech. I'm glad that I had patient friends who realized what I was doing, because people who were not closer acquaintances of mine often looked at me as though my mental facilities were similar to the two year old I sounded like. Reflecting on how I learned Czech, I agree strongly with the input hypothesis, especially recalling how many times I would have to hear a word in context to finally be able to remember and use it myself. What the learner has accessible to them does not mean that all of that content will be input, and I think that it is highly up to the individual which content is retained and used. This was certainly the case for me, because for some reason I was able to speak in the slightly archaic Czech used in fairy tale films before I could give a grammatically accurate account of how my day had been.

I am now learning Russian and German. Because of the settings I have studied Russian in, my use of the academic register in Russian is better than it has ever been in Czech, where I have never had to use it. My German is conversationally competent, but when I am in Germany I almost never spend time with female company of my own age. Instead, I am surrounded by young German men in their

twenty-somethings, and have found that when I am in Germany the way I socialize could be typified as more male than female, because if I spoke more femininely I would not be a comfortable member of the group of friends my fiancé spends time with. I think that this experience of mine is strongly indicative of how social language is. I sincerely hope that I will continue to be a language learner throughout my life, and I would especially like to regain my proficiencies in French and Czech, which I have since lost through disuse.

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A LANGUAGE?

Brian Damacio

I grew up on the South West side of Chicago in Pilsen, a community known for its murals. These murals brought the community's walls to life. They reflected the lives and hardships of the working Latin@ community of Chicago. Both my parents came from Mexico. My dad is from a small town in Guerrero; he came to America when he was 13 years old with a third grade education. My mom is from a big city, Mexico D.F.; she came to America when she was 19 years old with a high school education. Both of my parents came from very different worlds, morals, and definitions of religion. When we lived in Pilsen, there was only my old brother (one year older), my sister (two years younger than me), my parents, and I. We lived in a small apartment complex. My native language is Spanish. I was never "formally" taught syntax, grammar, or *how to speak* Spanish. I grew up hearing Spanish music ever since I could remember; my mom cooked us traditional Mexican cuisine so and I was almost always around people who spoke and looked like me.

I attended a Spanish speaking pre-kindergarten class. It was not until I was in kindergarten that I was placed into English for non-Spanish speakers. There I was expected to communicate with my teachers and peers in English. I distinctly remember only being able to formulate words out of order to communicate with others. My parents at home could

not help me develop my skills because they only knew so much.

Role of Teacher. Early on, I learned that the role of the teacher was to guide the student. I naively thought a committee selected specific people to be educators. I held them responsible for my learning because at that time I did not know that I was able to produce knowledge. When I moved from Pilsen to North Lawndale, a predominately African American community, in fourth grade, I quickly realized that I was wrong. I learned that the world was far more diverse than I expected it to be and that the people I read about in books were in communities nearby. I also learned that my language was far more complex than I thought it was. Although, I was not specifically taught how to speak and formulate sentences until I was in high school, I was told that I sometimes spoke, “Spanglish.” What seemed to me normal, others found it a way of speaking *improperly*. Some of my teachers embraced learning and speaking language as a never ending process, while others expected a certain English to be spoken and written in class.

Standardized testing was horrible. The English composition part of the exam always made me feel as if the word that could replace the blank spot could have more than one answer depending on who was asking or stating the sentence. My teachers in Elementary schools expected my peers and I to just understand that without fully comprehending where we were coming from. Testing, to this day does not make sense but I feel that it is because I had have a hard time transitioning into the college setting because of my bilingualism.

Idiosyncrasies as a L2 Learner. My senior year of high school, I took a course in introductory Italian culture. It was in that class that I began to learn how I learned language. My teacher started the course by examining culture in Italy and how it relates to the formation of Italian language. Similar to the Spanish Language, I quickly discovered how English and Spanish mixed sounded Italian. Certain phrases just made sense in Italian than in English. This course also helped me understand how different language can be depending on your geographical location. In Italy, there are small towns South of Italy where literacy rates are high and so the spoken language sounds much different than in Northern Italy (e.g. *Il Postino*).

This class indirectly caused me to reflect a lot about the status of language and how language can be much more complex than it seems to be. It made me curious about what it means to know a language and made me value knowing Spanish a lot more. I did not think being bilingual was a special qualification because a lot of people around me were fluent in Spanish and English. It was until I began to see how language connects people together that I became appreciative of learning tongues outside my own.

LANGUAGE ACQUISITION IS AN UNENDING JOURNEY
FILLED WITH NUANCES

Olivia Dufour

As a young girl who was taught English and French simultaneously, I had always identified with my European roots more than my American early childhood. Undoubtedly, my heart deeply belonged to the customs, culture, and language that made me feel closer to my maternal ancestors. My life in America could not properly reflect the way in which I identified myself: both personally and linguistically. Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (2000: 14) states that her primary language is, "Woven into the configuration of my mind, it encompasses those verbal fragments and expressions that evoke my earliest and even most preverbal memories." I consider both French and English as my primary languages, and Russian as my secondary. The following paragraphs will explore the teaching methods that were employed in my primary culture and my idiosyncrasies during second language acquisition. The case-studies in Karen Ogulnick's *Language Crossings: Negotiating the Self in a Multicultural World (2000)* will bolster my observations and experiences as a multilingual individual with many cultural identities.

The teaching methods and techniques utilized by my French grammar professors aligned with B.F. Skinner's behaviorist theory and relied on the use of incentives and the promotion of anxiety. I distinctly remember *la maîtresse* walking around the circular table and rhythmically tapping her

ruler after each correct answer, and if you made a mistake the ruler would stop making noise. It was both highly intimidating and effective in inciting proper grammar and fear. It also prevented the fossilization of childhood errors, as the instructor served as reinforcement. With that being said, it did not allow for young children to learn the intricacies of *le subjonctif* or *le plus-que-parfait*. Repetition and substitution drills are the primary methods used in French schools to obtain linguistic and grammatical mastery.

My introduction to Russian culture actually began when I was a toddler, my room was filled with *Мампёшка* dolls and children's books about Russia. My paternal grandmother had been born in Minsk, Ukraine and had moved to St. Petersburg as a teenager. Therefore, I grew up with Russian cooking and a desire to complete a missing piece in my understanding of Russian culture. Once I became a freshman in college and enrolled in the Russian language program, I was immediately in awe of the inflection, intonation, and overall sound that was produced by native speakers. I was determined to mimic that exact sound in order to eventually sound like a native. Early on in the semester I began noticing key patterns in the grammar cases and adopting colloquial phrases, which would help me to approach my second language acquisition holistically. My Russian professors' exposed our class to Russian culture in a way that encouraged consistent participation and allowed for the correction of errors, but in an inviting way. An emphasis was placed on conversational language and being able to interact with the language in practical ways that enhance our motivation to learn the more complex structures. Fortunately, there are grammatical

similarities between Russian and French, such as the way an individual forms negation, imperatives, and proper and improper personal pronouns. Sometimes I attempt to structure my sentences in Russian in the same way that I would in French, which expands the sentence's length and use of articles. I continue to struggle with producing grammatically correct sentences while in the presence of an instructor, possibly out of nervousness or the stage of my acquisition. I am almost strictly a visual learner, and generally require the use of grammar lessons either on the blackboard or via PowerPoint. This disproves that an LAD (Language Acquisition Devise) is present or that I am biologically programmed to automatically know how to formulate complex sentences in a foreign tongue. Practice, repetition, and memorization are necessary in order to internalize the language. I now have a heightened awareness when I hear native Russian speakers, and have approached a few of them in order to enhance my conversational skills. Greta Hofmann Nemiroff (2000: 15) later identifies that, "the passage from heart to tongue is arduous, burdened by the ambiguities of love and history as well as mistakes in grammar and inflection." It is critical that language acquisition is understand as an unending journey filled with nuances, because if it is not then the learning that is being done is not being truly appreciated.

I believe that both B.F. Skinner (1954) and Noam Chomsky's (1959) theories of behaviorism and innatism have their respective strengths in explaining second language acquisition. It is plausible that language learning can be viewed as a mechanical process and partially a congenital phenomenon. There is a reason why I have become extremely

comfortable in both my French and Russian identities, and I believe that both of these hypotheses play essential roles in my development.

LATIN FELT MORE LIKE A MATH EQUATION

Nick Fischetti

I have been learning French as a second language since I was in kindergarten. I am now proficient enough to say I speak French, although I am not fluent. I have been exposed to a wide variety of teaching styles over the years, some of which were effective and some were very much the opposite.

