

When a Language Instructor Becomes a Language Learner: Reflections and Insights

Learning something new is a valuable experience for college educators in any field. As experts, we often forget how we once learned. When we experience learning something new, and when we critically reflect on this process, we can become more knowledgeable, skilled, and empathetic. We can then share this knowledge with our own learners, enriching their learning experiences as well. As an English language instructor, I have learned many valuable and salient lessons from immersing myself in Spanish classes.

The Importance of Affective Factors

There has been an increased emphasis on the importance of affective factors in teaching and learning. Being a learner involves vulnerability and requires courage. It often causes fear. For many learners, learning online has increased these fears. Instructors may not have experienced these emotions recently in the classroom setting. When I took a Spanish course, I realized how difficult it can be for learners to speak up in class, and how simple mistakes can feel frustrating. This experience led me to reconsider how I give feedback on oral assignments, as many spoken mistakes learners make are performative, rather than based on a lack of linguistic awareness.

Many learners are perfectionists, and it can be difficult to change their mindset and entrenched behaviors. As a Spanish learner, I saw this trait emerging in myself! Now, I try to counter perfectionism with humor. I explain how mistakes are a gift to the learner as well as to the class, and once learners have begun to conceptualize mistakes in this manner, I notice them becoming less anxious. I also share how these mistakes provide opportunities for us to explore new, interesting areas of language. I tell my learners that they are my role models and inspiration because one day I hope to communicate as effectively in Spanish as they do in English, and they find this reversal of roles refreshing and uplifting!

Authenticity and Credibility

Brookfield (2015) asserts that authenticity and credibility are key traits in successful educators. He highlights the importance of balancing and demonstrating these traits

to connect with and support learners. I often share my language learning successes and struggles, and I believe this authenticity and vulnerability has helped my learners see similarities in our experiences. Rather than revealing a weakness, this allows us to find comfort in our shared struggles and explore future learning strategies. We discuss how success is generally only possible after several “failures,” but these failures really present many hidden opportunities for reflection and growth. Noticing these emotions in a non-judgemental manner is important, and we discuss how writing down our emotions can be very beneficial. These journal entries can also improve written fluency if they are done in the target language.

Brookfield’s other key trait seen in a successful educator is credibility, which is required for learners to trust their instructor. My learners and I discuss the personal benefits of learning a language, including improved neurological functioning and the opportunity to communicate with people from diverse backgrounds.

Classroom Management

Pacing: Online learning often leaves less time for learners to process assignments and lectures. Because it’s more difficult for instructors to accomplish online what we would have accomplished in a face-to-face class, we often rush the process. Even before the pandemic, the booming digital world prioritized a work ethic based on fast-paced results. As a learner, I noticed how much thinking time I required. I now have a much greater appreciation for the need to process, reflect, and even pause in silence. When I watched videos of myself teaching, I recognized that I was moving too quickly in an attempt to cover the material. Additionally, instructors often “fly with the fastest,” meaning we respond to the quickest and most vocal learners. To counter this habit, I have made a conscious effort to incorporate activities that involve thinking time before responses are accepted. I also provide a detailed preview of areas we will cover in class so learners have time to reflect before class.

Technology issues often affect the clarity of communication and are particularly challenging to learners who lack the background knowledge to fill in missing or unclear information. When the audio or video quality is compromised, it makes it very difficult for me to understand my Spanish instructor, and this has led me to be more aware of how this affects my learners.

Grouping: Grouping students by ability has benefits, but students are aware of their level. When this strategy is used too frequently, it can negatively affect confidence. It is helpful for students to work with different people as this encourages them to learn how to communicate with individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Community: Creating an enjoyable and safe learning space is crucial. The pandemic has been an incredibly isolating time. Our classes may be the only connection some learners have to a community. The increased pressure of learning during COVID, as well as our limited ability to assess a learner's well-being, means that many of our learners may be struggling considerably. However, our classes can provide continuity, stability, and a sense of purpose in an uncertain time.

Tools and Strategies: Digital tools make it possible to do a variety of short language-learning activities daily. Online tools also track student development, provide immediate feedback, and many incorporate elements of gamification that are fun for learners. Using these tools myself gave me a new appreciation for their applicability in the classroom.

Another strategy that has helped me is thinking in Spanish, and I encourage all language learners to do this. For many, this is a very novel idea. Initially, learners are only able to focus on simple, concrete ideas, but in time, thinking in an additional language will become easier and more expansive. This strategy is free, low-tech, and available at any time. When I tell my learners about this strategy, I emphasize that they are far more advanced in their language learning than I am, so they have the advantage of being able to explore many imaginative, abstract, and sophisticated ideas!

Final Thoughts

Putting ourselves in the position of our students by becoming a learner is incredibly instructive. Being a novice has also reminded me that at times it's helpful to approach my teaching practice with a beginner's mindset, which is fresh and open. I find this strategy useful when designing materials, planning classes, and teaching.

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References:

Brookfield, S. (2015) *The Skillful Teacher: On Trust, Technique and Responsiveness in the Classroom*. Jossey-Bass.