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L2 Journal

Title

Returning to the Classroom: an Autoethnography

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/32m5t0fr>

Journal

L2 Journal, 15(1)

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Publication Date

2023

DOI

10.5070/L215159236

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Peer reviewed

Returning to the Classroom

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The following is an autoethnographic description of my participation, as a late-career French professor, in a summer language immersion class in Spain. My initial intention was to improve my Spanish and to assess how I responded to communicative pedagogy. I soon realized, however, that it was more intriguing to explore my L3 and professional identities, as well as the affective consequences of my experience.

INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2017, a university in northern Spain invited me to come to its campus to give a presentation. I decided that afterwards I would enroll in a language school in Madrid for a week of intensive Spanish language instruction. This article consists of an autoethnographic exploration of my experience. I reflect upon and describe my language learning impressions from the point of view of a highly proficient L2 French speaker who is a linguistically apprehensive student of Spanish.

My initial goal when I decided to write this article was to compare my experience as a language learner with findings and recommendations from applied linguistics research regarding effective L2 pedagogy and curriculum development. Once immersed in the class, however, I became more interested in the insights that I found myself acquiring into the affective implications of the language learning process. In particular, taking on the role of the student, after many years of being the teacher, allowed me to develop a further understanding of the construction of a multilingual identity (Kramersch & Zhang, 2018; Coffey, 2010; Kramersch, 2009; Coffey, 2007).

BACKGROUND

To frame a narrative¹ about the language program's impact on me, I will first highlight my multi-faceted professional identity as a language teacher and teacher trainer, as well as a language learner. I have mentored language teachers for over twenty-five years, offering methods classes, professional seminars, and workshops to undergraduates, graduate student teaching assistants, newly arrived international exchange teaching assistants, and experienced faculty members. I have witnessed not only the evolution of pedagogical approaches (from the audiolingual method (ALM) to current post-methods frameworks) but also changes in teachers' and students' goals in the L2 classroom (Mills & Moulton, 2017).

I admit having an awkward history with the Spanish language. Before pursuing a doctorate, I taught in public secondary schools for four years. When interviewing for my first position, I was asked whether I could teach elementary Spanish as well as French. I replied that I probably would be able to do so, having studied Spanish for a few semesters in college. The course I would teach was very basic: an introduction to the language and culture(s). I spent a month in Salamanca to prepare for my assignment, taking courses and trying to get a feel for the language. Once in the classroom, I relied heavily on the textbook and dutifully conducted ALM drills. I prepared meticulously, looking up every word in the textbook that I did not recognize. I showed movies about bullfights; we sang traditional Spanish songs; and my students made *día de los muertos* altars. To this day, however, I feel guilty for having inflicted my students with the input of my broken Spanish and my lack of cultural insights.

Now, as the director of a language center, I work directly with a sizable number of Spanish instructors, several of whom are native speakers. I find it frustrating not to be able to interact with them well in Spanish, especially since a couple have told me how much they would prefer to converse with me in Spanish. Having the opportunity to improve my conversational skills was, therefore, one of the main reasons why I was excited to enroll in the immersion program in Spain. Another goal was to remember what it feels like to be a language student, or a student in general. I was inspired by a piece by Alexis Wiggins (Strauss, 2014), which made me realize how important it is for teachers to experience learning from the students' perspective, especially when it has been a long time since they themselves have been students.² That said, I wondered if I would be able to shift from being the expert in the classroom to being a learner. Would I be able to blend into the student body, despite my age and background? Would I feel out of place? Would I be afraid to make errors? Would I regret making the decision to put myself in this situation? And, finally, what impact would the experience have on me?

PLACEMENT, JUSTIFICATION, AND MOTIVATION

Even though I had not studied Spanish since the late 1980s, my backgrounds in French and linguistics enabled me to ace the school's online written placement exam, which consisted mostly of grammar and vocabulary fill-in-the-blank exercises. When I arrived at the center, however, I was required to take an oral exam. My verb conjugations—always my Achilles' heel—were abysmal, but I was able to express myself fairly fluently; my strategic competence was strong, although my grammar was shaky. The examiner asked what had brought me to Madrid and what I hoped to get out of the experience. I explained that I was the director of a language center and that I wanted to be able to interact with my Spanish colleagues in their native language. She looked at me dubiously (I had, of course, just butchered her language) and said that it would be better for me to continue to communicate with them in English. She explained (in Spanish) that there is an implicit power dynamic in place when one person speaks a language better than another, and she pointed out that I would not want to lose that edge by conversing in Spanish with people I supervised. “But I guess you're their boss,” she said with a shrug. She also pointed out that “people don't speak as well when they are nervous.” I actually found it humorous to find myself being sociolinguistics-'splained; because my Spanish was so weak, I had lost my status as an expert in my field.