I went to a private catholic elementary and middle school that required taking a French class. Kindergarten through fourth grade had French once per week. The first couple of years we learned the alphabet and the numbers as well as a few songs. The teacher was pleasant and in general everyone looked forward to the class. I still remember all the words to “Frère Jacques” and other songs that we sang every time we had French.

I do not think that the teaching method was ideal for encouraging young students to learn a second language. For the first couple of years the focus was mainly on singing and doing simple grammar worksheets. By fifth grade we had French twice a week, but besides for a handful of new verbs we were recycling the same information from previous years. We did not engage in conversations with other students or the teacher. New vocabulary items were taught in discrete units, starting with things such as colors and progressing to household items or types of food. We could not link the units together however because we did not learn enough verbs and grammatical structures and so instead we would memorize the

vocabulary lists for the quizzes and promptly forget them. The classes were held primarily in English with very few opportunities for the students to practice and apply the French they learned.

This method of instruction continued throughout middle school. The teacher was universally disliked for several reasons. She spoke French and English with an almost unintelligible Russian accent, she misplaced quizzes and homework assignments, and she was very strict in class (it did not help that the classroom was in a musty basement). The majority of each class was spent correcting each individual error students made on the homework assignment or quiz. Sometimes we would watch videos or listen to recorded conversations, but at the end of every single sentence the teacher would stop the recording to ask for a translation. These interruptions took the fun out of the videos and made them seem like interminable grammar exercises. No one at the entire school enjoyed French class (myself included) and the majority of students chose to take a different language in high school.

By the end of my seventh grade year I did not feel like I had progressed very far in learning French. Even though the class only met three times a week the grades counted the same as the other classes and French held down my grade point average. To be honest I hated French class and I even went so far as to say I hated the entire language because of my experience in the class. I started at the Groton School in eighth grade and I was forced to choose a language course to satisfy the requirement. I decided that even though I had an awful experience in French I would continue taking it rather than

start learning a new one in the hopes that I would have an advantage because of the little French I had learned.

After taking a placement exam I was put in French 1. It was embarrassing to think that I had been taking French since kindergarten and was still placed at an introductory level. I could not even participate in the most basic of conversations. When I walked into the first French class at Groton I was shocked to discover that the teacher spoke almost exclusively in French even though many people there did not yet know a word. He briefly explained in English that immersion from day one is critical to rapid and thorough second language acquisition and from then on spoke only in French save for the occasional translation of key words. The students were forced to begin picking up on what the teacher was saying right away. At first it made me very anxious to try to speak entirely in French, but I soon realized that I would not improve without making mistakes. The teacher preferred for us to participate confidently despite errors rather than to mumble quietly or remain silent. After the first day we could already introduce one another with basic conversational phrases, and by the end of the first trimester we had already caught up to where I had left off after years of French in middle school by learning the past and future tenses.

French went from being a miserable chore of remembering pronunciation and spelling to being my favorite class. No longer did I memorize words and phrases just to forget them after the quiz, but I memorized them in order to use them to express myself in class, therefore truly learning them. The class was very interactive, whether it was having practice conversations with classmates or playing games. The

teacher not only corrected grammatical mistakes but explained them. Over the rest of my time at Groton I had fantastic teachers that were all native speakers of the language. After French 3, the focus was less on grammar and more on creative aspects. We were expected not only to participate but to give presentations and lead discussions on French books and movies. We learned the language through learning the culture.

The summer after my sophomore year in high school I went on a service trip to Peru and got to stay with a host family for three weeks. In those three weeks I learned more Spanish than I could have in a semester of school. My knowledge of French helped tremendously, far more than what little I retained from two years of Latin I took in eighth and ninth grade. I did not particularly enjoy Latin because it felt more like a math equation than a language because you could not speak it to anyone. By the end of my time in Peru I could make myself understood in Spanish, although now I forget most of it.

In my senior year I took Italian for a few weeks at a program at the community center in the town next over to me. The teaching style was very different and I found it less engaging. Instead of sitting in a circle as we did in my French classes in high school, we sat in rows and took turns answering repetitive workbook grammar exercises. There was no creative conversational aspect that I found crucial to learning a second language. I learned more Italian by listening to Italian radio stations. Because I did not have any friends who spoke Italian I did not get to use it much.

Here at Conn I have had fantastic French professors that have challenged me to become better at literary analysis, oration, and listening comprehension. The classes are more focused on academic content and I find that it helps tremendously in keeping the classes interesting and helpful.

*CHILDHOOD SOCIALIZATION, TUTELAGE
AND THE VALUE OF EXPLORATION*

Nadiya Hafizova

The appeal of learning another language at the onset of high school was augmented with the recognition that I would be at an advantage because of my heritage speaker status. As was noted to me by multiple of teachers of various subjects, my brain was already conditioned to recognize with ease the transition in coding between languages. It was the differences and similarities in the path to learn French and secure my Russian that made me recognize the value in an early childhood foundation paired with consistent socialization.

I spent the first two years of my life crawling between *babushkas*, clinging to *dedyshkas* and uncles and listening to their incessant interactions with my parents. I transitioned from my perpetual state of wonderment to voice my presence towards the end of my first year. One day I finally responded to my older brother's pokes amidst his joyous songs with a resounding «*Нет!*» Thereafter, I found myself brandishing this word with ease. I quickly learned how to refuse extra servings, and extraneous naps and my Russian vocabulary grew. My social setting however changed at age two and a half when I began spending most of the waking day at a British nursery. Now, the development of my Russian had to compete with the increasing comprehension I had of the English world. The process of verbally differentiating between Russian and English

was a slow one, and when I had gained the aural understanding of the separate cultures I do not know. Eventually, with practice I learned which whiskered grownup to welcome with «Привет!» and which to chime at with a “Hi!” I attribute much of this to the socialization aspect of my language.

For example, there were two main groups of people I could play with during my early years in England. First were my outside peers – those who extended their “a’s” and giggled when I greeted my mother. Then there was the much better linguistically established brother and cousin, with their older minds and experiences (a younger cousin trailed mutely behind.) We were expected to speak Russian among each other, so as not to disconnect ourselves from the extended family. By age five, my mother was taking us to a Russian elementary school teacher to supplement my education. I learned to recite poems by the likes of Agniya Barto and sing along to traditional seasonal songs such as «Ёлочка». My grandmother would extend the lessons to диктанты, chiding me when my first word surfaced and embracing me when I earned a gleaming 4 or 5. My mother would quiz me on the walk to school the gender of nouns. This style of education continued when I reached the USA, throughout middle school. At one “school” I learned out of a textbook, and I learned to fix my mistaken verb declensions and conjugations. At the middle school weekend school, I participated in a grammar class and a history class with a hodgepodge of levels represented. We too used grammar books and exercises to direct the class, but unlike French, which I would formally take in high school, it felt

like a review, or a contextualization of the sounds I would hear at home.

Living in England made being peppered with French phrases inevitable, though I remember only knowing ballet terms come middle school. I took French in 8th grade after two years of Latin (the similarity in language structure was not yet evident to me; I had a poor understanding of what a падеж actually was.) In addition to crepe Fridays we had many themed projects where we employed the learned “functional” phrases and were quizzed on grammar and vocabulary. In 9th grade the language lab was introduced to me and I began to listen to different types of French voices. In this introduction class, we watched short skits on tape that accompanied our textbooks. It varied in the phrases it employed- there would be mastered phrases, phrases to be secured and a scattering or a taste of phrases to come. The next year, I was placed in the accelerated class, where we plunged into analysis of original French texts from Baudelaire to Molière and Descartes. This cultural survey was paired with an increasing exposure to grammatical complexity, and the classes were lead exclusively in French. We began reading novels such as *L’Étranger* and preparing for the AP exam. I also was fortunate to spend a month of summer in Paris, taking language classes in the morning and communicating at an elderly day care in the afternoons. This increased the fluidity of speech tremendously, as it was between the summer of accelerated French and the third level. I was beginning to bring the lessons and mindset together. It was this ability to explore in the language candidly, as opposed to a graded setting that made the difference. Unfortunately, my confidence in my abilities has declined with

disuse, and certain verbal and intonation mistakes I fear are ingrained. I believe however that there is a residual framework that could be filled in with more time with the language.

I believe that a major part of my linguistic abilities comes from the desire to speak. I dislike this element of myself, but it is only when I deem it necessary to voice my presence does the language in question click. I otherwise will not put the effort in stringing the grammar together at a steady pace perhaps because I take my years as a heritage speaker for granted. When I went back to Russia this break, it was only after what seemed like a half an hour warm-up where I um'd and ah'd did I feel a part of the conversation. I love listening however; naturally I am free of the expectation to perform. Here at Connecticut College, I felt the need to review my formal Russian grammar terminology after a four-year hiatus from the written word because of boarding school. The Poetry and Power class (Fall 2013) felt like a natural place to be, as only now, after a few years of French literature can I enjoy the analysis of my native tongue. As a displaced speaker, a lot of work needs to be done on my part supplement my years of exposure to excel to a high working proficiency for example. Though I have a large advantage compared to my peers, it is my desire to continue hearing the language and the culture discussed that keeps me engaged, especially as I feel as though I contribute in a unique way because of the methods employed to fossilize the language within me.

ME AND MY LANGUAGE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Tomoro Hamano

Being a Japanese-American, I was exposed to different languages and cultures from the very start. I was born here in America – Brooklyn, New York to be exact – and so I was raised under the English education system. However, my parents both emigrated here from Japan after graduating college. Therefore, I was also exposed to some Japanese culture and lifestyle growing up.

Although I do not remember which language came first, I learned both English and Japanese simultaneously – English, through school and daily interactions; Japanese, through listening to my parents and relatives speak and watching Japanese cartoons. Being exposed to these two languages during my childhood, I was (and still am) able to think naturally in both. When speaking English, I would think in English, and when speaking in Japanese, I would automatically switch my thinking into Japanese without any act of translating.

Part of the reason how I came to learn Japanese, other than my parents' speech, was the fact that we would hold weekly study sessions. These study sessions were nothing serious – there was no homework or exams. It was just a group of some of my Japanese friends (who were also born here in America) and their mothers who would gather once a week to learn Japanese - the mothers being the teachers. During these sessions, we would speak mostly in Japanese (although there

were some occasional English utterances), and we would primarily learn how to read, write, and speak Japanese. This was a very crucial part of my Japanese learning experience in that, had our mothers not exposed the language to us at this young age in a controlled class-like setting where the aim is specifically to learn the Japanese language, I do not think I (or any of my other friends for that matter) would have the competence in Japanese that we have today. Of course, at the time, we were young and thought nothing of these sessions. They were actually rather annoying in that it felt like an afterschool class to us. However, looking back, I am grateful that our mothers organized these sessions, because without it, I would probably not be able to converse or think in the language. This ability to think in Japanese would go on to help me acquire my fifth language, Korean.

Before I go on about Korean language acquisition, I should mention my third language, which I have studied for 5 years: French. I started learning French in middle school and continued on until my second year of high school. For these five years, I found myself rapidly absorbing the language, slightly more readily than other students in my classes. It may have been an issue of motivation, especially in middle school, when mostly everybody is rebellious and not interested in schoolwork. I, on the other hand, was captivated by the wonders of communicating in a completely new language, which made me more determined to learn than some of the other students.

Apart from the motivation, I think it also had something to do with the fact that I was raised learning two languages. I believe that being bilingual from childhood proves

to be advantageous when learning a third language. The brain is more 'equipped' and readily able to absorb another language than a person who only knew one language growing up in that one is already accustomed to switching their thinking into another language system. Therefore, consequently, one also finds an easier time switching into a foreign language mindset.

I was also able to relate French to English in that many of the words had somewhat of a resemblance with English words, and some of the grammar patterns were similar to that of English. I found the same thing when learning my fourth language, Mandarin. I was able relate some of the grammar patterns to English grammar. At the same time though, the words and characters resembled those in the Japanese language. Therefore, I believe I had a slight advantage over some of the other students who were seeing this writing system for the first time. In this way, I was able to elicit both my knowledge in English and Japanese to acquire Chinese.

When I started self-studying Korean, I was initially learning through English. However, I found that it made more sense to think in Japanese. Therefore, I found myself translating the English translation of Korean into Japanese and then comparing the inflections in these two languages in order to understand the grammar patterns of Korean. This proved to be a good exercise for my translation skills. For a while, I studied Korean in this manner, until I went to study abroad in South Korea. I acquired most of my Korean competence while abroad. Being surrounded by the language on a daily basis helped this process greatly. I was able to absorb so much that I am capable now, to some extent, to switch my thinking into

Korean, where some words come out naturally without thinking first in Japanese or in English.

In this way, I was exposed to many different languages as I reached adulthood. However, unfortunately, I have forgotten some languages, namely French and Mandarin, since I have not been using them on a regular basis. I strongly believe that in order for a language to stick to one's mind, one must use the language almost on a daily basis. I *have* been, however, making sure to keep up with my Japanese and Korean. I am currently taking an advanced Japanese course, which has been helping me maintain, as well as improve, my Japanese skills. I have also been maintaining my Korean skills through messaging my Korean friends on a daily basis. I hope to somehow use this knowledge and incorporate my language abilities into my future career.

I think throughout my years in college, I have realized my passion for learning languages. I enjoy being able to speak to other people from foreign nations in their mother tongue in that not only can you communicate with them, but you also learn about their *culture*. Culture is inherent in language, and I strongly believe that one can study *everything* about a culture, but one will never truly *know* or *experience* a culture unless one learns the language.

A SPACE THAT IS GOOD FOR LEARNING

Kamal Kariem

The first time that I heard the Spanish language was in 2nd Grade. I had recently transferred into a Catholic grammar school on the South Side of Chicago, and we were instructed that we would have to learn Spanish and that the woman that stood before us was going to be our teacher. She introduced herself in Spanish, and then proceeded to speak in a fragmented English that I could barely understand (The two languages that she spoke—her primary language (Spanish) and her interlanguage (an English)—I did not understand). But I had to learn from her. I had to get good grades. And I had no choice. This teacher and others like her (we had a total of three Spanish teachers while I was in grammar school) only came to teach us for 30 minutes twice a week. As thus, Spanish wasn't a class. It was a forced activity like exercise in a P.E. class. We were expected to listen, to repeat, and to comprehend when our teachers started to speak at blinding rates in a language that they had never taught us. But each student in the class learned specific tricks to pass or to seem to excel: some slept, some had their eyes glued to the back of the book, and some (like me) would pick out one word then think of all the English phrases that involved that word. I recognize *cabeza*, *agua*, and *pequeño*. But they aren't in a separate Spanish language library in my brain. They are borrowed words that made their way into English; they are only synonyms to

their English equivalences always with the implied command to tune out every other word.

I don't consider myself even remotely a Spanish speaker and I believe that my lack of learning was based on my instructors and the environment that we were required to "learn" in. First, our teachers had no idea why we were struggling in Spanish, so they tended to dismiss our struggles as a lack of effort to learn the language. Second, whenever any student answered correctly or did what they asked, they assumed that that student understood the language. So any subsequent time that they made mistakes, the teachers thought it was because the student had given into peer-pressure to not succeed. Lastly, since we only learned twice a week for 30 minutes against our will, no one had any impulse to do more than they needed, especially because the teachers didn't want to fail us (possibly worrying about their job security, if they had a high percentage of fails).

From this experience, I made sure to avoid Spanish when I finally was able to choose the language that I wanted to study in high school. I decided to try French, and I believe having a choice does matter in language learning and eventually acquisition. To my relief, the teachers that I had could comprehend why we struggled at points in time and could explain in English how we should think about the concept when it was very difficult, which was essential for learning. I never really thought about this fact until now, but since my high school French teachers were not teaching their primary language, I believe that they were better able to understand our needs as learners. Classes were held almost every day of the week, and classes were about more than

simply repetition. My teachers encouraged everyone to speak and the small class sizes ensured that everyone did just that. We were encouraged to make mistakes and were promptly corrected after we completed our attempt at speaking. It was a different experience entirely than my Spanish “exercises”, especially because the teachers altered their speech rate for us, at least at first. This helped us to acclimate to the language a lot better than my Spanish “exercises” did. Moreover, they slowly increased their speed as time went on, which allowed us to see progress in our comprehension over time, and not leave us at the same confused and frustrated level as my previous experience, which to an extent is what all of my language learning experiences have been compared to. However, as I advanced in study, I slowly saw students entering the classes that shouldn’t have been in them, at least at the level that they entered at. These student implants (they were invaders at first) changed the dynamics of the classes since the teachers had to slow down for students that they didn’t want to fail.