After I assured her that I was extremely enthusiastic about learning the language, she finally relented, with the warning that “the students will be much younger than you.” I sighed. I was trying hard to be polite and humble and was determined not to be a problem for the

other students or the teacher. I wanted to convey that to her, but I did not have the linguistic skills to do so. She placed me into the B2 course that they were currently offering; the class would meet for four hours a day for five days.

My motivation to learn Spanish was extremely strong. According to Ushioda and Dörnyei (2009):

a basic hypothesis [of Dörnyei's theory] is that if proficiency in the target language is part and parcel of one's ideal or ought-to self, this will serve as a powerful motivator to learn the language because of our psychological desire to reduce the discrepancy between our current and possible future selves. (p. 4)

I wistfully envisioned my future self returning to my colleagues in the U.S. and being able to interact effortlessly with them in Spanish. I was determined to give the class my best shot.

LEARNING COMMUNITY AND PEDAGOGICAL INSIGHTS

There were between eight and ten students in the class (it varied each day), of which—to my great surprise and pleasure—I was the only American. There were two Italians, a Korean, and several Chinese students. I was at least the age of their parents. I did not want to throw off the chemistry in the classroom or intrude on the students' experience in any way; I felt that this was their time, not mine. I figured that it would be fine to participate in group work with them, but I did not want them to feel as if they had to talk to me beyond the walls of the classroom. My goal was to blend into the background.

I was intimidated by the level of the class on the first day. As I wrote in my journal: "First minutes of class: moment of shock. I don't understand what she is saying. As the class continues, however, I am OK." At the end of the day, I noted: "Everyone has left the classroom, and I am alone." "The freedom of not having to make friends, but also the feeling of being old. How do they look at me?" I noted how frustrating it had been that I had not been able to join my group sitting on the floor to do an activity because of my bad back.

After the first day, however, the situation changed considerably. One of the most unexpected outcomes of my experience was the strong bond that formed between my classmates and me. They were kind and never seemed put upon when they had to work with me during group activities. As I wrote in an email:

What I've found the most interesting (and the most gratifying, really) is how nice the other students have been to me. I expected them not to want to have anything to do with me (for which I had no intention of blaming them), but in fact, it's been kind of the opposite. They smile and are good natured when we do group work.

During one break, I saw the two Italian students sitting talking together in the small cafeteria, and I intentionally sat down alone at another table so as not to intrude. Almost immediately, they moved over to join me, and they asked me for advice (in Spanish, our *lingua franca*) regarding how they might deal with a complicated housing situation. Another student, a young Korean woman, invited me to go to a restaurant for lunch with her after class. Again, we had no choice but to speak Spanish throughout our meal, which was a challenge for me. She had lived in Ecuador for a year, so her Spanish was a lot better than mine. I will never forget her saying that she was afraid to visit the United States because of all the gun violence. I had so

much to tell her about life in the U.S., but my linguistic limitations did not allow me to make the points I wanted to convey. The Chinese students were delightful, although it was more difficult to understand their Spanish. My background in phonetics proved to be useful, however. When we did group work together, I was able to help them with their pronunciation, which they sincerely seemed to appreciate.

I could be mistaken, but I believe that I was perceived as a non-threatening presence and perhaps even as a comforting ally in the classroom by my classmates. The teacher, although always pleasant, seemed to prefer to cultivate a more distant relationship with us. She never engaged with me directly, and, despite the fact that we were colleagues beyond the classroom, I never tried to forge a bond with her. I realized that I was clearly more drawn to the other students than I was to the teacher and that I was starting to enjoy being part of their group.