Thus, my French classes lost something that separated them from my Spanish “exercises”: a challenge. As opposed to pushing us to rise slightly above our current level, they began to simplify to help students that were struggling more than others, which isn’t a bad thing. But classes became a block of time to me where I had to sit and listen to students far behind where I perceived that they should be for the class that we were in and the classes quickly became divided. There were those of us that didn’t have to speak as much because the teacher assumed we knew and those that the teacher tried to make speak more. Class became boring.

When accepted to college, I knew another change was in order. French no longer stimulated me as it once did. But what would come next? For me, I thought the answer was clearly Japanese. I loved the culture and the language for the most part sounded like one that I should speak and know. However, the Russian language was able to infect me. I am currently in my second year of studying the Russian language. Generally speaking, my professors provide a space that is good for learning, and the language itself provides the challenges that I desire. Interaction with students at higher levels of Russian and listening to conversations that professors have with them helps with learning. I feel a community that can and that does help me learn. In a way, more than the previous critiques of language teaching that I've stated, I feel that this community is key to learning and staying interested in learning.

FORGETTING TO “SWITCH” MY ENGLISH BACK ON

Andrea Levinsky

Various aspects of my language learning experience have shaped my views about second language acquisition theories. I have been exposed to the French language since I was very young. Growing up in Maine, much of my family learned French in school. They remembered enough of it to have simple conversations with each other and say short phrases in French. The French they know, however, is not the Parisian French I learned in school. It is “Lewiston French,” a true interlanguage that combines Canadian French and English. Wanting to be able to practice French with my family, I decided to switch to taking French after taking weekly Spanish classes in elementary school. Throughout middle and high school I took all of the French classes that I could, culminating in a French class at a local university. French was always one course in my schedule. In college, I have taken two 300-level French classes. I have never been to a French speaking country, or have been immersed in the language. I am by no means bilingual, but I am proficient. I can carry a complex conversation in French with a native Parisian speaker and understand about 80% of what the person says. I cannot understand if the person speaks too fast. I think I have reached a point of fossilization in which my language skills are stagnant and will only be able to improve with going to a French-speaking country. My aunt’s first language was Canadian French and she cannot always understand what I am trying to

say. My reading and writing skills are far less developed. It takes me a very long time to read scholarly work in French. I think my varied skill level is due to my learning style.

In learning French, I found I am an auditory learner and learn best through creative teaching. In middle school, my French teacher taught us several songs to help us learn vocabulary and how to conjugate verbs. I still use these songs today. Creative tricks to remember words and rules such as mnemonic devices also help me. I also learned well from listening to the lyrics of French music as a completion drill. Similar to a repetition drill, I made flash cards to memorize vocabulary. The role of the teacher in my primary culture is to provide the students all of the information they need to know, while the students passively absorb the information. This role, however, did not help me learn best. I learned best with teachers who had students be active participants in their learning by practicing the language. I want to teach language classes because they typically utilize more creative teaching than other classes. I believe that especially in situations where older students are learning the basics of a language, teachers are able to do fun activities such as games, skits, and songs to get the students engaged in learning. While this type of learning is effective in general, it seems to be more socially acceptable in language classes. My experience in observing language learning mirrors several linguistic theories.

In working with New London High School students learning French, I have seen examples of the contrastive analysis theory. It seems as though the students make mistakes because they are comparing French directly to English and attempting to translate every word literally. For

example, I believe they have not grasped the concept of a helping verb when speaking in the past tense because that grammatical structure does not exist in English. I agree with Robert Lado's theory of transfer because the students take English phrases and turn them into French. My own language learning experience can be applied to theories as well.

Using my own language learning experience, I agree with William Moulton (1961) that it is best to learn through a language, not about a language. A lot of my French classes in high school explicitly taught grammatical structures, but I think I would have learned better if we were immersed in the language from the beginning. One of my teachers used immersion for the upper level courses, and I feel I learned much more. This immersion style of teaching helped to create a habit of thinking in French and needing to use French to communicate (Lado 1957). We were forced to figure out how to say what we wanted to with our limited vocabulary. I remember walking out of French class and forgetting to "switch" my English back on, which shows the importance of oral practice of a language (Lado 1958). Practice is the only way to get better at a language. Further, natives create language. To me, it does not matter what a textbook says about how a language is supposed to be, if that is not how natives speak it. Since the purpose of learning language is for increased communication, learning a new language is not helpful if people cannot use it to communicate. I agree with Moulton (1961) that language cannot be translated word for word because the nuance of the language is lost. Some may argue that people can communicate through translation services and do not need to learn multiple languages, but I feel

that a translation can never really do a language justice. I disagree with Moulton, however, that language is only in speech. Writing is an incredibly important method of communication, so therefore it is important to be able to both write and speak in the target language.

As I learned a second language, I found that I was introduced to new concepts through obligatory contexts (Lightbown & Spada 2013: 46-48). The class would get to a certain point where we needed more advanced language to communicate what we wanted to say in French. For example, I remember wanting to be able to say something happened in the past, and then the next day we started learning the *passé composé*. I found I could easily communicate with other people in my French classes, but had a much harder time communicating with other French speakers. I think this was because everyone in my class was at about the same level, and we spoke in an interlanguage. We spoke our own version of French that incorporated some English and the French that we knew. We were able to understand each other because the interlanguage had its own system (Selinker 1974). My experiences in learning a second language shape my philosophy about language learning and how I want to teach.

FROM ONE TO TWO

Glindys Luciano

I remember at the age of five arriving to the United States, I was just a couple of weeks away from turning six and I was supposed to enter the third grade. I did not comprehend that there was a challenge that I was about to face, but I got the gist of it when my cousin Crystal spoke in a tongue that was different from mine even though our families came from the same place. I personally thought that this was interesting and when she realized that I could not understand, she started to speak in her awful Spanish and told me that I had to learn how to speak English. In my head, I clearly believed that she was the one who needed to learn Spanish. I remember questioning my mother why was it that Crystal did not speak Spanish. Her reply was, “your aunt and uncle think it was best for her to just learn English, but do not worry you will know two languages—you will be bilingual.”

My formal education officially began at the age of four in the Dominican Republic, I was mainly exposed to the Spanish tongue, but I was also exposed to English—my father is a proficient English speaker. I was constantly moving between the United States and the Dominican Republic, which in consequence made me a timid child. I learned to walk and speak very late and when I did, I would only engage in conversation with my mother, not even with my father. I would spend my time as a child either looking at pictures in books or drawing.

At the age of four I was in pre-kindergarten and disliked it very much, I was not a very social child or spoke very

much unless it was with an adult. At the end of the school year I told my mother that I was not planning to return to school—she supported me in that decision. At this point in my language abilities, I was able to communicate clearly. I knew how to spell my name, how to pronounce and spell the Spanish alphabet and the basic shapes. My mother homeschooled me in Spanish for an entire year and at the age of five, I was ready to go into the school system—I was ready to begin first grade. I lasted a week in first grade because I was ahead of my other classmates and was placed into the second year class. By the end of that year, I was comfortable with my classmates, I knew how to speak proper Spanish, as well as, the dialect that it spoken in different parts of the country and I could read and write almost fluently.

When my parents decided to officially move to the United States, my mother knew what was the best way to teach me. The issue was that she did not have a good sense or any kind of approach to help me learn the English language. She does not speak English herself. My mother enrolled me in a small public school and I was placed in a bilingual third grade class. Every day after school I was supposed to read for thirty minutes as part of my homework assignment—my teacher did not particularly cater to my needs as a second language learner, but my mother had some tricks up her sleeve to make it work. She would instead make me read the required thirty minutes, as well as, an extra thirty minutes of aloud reading. My mother did not have any idea of what I was reading to her, but she gave me the confidence and support. She had already taught me my ABC's and would make me try to combine the sounds of the different words.

My pronunciations slowly improved and as my English vocabulary expanded, whichever words I did not recognize from the readings, my mother would make me write them down. After the hour of reading, I had to look up the words in the dictionary and write a complete sentence that my father would then read to make sure it made sense. My mother never stopped teaching me—even when we were having a meal she would point to objects around the kitchen and I would have to name the object in English. When I had free time to watch TV, she would put on PBS or Disney Channel with subtitles and tell me to listen carefully. This helped me develop my listening skills and associate the spelling of the word with the sound—when I had to read aloud I knew how to do an exact pronunciation. By the end of the third grade I knew how to speak proficiently, though my grammar skills and reading skills were very advanced compared to my speaking skills. I scored a high three out of four in the English section of the NYC examinations, and on that same academic year, I earned an award for ‘most improved’. My family members were shocked and could not understand I learned English so quickly.