As the week went on and we grew closer, the class started to gel even more. One morning as I entered the classroom before class had started, I dramatically reacted in mock horror (in Spanish) when I saw that one of my Chinese classmates was wearing a New York Yankees cap. She had not realized that the cap was associated with a baseball team (my favorite team's nemesis): "I thought it just meant New York!" she protested. A lot of laughter (from all our classmates) ensued, and, with her permission, I took a photo of her wearing the cap, smiling. The ensuing discussion among several of the students, which focused on sports and urban rivalries, could have led to an extremely interesting cross-cultural discussion, which we had already initiated—ourselves—in Spanish! But then the teacher arrived, and we had to work on the *imperfecto del subjuntivo* ('imperfect subjunctive'). I was disappointed that the teacher did not embrace our animated conversation and find a way to link the grammar to our topic. My hope that she would pivot in that manner, however, revealed my own pedagogical biases regarding the potential and implicit goals of communicative language teaching, the framework in place at the center. My disappointment also reflected my own high comfort level with shifting and redesigning a lesson plan at the last second when unexpectedly finding an opening for a potentially meaningful interaction. It is important to point out that I do not intend to criticize the instructor, who was well-organized, competent, and thoughtful, or the pedagogical interventions³ that framed the 20 hours of class time, almost the equivalent of a half-semester of Spanish.

All this said, every teacher trainer who has observed a class would probably admit to having felt the strong desire to jump up, rush to the front, and take over. I definitely did not feel that I could teach Spanish, but at times, I saw what I thought were missed opportunities to lead students in what might be fascinating cross-cultural discussions, especially considering the diversity of the students in our class. I left the program unsure of how most of my classmates felt about being in Spain, except for what I learned during our outside-of-class conversations. What were their biggest challenges? Did they experience culture shock, and how did they react? How were they treated by the locals? What surprised them the most? Most of all: did they feel that they were undergoing any kind of personal transformations because of their study abroad experience?

In addition, I believe that it is important to consider how instructors and programs can make the most of the particular context in which students are learning about the target language and culture. In fact, this was the topic of my presentation from the week before! We had access to the city of Madrid; it might have been effective to assign us tasks to complete outside of or even during class that would have encouraged us to engage with the locals, who were welcoming, encouraging, and forgiving of our error-ridden Spanish.

Our instructor had us participate in a number of group activities, which I found beneficial. These activities broke up the class a bit; four hours a day, with only a short break in the middle, was a long block of time. In addition, the group work was helpful for community building. One day we were asked to come up with a list of commands in our group, and I tried to spice up the activity by encouraging my groupmates to produce commands linked to what *not* to do or else be a *turista malo* ('bad tourist'). We laughed as we put together a list of things that one should not do in another country, for example, speak your own language loudly/eat only food from your home country/explain to everyone why your country is better, etc. Again, it was interesting from a cross-cultural perspective to see what everyone contributed. My classmates came alive during this activity. Their laughter brought me joy.

Although group work was helpful to formulate my own thoughts and to practice speaking, it was not useful for receiving input. I would argue that hearing the other students speaking Spanish (perhaps with the exception of the Korean student, whose Spanish was the best of the group) was not valuable. I noted in my journal: "Difficulty understanding other students. Bad input from them." The analogy of playing tennis or a musical instrument is relevant here: only when you are playing with someone who is better than you do you truly feel as if you might improve.

One day, two Spanish graduate students came to class, and we were invited to speak with them informally in small groups, asking them questions about themselves and responding to their questions about us. It was not a particularly structured activity, but it was, by far, the highlight of the program for me. I listened carefully to how they spoke, noticing their accent, their vocabulary, and their syntax. Unlike the conversations that I was having with the native speakers whom I met in businesses and restaurants, which were mostly transactional, the interactions with these teachers-in-training had the potential to be meaningful (see Levine, 2014). I was disappointed when they left the class that day, as I craved having more time to speak with them. After that experience, I realized how much I should try to give my own students more opportunities to interact with advanced speakers.

Perhaps my classmates did not enjoy that interaction as much as I did. Students have various learning styles, and there are vast individual differences regarding the types of interventions that students find to be effective or motivating within the L2 classroom. At the same time, being a student in a language classroom after so many years did provide me with insights into what is effective at least for learners like me. More important, it also renewed my empathy for my own students, reminding me of the disappointment of not being able to express what you want to say—or to be the person you want to be—due to linguistic constraints. Remembering that frustration was an extremely valuable outcome from participating in this program.

EXPLORING L3 IDENTITY

In *French Lessons*, Alice Kaplan discusses her desire to be indistinguishable from the French and to blend into the target culture, and she laments her inability to hide her American accent (1993, p. 100). I admit having also felt that way about French and experiencing a sense of victory whenever I "pass" as French, which usually happens in short, transactional interactions with native speakers (see Piller, 2002, p. 191). In Spain, I did not feel that desire, or have anything close to the competence, to try to pass myself off as Spanish. When I spoke Spanish, however, for some reason, people often thought I was French.