It is believed by many adults that children are quicker at acquiring different languages, that if a parent speaks a language the child can simply mimic the sounds and eventually learn how to speak. I did not learn how to speak English as quickly as another second language learner would, this was because I was not exposed to hearing English speakers around me and had no one to mimic—except Disney characters like Kim Possible and Lizzie McGuire. This led me to develop my own accent. Instead, I was exposed to the grammar and

because of this I slowly learned how syntax worked—through the process of teaching me, my mother noticed my passion for writing. She encouraged me to keep a journal and practice my English writing skills. In addition, she encouraged me to sing English songs and learn the lyrics. My mother did not try to learn English and she did not believe in Americanization—she saw English as a tool, but not as a means of survival.

I was homeschooled until the age of nine even though I attended regular school. I performed very well on the NYC examinations at the end of the fourth grade and placed out of the bilingual class. I was now in the fifth grade in an all-English class. I was no longer with second language learners but with native English speakers. This was definitely a new challenge for me because I was taken out of my comfort zone and thrown into a cage with lions; nevertheless, this helped me become a better speaker. At this point, my English was beginning to be better than my Spanish was. In consequence, my mom began homeschooling me in Spanish while I spent all day in school learning English. Many of my family members saw this as some sort of taboo that I would not speak either English or Spanish, but they were wrong. By the end of the fifth grade, I was one of the best students at my small school and unlike many other students; I was fluent in both English and Spanish. It took a total of three years and a half to master two languages fluently and although today I prefer to speak English over Spanish, I can read and write almost perfectly in both and can communicate formally and informally in both tongues. Learning a language is a journey where many mistakes are made, but many experiences, knowledge, and perspectives are gained.

MI AUTOBIOGRAFÍA

Sara Maclean

As a descendent of poor Polish, Irish, and Italian immigrants, I grew up in a monolingual home where we solely spoke English. Long gone are the mother tongues of our ancestors who worked so hard to assimilate to American culture and to leave their heritage and hardships behind. Don't get me wrong, my grandmother was proud to be Polish, but the only word she could ever remember was "chleb," which means bread. My mother tried to cook Italian food to keep tradition alive, but she could never decipher or get the recipes quite right, and the only Italian word she ever knew was "mangia" which means eat. I did not start to speak a second language until high school with the rest of my monolingual classmates, but in the meantime, I was already acquiring the skills I would need to learn a new mode of communication at gymnastics.

I started learning gymnastics at the age of three. The sport in and of itself is like a language. You practice on a team in a social setting, as languages are always social. You start with the basics; simple tricks like forward rolls act as single vocabulary words, which you string together to form combinations like sentences. Next, you build routines, which act as paragraphs to tell stories. Before you know it, you can defy gravity, flip, and fly, just like you must know the rules of grammar inside and out before you can break them. As you become better at gymnastics your movements become more fluid and you are said to be *fluent*. The names of moves are

arbitrarily assigned in English somewhat based off of Russian, Romanian, and Greek words for the great gymnasts who did them first. For all of the time I spend immersed in the gym, I never realized gymnastics was like a language until I quit.

The same year I ceased to compete gymnastics, I got serious about learning Spanish. They both require trial by error, precision, perfection, and repetition. Spanish was challenging and fun. I fell in love with the romance language almost instantly. It was love at first sight. I liked the rhythm of the words and the way that Spanish spoken out loud sounded like music to my ears. Sometimes we spent entire class periods just listening to music in Spanish, analyzing, and translating song lyrics. Shakira was one of my first and favorite teachers. I may never be able to sing like her, and I still can't roll my r's but that's okay, because I believe the second you lose your accent, you lose yourself and forget where you come from. I may speak Spanish with a thick suburban-white-girl accent, but that's just who I am. More importantly, I speak Spanish grammatically correctly and can communicate with other people proficiently. Although I have never had the desire to be a permanent part of another country or culture, I have always wanted to travel, to visit, to explore and experience. Growing up in a small town in Connecticut, I often felt trapped and isolated. Growing up, I only ever went on one family vacation. We went to Disney World when I was four, but that wasn't enough. I wanted to see the rest of the world, the real world, and learning Spanish gave me the ability and opportunity to do so. The next time I would leave, I'd be eighteen and a senior in high school on a plane filled with fifteen of my friends headed straight for Spain.

I owe much of my academic achievement as well as second language acquisition to an amazing intellectual and educator, Edgar Roca. A former professor at Connecticut College, Mr. Roca was my Spanish teacher throughout all four years of my high school career. He didn't just teach me how to read and write Spanish words, he taught me how to read the *world*, as another inspiring critical pedagogue Paulo Freire (2005 [1970]) would say. He taught me about oppression, culture, and life in general through the lens of learning a foreign language. I did not just acquire ambiguous vocab, or learn how to identify the subject and predicate of phrases, but to evaluate who got to *be* the subject of certain sentences and who was the object. I didn't just learn how to conjugate verbs, but to understand who got to speak in the first person form and who was spoken *for* in the third person plural. I didn't just learn the difference between feminine and masculine terms, I learned the ways in which language and rhetoric reflect the dichotomy that exists between males and females in society, because language is power.

Driven by passion and a strong work ethic, with the help of a magnificent mentor, I quickly finished all of the Spanish classes my school had to offer. I attended a very privileged public school where we had all of the resources to be successful and none of the motivation to actually be productive. Unlike the video clips we watched in class that demonstrated a nostalgic look back at the development of the language lab in the United States, I only remember the day my class got locked in our state of the art language lab until someone finally confessed to smoking marijuana in their cubicle. Not much language learning went on in the lab or

inside of our classrooms. Most teachers taught traditionally from textbooks and administered tests and quizzes that examined our oral, written, and listening comprehension to some extent. Regardless, Mr. Roca recognized my potential and desire to learn Spanish. He was kind enough to design an independent study just for me in which he taught me how to speak his native Portuguese. He taught me one-on-one through conversation, reading, writing, poetry, and film. He was fired for unfair reasons in unfortunate circumstances before I finished my senior year. Losing him was like losing a father figure. Even after he was gone, he still helped me. I believe he is the reason I got into Conn with enough financial aid to succeed. Here, I was granted the chance to travel to Cuba with the Education Department and the Dominican Republic with my good friend Glindys. I continue to study Spanish and strive to be the educator and mentor he was to me. After I stopped competing gymnastics, I began coaching it. After I graduate college and stop studying Spanish, I would like to teach it. I believe learning a second language is not just about learning how to speak within the constraints of a different dialect or syntax. It is about broadening your horizons, learning how to be compassionate, how to interact with other people, how to be competent and creative when you're at a loss for words, how to wander but never get lost in translation, how to dream in a different language, and how to make those dreams come true.

JAPANESE EDUCATION IN THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

Winona Mantelli

Whenever anyone asks how long I have been studying Japanese, I always struggle to come up with an appropriate response. Technically speaking, the answer is fourteen years, or since I was seven years old. However, this length of time gives off an impression of proficiency well beyond what I feel is accurate. I find that answering that I had studied Japanese through high school and am now continuing it in college is the most appropriate response to measure my current ability. However, this always leaves me to wonder how much of an effect the first eight years as a language learner had on my current second language ability, and what critiques can be made of the program through which I first learned Japanese.

Most American students begin learning a second language in junior high school or high school. My case was unusual, as I started studying Japanese in first grade. My elementary school offered a Japanese immersion program, in which students spent half the day in Japanese and half the day in English. Science and math were conducted mostly in English, but were supplemented by materials and terminology in Japanese. As children, we learned mostly through generalizations and imitation. Teachers utilized a natural method that capitalized on our young age and tried to teach us through absorption, since it may have seemed too difficult to directly teach elementary school students grammar and sentence structures. I do not recall any instruction beyond the most basic sentence structures, like "A is B," and so on. Any

concentrated effort on teaching Japanese was limited to 20 minutes a day, at most.

One major flaw of this program was the struggle to teach children Japanese while simultaneously teaching standard grade-level math and science. More English would be spoken than Japanese during the Japanese portion of the day, leading us to understand that any Japanese we encountered would always be followed by an explanation in English. We rarely spoke in Japanese, learning mostly through listening. Junior high school was a recap of everything we had previously learned, and it wasn't until high school where I finally felt challenged and learned a wealth of new material. Over the course of twelve years, I only had three teachers, one of which taught me for six years. This teacher in particular spoke to us primarily in broken English over the course of six years, giving us little ability to imitate a proper model of the Japanese language. She often provided us with projects in which we memorized skits or poems. While this was helpful in learning Japanese culture along with the language, we quickly learned to memorize our lines based on the sounds of the words rather than the word meanings. She also utilized frequent quizzes that only required minimum memorization minutes before class. From the students' standpoint, learning from this teacher meant that our priority was everything but Japanese: math and science, memorizing for performances, and quiz grades. Rarely were we encouraged to try to use Japanese to express our thoughts or experiences, and never did students converse with each other in Japanese.

While there was an overall lack of success regarding our proficiency in Japanese, there is evidence of some

language acquisition according to theories regarding learner's errors. In Japanese, the sentence ending *desu* marks the present tense, and the ending *deshita* changes the phrase into past tense. Therefore, as we learned saying "*atsui desu*" means "it's hot," we naturally assumed "*atsui deshita*" meant "it was hot," in the past tense. However, the Japanese grammatical pattern for adjective conjugation follows a different pattern, in which "*atsui desu*" turns into "*atsukatta desu*." Needless to say, this shows our ability to recognize the general pattern for tenses and were acquiring the language to some extent. The issue, however, lies in the fact that this error was never corrected, nor was the proper structure ever modeled. We were informed of the correct conjugation in junior high school, where we slowly had to unlearn an error we had been using for six years. Therefore, it seems evident that we could have progressed much farther in our acquisition had our teachers been more rigorous in correcting our mistakes and modeling proper phrasing for us.

The Japanese program at Connecticut College is structured very similarly to the audiolingual method of language learning. The classes have a rigid structure, beginning every class with the recitation of a sample conversation that students are required to have memorized prior to coming to class. Then, students practice their pronunciation by repeating the core conversation one line at a time and the instructor corrects any mistakes. The remaining class period is conversation based, in which the instructor asks individual students questions in a rapid manner and students are required to answer using the vocabulary and grammatical structures studied in the textbook before coming to class. The

instructor immediately corrects any mistakes made by students to avoid the formation of bad habits.

While there are methodological flaws with this kind of learning, I found a number of merits that made it worthwhile. First of all, it helped enormously with pronunciation and fluidity of the language. Even when we were producing phrases that we may not commonly use in conversation, using Japanese quickly was good practice in starting and completing a thought in a second language. The conversation portion of the class allowed for flexibility in the students' usage of words and patterns. Oftentimes the instructor would encourage students to play with the new structures, using them outside of the way they were directly explained and discovering subtleties between new forms and older forms. This was helpful in using critical thinking while using the language, rather than simply pairing words with situations. However, there is still the issue of relying too much on the stimulus from the instructor, who is not present outside of the classroom.

In general, I don't believe my early language education has put me at an advantage over students who began studying Japanese in high school or in college. Through this program, I learned the Japanese reading and writing system immediately, which helped me become comfortable with a system so different from English. Our pronunciation was particularly strong due to learning by listening and repeating, rather than reading Romanization of the Japanese. As a young child, I learned to grasp the structure of Japanese naturally without much trouble with the subject-object-verb ordering that distinguishes Japanese from English. However, I believe there is much room for improvement for such programs that

attempt to teach language at a young age. Teachers should put a higher priority on modeling and correcting language behavior so students have the ability to learn from their mistakes. Encouraging conversation and focusing on the social aspect of language learning would also help children become more comfortable with using a language. Ultimately, from my experience the most important aspect in a language classroom is an understanding that language is social and the only way to learn a language is to use it. I believe that only when teachers and students are both actively engaged in socialization will any proper language acquisition take place.

L2 LEARNING REQUIRES SOCIALIZATION AMONG THE CLASS

Bo Martin

Spanning more than a decade of my childhood and of my adolescent years, the diverse array of experiences I have had in foreign language learning environments has proven useful for my current reflections on second language learning and teaching techniques. While I still have daunting amounts of information to learn about teaching foreign languages, my exposure to acquiring a second language has taught me useful knowledge about what is an appropriate lesson plan, the necessities in the role of a foreign language instructor, and the part the student plays in acquiring the language.

My initial experience of learning Spanish in fourth and in fifth grade mirrored my subsequent experience in sixth, in seventh and in eighth grade learning French; both periods seemed to be wastes of my time. The lesson plans provided by the teachers were generally constant translation. There was no attempt by the teachers at fostering communication between my peers and I; the concept of language existing between individuals was absent. By teaching language the same way as one would lecture math or history, the student was largely responsible for acquiring lexicon that would have been easier to acquire had we, the students, been tasked with communicating with each other. The large class sizes would have been conducive to conversation practice, yet they instead detracted from my acquisition of the syntaxes and the vocabulary of the respective languages. Smaller groups with

more individualized instruction in combination with group practice would have been more fruitful in producing competent language learners than the method my fellow classmates and I were subjected to. A further issue with the language instruction was that both the Spanish and the French teachers were native speakers of the respective languages. While this does not necessarily mean a downfall for a foreign language instructor, their difficulty in explaining concepts alien to me but natural to them shows that teaching your native tongue can be incredibly difficult.

When I began high school, my atrocious experiences with Spanish and French made me switch to attempting to learn Russian. Naturally my language skills progressed better in response to my increased workload. However, much of the work I did was again simple translation; I did not have the opportunity to apply my language skills in a social setting. I was able to acquire grammar, but my conversation and speaking skills were incredibly underdeveloped. Further, I found the class activities and the work monotonous; there was no intrinsic value to me completing the assignment. Currently I find that captivating and interesting work that challenges my language skills is essential to language acquisition progress. I was subjected to this boring atmosphere for three years until my high school cut the Russian program. A year absence from exposure to Russian proved to be a major setback for my language skills, specifically my speaking. When starting college I could read but not verbally reproduce anything or take part in conversation.

The major difference between my past language learning experiences and my college experience was that the

work in college was demanding, but interesting, which in turn kept me motivated. This motivation was further fostered because my professor of Russian was not a native speaker of the language; he was able to understand the origins of our questions and of our errors. My linguistic skills were rehearsed because of the small class size and its communicative atmosphere, something I had never previously experienced. My positive experience with language learning led me to indulge in an immersive Russian language environment at the Middlebury Language Schools. This was an experience unlike any other as the complete absence of English in my day-to-day life forced me to utilize my Russian skills in ever changing and creative ways. I rapidly acquired and remembered new lexicon and grammatical items.

From my experiences I find that language learning activities need to build upon one another in a “scaffolding” type of manner. By combining such exercises with both exposure to cultural items of the target language, such as cartoons, movies, books, art, etc., and a teacher who guides students through the language learning process, the latent psychological structure of language learning can be reactivated. These activities are better implemented in an immersive environment as it gives the student time to experiment and to play with the language outside of class. Because language exists between speakers, lessons should be presented in an anthropological setting targeting questions such as: how do people interact with the language? and what words and phrases are used with certain interactions? Despite predominant ideology that student errors signal a bad teacher, in contrast, errors show that the learner is acquiring and

experimenting with the language. It shows that the student is in the process of learning and developing the foreign language.

The process of learning a foreign language is a reciprocal action shared between the students and their peers as well as between the students and the teacher. It is unique among academic subjects as it requires socialization among the class. However, as with the natural sciences, experimentation is a medium through which discovery and learning takes place.

AN INDIVIDUALIZED JOURNEY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Morgan Rentko

Language learning, for me, has been a positive but difficult process. It is still an ongoing process in my education, one I plan to continue until I attain a level of proficiency that I am content with. There are many different components that make up the progression of my language learning, and as my education continues I expect even more factors to influence my understanding and learning of my second language of choice, French. I am endlessly fascinated by the idea of language learning because while I know there are many others undergoing a similar procedure, I am currently and continually having a singular and distinctive experience of my own.

Although my experience is not as comprehensive as others' experiences, I have had a decent amount of my life dedicated to my familiarity in language learning. I grew up as a native speaker of English, as my parents had no knowledge of another language. Thus, as a child, I lacked exposure to a second language; English was the only language spoken in my house, and my school did not provide instruction in a second language until a higher grade level. I moved in the middle of fourth grade and at my new school received my first second language lessons in Spanish for only half a year. I retained little, as the other students had been learning a lot longer than I had. In fifth grade the entire class transitioned to French classes, and I continued this language through high school and

college. I now consider it my second language, although I acknowledge that I am still a second language learner.