Having an L2 identity as a French speaker clearly played an important role in my exploration and cultivation of my L3 self. Kramersch (1997) has highlighted the privilege of being a non-native speaker. People learning a third language (or beyond) bring to the table an additional advantage: that of having already successfully learned another language and created an L2 identity. Perhaps I did not feel the need to approximate Spanish native speaker norms because the pressure was off. I was already bilingual, so I had nothing to prove (see Róg, 2017, p. 300, for a description of the L3 as a “trophy”). I also think that I felt this way because of the wide linguistic diversity of Spanish native speakers, as well as the generous encouragement (and patience) that I have always experienced when I have tried to interact with Spanish speakers.

Although having a strong L2 identity was comforting and useful, not being able to express myself with the same facility in my L3 was annoying. I felt childlike during mundane excursions, and it was embarrassing to be presented with, or to have to ask for, a bilingual menu in restaurants. I felt as if I should apologize for wasting people’s time, for taking so long to accomplish communicative tasks. As was apparent in my descriptions of the classroom, these interactions helped me to feel a renewed sense of empathy for my students who find themselves in similar immersive situations.

Merging with my L2 self, my identity as a (non-native speaker) language teacher also became apparent, influencing my classroom persona as well as my interpretation of the experience. The way I interacted with classmates was clearly more as a mentor than as a peer. For example, in group work, I usually took on the role of facilitator. Outside of class, I helped classmates tackle problems and encouraged them to make the most of their time in Spain. If I entered the classroom before the teacher’s arrival, I could not help but switch into teacher mode, trying to get everyone warmed up before the lesson began. Coffey (2007) explains in his study that:

“participants conflated accounts of their identities as language learners with those of other subject positions according to profession and social status as well as their personal logic of narrative construction.” (p. 151)

I am, at my core, a teacher. Perhaps the woman who gave me the oral exam saw that and was concerned that the impact of my presence on the class could be negative. She did not realize, however, that it means a great deal to me to be a “good teacher,” one who really cares about students and takes deep pleasure in their success. Maybe if my classmates had been older and did not remind me of my own students, I would not have taken on this role. But I wouldn’t bet on that.

The issue of age is also important in assessing the cultivation of my L3 self during the program. My identity as an older learner is interesting because it reflects the influence, and my interpretation, of my past self as a language learner. Coffey (2007) explains that “narratives allow an individual to make sense of their own past, present and (predicted or imagined) future” (p. 148). Kramersch and Zhang (2018) assert:

Nothing confronts language teachers as viscerally and unexpectedly with their own past history as a classroom full of students from a different age group, with different life experiences and a different understanding of history. Rarely does research talk about the hopes, expectations, surprises, disappointments, memories, and emotions of multilingual teachers, who rediscover in each classroom their own relationship to their different languages and the experiences they associate with each of them. (p. 181)

Becoming a student again, among much younger classmates from such different backgrounds, provoked unexpected memories and emotions, as well as some nostalgia.

While the other students were more focused on cultivating their future selves, I brought the baggage (perhaps in the French sense of the word, which does not necessarily have the negative English connotations) of the past with me. In particular, I felt myself drawn back into my 20-year-old self on a year-long study abroad in Paris – feeling and experiencing things for the first time, all through the filter of developing a new linguistic identity. However, it was different this time, thirty years later. I wrote in my journal:

Memories of junior year abroad—getting up early—a crisp/cool day after the heat wave. Walking through the city with a purpose, while everyone else is also going on with their days. The sights and the sounds and the scents are lovely. I am a different person. I bring so much more experience.

I was also grateful to be able to immerse myself in the language and culture as a student, not a tourist.

It is interesting that my French identity seems to put value on wistfulness, or joy mixed with sadness, as expressed so beautifully by the 50-something protagonist in the scene “14ème arrondissement” from the film *Paris, je t’aime* (Payne, 2006). I admit that my French self loves nostalgia; French culture is connected to the past so longingly. Kramersch discusses the “sensuous material aspect of language learning” as the ultimate impetus for engaging with another language and culture:

Motivation is an instrumental adjective for me, it’s something that moves you in a certain direction. Pleasure is fundamentally linked to your senses, to your perceptions, and to your sense of well-being and happiness. And that’s why I like the word pleasure rather than motivation. (Kramersch & Gerhards, 2012, p. 78)

Perhaps older learners derive unique pleasure from learning a new language, since it reconnects them to something intangible from the past, rather than (or in addition to) something available to them in the future.