My beliefs about language learning are reflective of both culture and society's portrayal of the process and doubts about my own ability. I started out as an eager and conscientious language learner and held the belief that if I kept at it long enough, I would become highly skilled at French. A few years into my education I often lost hope when I couldn't quite express my thoughts and wondered if I would ever become truly proficient. I always believed fluency was easiest to attain if you are a native speaker of the language, so I was confused at those individuals who were adept at a second language but had learned on their own; how could one possibly understand the nuances of a language if one hadn't grown up with it? I had doubt in myself in reaching that level, and currently I still struggle to find the method that would work best for me to get to that level. My beliefs on second language acquisition are still in development and will grow with both my increasing knowledge of methods of acquisition and higher education in the French language. However, one thing I persistently believe is that the most encouraging aspect of language learning is "electric thrill...at the prospect of speaking another language" (Colangelo 2000: 106), which continues to motivate me to work to acquire my language.

My second language teachers have varied in skill and style over the years but have indeed had some influence on the way I view and retain the French language and its culture. My first French teacher was Syrian, and while the textbook we used in class mainly focused on the culture of France, my instructor contributed a more francophone perspective. My

second French teacher was Belgian, also able to give the viewpoint of a francophone country but with a closer understanding of European culture. She knew the influence that French culture had not only in its country of origin but throughout its continent, and imparted this knowledge to her students. My last French teacher in high school was born and raised in the United States Midwest but was fluent in French herself and had a husband that worked in France. She encouraged a global view of the French language as well as emphasized the importance of second language acquisition for Americans. My current French professor is from France and thus deeply connected to France and the ideas that are culturally and linguistically significant to France. Much like Ruby Sprott's (2000: 50) experience in *Learning to Speak: One Woman's Journey*, I learned much simply from the "nature of a modern language, which demands that the teacher listen to you, advise you, and really hear you," which each of my teachers has done for me.

My own language learning is certainly idiosyncratic, and I find this to be a result of the many different ways I went about learning my language, as well as my own learning style. While comprehensively reading French text, listening to French being spoken, or engaging in conversation in French, I find myself alternating between thinking of the language as something to be translated into my native tongue, and thinking of the language in its own context. I haven't reached the point where I can switch completely into one language or another; my languages often influence each other in speech and in thought. Another odd quirk of my language practice is my nervousness at the prospect of real life practice. Like

Stephanie Hart in *Why I Shouldn't Speak Only English* (2000), I often find myself trying to circumvent speaking French when an opportunity arises for me to do so. I repeatedly doubt my own ability despite an intensive background in the language, and this affects the way I speak and the speed of my thoughts in French. My fear of being incorrect is often a detriment to my learning and something I am trying to improve; I know when I allow myself to make mistakes, I will be more open to attempting more difficult concepts and speaking techniques. Being aware of my own language learning idiosyncrasies makes me a better observer, pupil, teacher, as well as gives me the incentive to work towards the confidence to more fully acquire my language.

*THERE WILL ALWAYS BE SOME
OTHER LANGUAGE FOR ME TO LEARN*

Lizz Ocampo

I was lucky enough to learn two languages, Spanish and English, growing up. I never thought I would become passionate about learning other languages, and I believe one reason would be because of my upbringing and learning two languages at the same time. In the United States, many Americans are monolingual. In the past, there was an emphasis in having a common language, English, while other languages are devalued in our mainstream culture. My conservative elementary school devalued the learning of any language other than English, yet that only sparked my curiosity. I know that my journey as a language learner will never end since there will always be some other language for me to learn.

My journey started at home; I was the daughter of Mexican immigrants, so for the first five years of my life, I only knew how to speak Spanish. My parents did not want to teach me about grammar at such an early age, so most of the Spanish that I spoke was due to mimicking and socializing with my family. I did not learn English until I entered kindergarten. My elementary did not have any bilingual or ESL programs, so I was placed in classes with English speakers.

I found it difficult keeping up with the other students since they already had prior experience with English, and the support in my school was very limited. Because I kept

struggling and the school was of no use, my older brother would dedicate hours trying to teach my parents and I English. While grammar is extremely important in learning a language, socialization is much more crucial; because I was now surrounded by English in my school and home, I found myself being forced to speak English. Although my English was gradually getting much better, I noticed that my parents had much more difficulty learning a different language. Even today, they can only speak broken English. Learning English felt like a chore; my school and teachers taught phonetics and grammar, and the students were just the receivers and had to repeat everything like robots. There was nothing creative that they did to make learning English fun; I really dreaded it.

As I was ending elementary school, I was proficient in English, but my Spanish was gradually getting worse. Whenever I spoke to someone in Spanish, he/she would point out that I had an ‘American accent.’ Back then, I felt like I had lost a part of my identity, and I always felt self-conscious whenever I spoke Spanish. At the beginning of high school, I developed an interest for other languages. I began to watch a myriad amount of Japanese animation and a few Russian cartoons. For Japanese and Russian, I began to understand small phrases. After a few years, I was able to understand Japanese a bit better, and there were times when I did not need English subtitles. Although I was not formally taught Japanese, I was able to understand key words and interpret what characters were saying by knowing those words. I learned to imitate words and sounds, but I did not know how to read or write kanji. I have had similar experiences when trying to learn Korean. I found it much easier to learn a

language when I am always exposed to it by watching television shows or listening to music.

Even though I was listening to Russian music and watching Russian cartoons, I was formally being taught in my third year of high school. This was the first time that I was being exposed to something that was completely different than what I was used to. I was introduced to Russian, and I found it completely overwhelming especially by looking at Cyrillic. Luckily, my Russian teachers were able to guide me through this experience. While the class focused a great deal on grammar, my teachers always incorporated history, literature, and culture into the lessons. We watched shows like *Cheburashka* and *Nu, pogodi* with English subtitles. We would read short stories by Gogol and Pushkin in Russian and English. Additionally, we would listen to music from Zemfira or Dmitry Shostakovich. There were times when the class would reenact skits or memorize poems in Russian. Unlike learning English, I greatly loved my Russian class; learning a new language did not feel like a chore, and I found it extremely fun that I would continue my Russian learning outside of the classroom. By my senior year of high school, my Russian teacher encouraged me to compete in a Russian *Olympiada* in our state. During the competition, I was only able to talk in Russian; I was supposed to describe my hobbies, memorize poems, and identify former Russian republics. All the hard work that I put into the competition was able to get me a silver medal, and I was extremely proud of myself. Because I was completely in love with Russian, I decided to continue my journey in college, and, of course, I have wonderful Russian professors that allow mistakes. While most of what we do in college was similar to

what I did in high school, the class environment is completely different. I do not feel intimidated by my peers, I am not afraid to make mistakes, and the pace is quick, yet I do not feel hastened.

Compared to learning English, learning other languages such as Japanese, Russian, and Korean were more fun since my teachers were able to integrate the cultural background of the language into lessons. When learning English, I was only given a set number of rules and was forced to follow them without making any mistakes. My previous teachers whom taught me Russian and Korean were able to make the class more exciting and were able to incorporate different techniques when teaching the language. It is extremely important that the teacher uses different techniques to able keep the student engaged in the learning process. Rather than devaluing the culture of that language, teachers should acknowledge students come from different backgrounds, which affect the learning process of the students.

*I FELT ASHAMED ABOUT MY PREVIOUS
MONOLINGUAL HISTORY*

Kenan Wan

Locate Chengdu Foreign Languages School on the map: it hovers outside the Jinniu Town, and it is thirty-minute drive from the nearest city people may have heard of, Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan. Just like the small town I grew up in, it's all alone.

When my parents first drove me to the school, I was amused by how a regular boarding school should be named after “languages”, as if the inclusion of “foreign languages” could afford this school any more prestige than any other school named after their city or a political figure. This certainly was not a new thought – It came in some form to the millions of aspiring young graduates each year in China, who inevitably indicate their English proficiency in their resumes, in educational degrees and professional certificates, as if anything having to do with “English-speaking” could afford them some level of prestige and therefore, an edge in the career market. This reminds me of a point made about the equality of all languages in the linguistic class. While we agree that linguistically, all languages are equal; socio-economically (and I would add, politically), languages are never equal. I was sent to the school because my mother believed that the school offered more rigorous English lessons, that proficiency in that particular language fit into her vision of my career plans. Because of this reason, choosing a second language of one's

choice is truly a privilege- for many others, me for example, we did not exactly choose to learn English, the second language was chosen for us.

Just like all what the pretentious name of the school could imply, the English textbooks I used were imported from Britain, meaning that any Chinese translations were kept to minimal. In fact, the first thing we did in the opening class was to cross out the Chinese translations in the books with mark pens. The rationale of such practice, explained by my teacher, Dennis, was that dependence on translations could decrease our response time to English. Even to this day, I maintain my doubt about this claim. While I fully agree that reduction of turnaround time is key to oral proficiency in a foreign language, there is time and space for it- sudden detachment from the primary language and forced expel from the cultural comfort zone can easily build up loss of interest especially in young language learners. Or worse, it breeds sense of frustration, which is truly detrimental to the acquisition process.

At least that was my feeling at twelve, when my teacher forbade exchange of any Chinese in class and assigned English names to each of us. Not only did I feel ashamed about my previous monolingual history, but also I could not handle the discomfort associated with being called Sam instead of my birth name. For a twelve-year-old teenager who just started his English course and was not yet fully exposed to the diversity of the world, the gap between a Mongoloid face and an Occidental name was real and seems impassable. Of course, today I had a different view about adopting a local name of any language, both in language learning and in social setting.

In real life, I can understand if one prefers an indigenous name, in order to foster assimilation of oneself into the society or to protect oneself from job discrimination, particularly for immigrants. One may also keep his or her birth name to display his or her cultural or ethnic heritage. That, too, I can understand. I maintain similar level of understanding with language teaching as well. When I tutored Chinese at the Regional Multicultural Magnet School in 2012, I used to call my students their birth names but with Mandarin intonation. I would also teach them how to write their names in Chinese, with all the strokes and squares. That way I could arouse the students' enthusiasm while saving myself the frustration of having to reteach artificial names that I could have randomly assigned – the association between their names and corresponding Mandarin pronunciations was not unsubstantiated; as long as they remembered their birth names, they could speak their Chinese names. Similarly, in college I see similar practice when students of languages try to spell their birth names in Cyrillic, in Japanese, or in Arabic and I hope that it can keep that way.

In my six-years' English education, I benefitted tremendously from role-playing assignments and theatrical shows. It is true that they were staged. But they were also fun and interactive. As a performer, I had to be both immersed and detached at the same time. It was not quite acted out and it was not wholly sincere. Detachment came from the fact that there was a crowd of audiences I was targeting- teachers, peers and school administrators- for whom I must be aware of my technique and proper use of English; I was meanwhile fully immersed in the design of my plots. I got to cover newest

stories of British storm hazard or scavenge treasure in a man-made cave. If the English director wanted me to be a BBC reporter or an American bounty hunter, I was a BBC reporter or an American bounty hunter.

Then there came the required part of almost any language learning process – memorization of vocabularies and communication with native speakers. Because of this practice, people think of second language acquisition as mechanical, and they are right to think that way. However, early vocabulary learning for me included English subtitles and conversations I found amusing in watching *Friends* other than example dialogues from dictionaries. It also included my choice to chat with American businessmen whom I felt deeply attracted to, and whom I would often ask to write down slang language I could not understand. Each vocabulary I learnt, slang I jotted down, or American I became acquainted with was individualized to me – I would memorize some words more firmly than others, the same way I would get to know some native speakers at a more personal level than treating them as language partners. In other words, in my experience, the language acquisition process was always surrounded by personal fantasy, experience, and development. This realization became especially strong in 2008, when I became acquainted with a Franco-American family, who offered me tremendous help in improving my accent and encouraged me to pursue study in the United States. From then on, English stopped being a second language to me, as it became an invitation to the challenges and opportunities of the Great Capitalism Machine of the Anglosphere world.

MY "GABBYNESS" WAS DISAPPEARING

Gabby Wang

My experiences with learning a second language go back many years ago when I attempted to learn French in middle school. Our school system thought it was very important to start teaching children a different foreign language at a young age, because it would be easier to learn that language than if we had started when we were in high school or older. However, I found French to be very boring and uninspiring, so I quit after four years. I began to take Spanish my sophomore year of high school, because much of the U.S. population speaks it and I thought it would be necessary when I was older. Much like French, I found Spanish boring, but I stuck with it for three years. I am not sure if I felt this way because I was forced to take a language that I did not have an interest in, or if my teachers were not trying hard enough to teach us the language in a way that the students could enjoy it. It turned out being both of those reasons. As I enrolled in my freshman year at Connecticut College, I decided to start learning Russian, because I knew the language was hard and was fascinated with it. I grew up in a small suburban town in Connecticut, where essentially no one spoke a second language, let alone Russian. To this day, I am very grateful that I decided to learn Russian. Even though I struggle almost every day learning a second language, it is making me a more cultured and driven person.

After taking four semesters of Russian at Connecticut College, I decided to take an intensive summer language program to try to take my learning to another level. This program, through Yale University, consisted of three weeks of Russian language and culture classes at the university, and then five weeks of the same classes in St. Petersburg, Russia. While in Russia, I was immersed in the culture and the language and there was no escaping it. In this situation, I was forced to abandon my first language and only communicate with people in Russian, my target language. At first, this was a major struggle and took quite an emotional toll on me. However, as I worked through it, I saw my Russian language abilities greatly improving and even found myself becoming more comfortable with my surrounding environment. Because I was learning to be comfortable in this new environment, I became more confident in my abilities to speak in a second language. This confidence continued to grow as I lived in Russia for another four months for my fall semester of my junior year.

As my experience with Russian as a second language continued, I saw myself changing. Never before had I travelled outside of the United States, and my first experience was to Russia, a completely different country than the one I was born and raised in. Learning the Russian language taught me more about the English language, which is similar to Karen Ogulnick's (2000: 1) explanation that through learning her second language of Japanese, "I suddenly had a unique vantage point to see structures in my own language and culture more clearly." Like this woman, I was able to see more

clearly how the English language and American culture worked and affected people.

I believe that there are two necessary elements of learning a second language: 1) the second language learner needs to go abroad to a country where the citizens speak the target language, and 2) it is important to engage your brain in games and activities in the target language, so learning is fun, not a chore. As a second language learner, I will be the first to admit that studying abroad in a country that speaks your target language is extremely hard, but I believe that it is necessary in improving one's language abilities. When abroad, I was constantly frustrated with myself for not understanding what Russians were saying, but I was also frustrated with them for not understanding what I was saying. I felt myself become a one-dimensional person, because I lacked the necessary vocabulary to continue a normal, intellectual conversation with a native speaker. It seemed that what made me who I am, my "Gabbyness", was disappearing and my Russian persona, Galya, was extremely boring and quiet. For a certain period of time, I was embarrassed to talk and make mistakes in Russian, because I rarely spoke the language outside of the classroom. But this is why it is vital to study abroad. In order to push oneself as a second language learner, a person needs to experience feeling out of their comfort zone.

One way that I became more comfortable speaking in a second language was by playing games with my friends and teachers. While learning verbs of motion and their prefixes, my Russian teacher would often bring in a toy BMW car that the class would use to explain the verbs and what the car was doing. This was such a great idea, because it kept the students

entertained and wanting to learn. It is so important that students are having fun and enjoying learning a second language, because if they aren't, there is more of a possibility that these students will stop learning the second language or just not try as hard. My professor's techniques of teaching students a second language was successful, because the students genuinely wanted to learn more about Russian and their attention was kept by using games and toys that they could play with. While learning Russian, I have developed several idiosyncrasies that help me remember new words, rules, or cases. When I learn a new word, I write the word down on a piece of paper and try to act the word out with my hands. This technique is often successful, but other times, it does not work. If my first technique fails, I once again write the new word down and then try to rearrange the letters so I spell out a completely different word. Sometimes I am able to remember a word when I do this, while simultaneously learning new words.

In my opinion, a teacher plays a more important role than the student in the learning of a second language. A teacher's lesson plan, and the way he/she goes about teaching students learning a second language, can either hinder second language learning or facilitate it. While abroad, my teachers would only speak in Russian, which was good, but also bad for learning the language. Many times, I would not understand what he/she was saying and I would be completely lost. This forced me to constantly look up new words in the dictionary, which expanded my vocabulary, but I also missed important information that the teacher was saying. When students appear confused or unclear as to what he is saying, my Russian

teacher in America will speak in English, so there is really no information being lost in translation. At Connecticut College, I have been very fortunate that I have had nothing but good experiences in acquiring proficiency in a second language, and I think that this has made the difference between being successful or not.

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