Although I came to Paris at 20 armed with linguistic skills that far surpassed my Spanish preparation, my identity then, both linguistic and overall, was still emerging. This time I approached my sojourn with the advantages of age and its (I hope) associated wisdom. Even though I could not recreate the same feelings I had experienced as a 20-year-old, I was able to remember them. And, although I was frustrated not to be able to be the person I wanted to express using Spanish, I actually knew who that person was. I wanted to be myself in Spanish, but maybe what I learned was that I would never be the same person⁴ in Spanish (or in French), and that was fine. Maybe accepting that ambiguity was easier to accomplish at an older age.

CONCLUSION

I felt a combination of various emotions on the last day of class when I received my diploma, which attested to the fact that I had “met the B2 requirements.” Honestly, I was a bit dubious about that. For one thing, I felt disappointed that my verbs were still terrible. I don’t know why I had such a block with the *prétérito*. I also wondered how much vocabulary I had acquired and whether my Spanish had become more colloquial and less a translation of French. I knew

that I had not made a lot of progress linguistically, but I also realized that, obviously, a week is not enough time for everything to sink in. I also admit not putting in as much time outside of class as I should have to supplement the classes; I did not have the stamina. I knew that I had a long way to go before I would be able to achieve my goal of becoming more fluent in Spanish.

I asked the administrator if she would take a photo of the class with my phone. I did not want to forget the faces of my classmates, for whom I had developed great affection. I knew that I would probably never see any of them again, and that saddened me. At the same time, as with any class, a community had emerged, for which I was grateful. I like to think that maybe I had played some part in that, but maybe that's because my identity as a teacher craves the fostering of that connection. My classmates jumped out of their seats and surrounded me, smiling. My memories of them are permanently etched in that photo, though I don't remember their names.

The limitations of this description of my experience are clear. Coffey (2010) explains that “the emphasis on individuals telling their life as a story implies that these stories are selective and so construct specific narratives.” (p. 121). My bias is certainly unescapable. I recount my narrative from some journal notes and email messages, but mostly from my now five-year-old memories. My words undoubtedly also reflect how I would like to come across, both to my reader and to myself. Coffey (2007) comments on the “performative” aspect of life histories:

People recount events and stories about themselves for certain reasons—they want to be perceived in certain ways and their memories are filtered by language and restricted narrative structures. Autobiography—telling the self—is not, therefore, a record of past events, nor even a voice expressing inner-subjectivities, but rather a socially constructed project. (p. 147)

I realize that those reading this article might ask why my experience should matter to anyone else. One answer is that I hope that my recollections might lead others to feel more empathy for our students, both in terms of their language learning and the cultivation of their multilingual selves. I also hope that my account can lead readers to examine how they might explore their identities as teachers and also as multilingual individuals.

I keep thinking about the notion of privilege. I had the privilege of being able to engage with a language and a city at an unusual stage in life. I had a week during which I experienced great freedom, having the time and financial resources to live comfortably and do as I pleased. I met the unexpected at every corner: a look from or at a person, an overheard conversation, or a storefront window decorated with unfamiliar items and unknown words. I tasted new foods; the air smelled different. Perhaps people were kinder to me, and more patient, because I was older. Most of all, I had the opportunity to reconnect with my 20-year-old self, who had been long forgotten. I remembered what it felt like to be young, to be a student, to sit in a classroom with other students and to be accepted as part of the group. I hope that my readers might feel motivated to find some way to return to the classroom as students, to lose themselves in a new language and culture, and to emerge with a better understanding not only of what it feels like to be a language student again, but also of who they have been, who they are, and what truly matters to them.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Robert Davis, Nicole Mills, Boris Yelin, and Sandra Katz for their feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

NOTES

¹ Kramersch and Zhang (2018) distinguish a “‘story’ (a sequence of logically and chronologically related events)” from a “‘narration’ (a construction of a deeper meaning from the point of view of a narrator)” (p. 114).

² Nicole Mills (p.c.) reminded me that “the notion of teachers experiencing teaching from the learners' perspective is common in TA/TF training programs where *shock demo* lessons are taught in languages that are unfamiliar to instructors.”

³ The class adhered to many of the guiding principles for effective pedagogy in the 21st Century classroom (Bourns, Krueger, & Mills 2020, p. 4-5).

⁴ See Kramersch (2009) regarding multilingual subjects' realization that their personalities shift when they speak different languages (p. 1).

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