
FORUM

Multilingual Awareness through Travel

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The study of a foreign language (FL) always proves to be a long-term project. It might be even advisable to think in terms of a trans-generational process because most students decide on a specific language for a host of reasons and are certainly also influenced by their parents, peers, friends, relatives, and others. By the same token, they will influence the next generation as well through their recommendations, ideas, suggestions, and examples. To maintain a high rate of foreign language learners, FL teachers must always consider what impact their present student body will have on the public, their families, and also on the next generation. Even if students in one class might not perform well, or might not retain much of the target language taught at school or college, the crucial aspect seems to be how much they will remember their experiences in their own FL class or classes long afterwards as something fruitful, enjoyable, productive, and meaningful. For instance, many college students usually decide for one or the other FL simply because they had previously been exposed to it during their early years either in their Elementary or Middle School, either in regular or in after-school programs (Pesola). In other words, teaching a language invariably involves many different strategies, long-term goals, complex interests and motivational factors, and it invariably involves numerous other subject matters, such as cultural studies, global studies, economic and political studies, military and religious studies, and gender studies (Kramersch and Hoene).

Considering the flurry of recent publications focused on new approaches to the teaching of FL (Tokuhama-Espinosa; Phipps and Guilherme; Rivers; Sercu and Bandura), or concerning the question of how students' perspectives vary from teachers' perspectives regarding the relevance of culture in the classroom, cultural stereotypes, and the actual importance of a FL within the global market system (Chavez, "We Say 'Culture'"; cf. Chavez, "Variation"), it seems surprising that some of the practical experiences of teaching FL in a travel environment have not yet been considered adequately (LaBelle). Some scholars seem to have recently discovered that the teaching of culture as part of the FL curriculum does not necessarily rank very high on the priority list of our students who might be motivated to take a

FL simply for pragmatic reasons (cited in Chavez “Variation”: Gunterman et al., Harlow and Myskens, Hotho, and Martin and Laurie). But whatever the situation might be in the day-to-day classroom at any level, I would submit that it is most significant to remember that each teacher has the unique opportunity at each specific moment through his/her outreach efforts to break through possible and potentially dangerous barriers between her/himself and the student body, whether they are initially motivated to study the FL or not, whether they demonstrate interest or not. Teaching is and will remain a very personal matter, and a good teacher will always have the best chances to take the students with her/him toward the desired goal (Classen, “Das Licht”), if the conditions are right, if both sides in the game understand the necessary principles to achieve this goal, and if numerous outside factors contributing to the creation of motivation to study a FL are present (Dornyei and Schmidt; cf. Yashima et al.).

The teaching of a FL principally implies that we are dedicated to the global community in this world and that we embrace the idea that humanity can only prosper on the basis of good, open, functioning communications (Knutson). Teaching a FL does not mean that we enter a competitive race against other languages and other cultures. By contrast, to reconsider a common notion, those who study a FL also study culture, political structure, ideology, and so forth—the fundamental basis of a “Studies”-oriented approach, such as in German Studies, Russian Studies, and French Studies. Once a student has voluntarily embarked on the path toward the acquisition of a FL, s/he has already indicated a willingness to look beyond the narrow confines of her/his own identity, culture, and language. But the situation in the United States represents numerous challenges, especially the sheer geographical size of the country and the political pressure by some groups to identify with this country through a commitment to English only (Tucker).

What would be realistic goals in all our efforts to teach FL at the various levels (K-16)? Can we truly rely on idealistic concepts that a majority of our students will take with them, after two or four semesters, a solid competence of a FL and its underlying cultural background? Even if that were the case, how long do our students retain that knowledge, if they do not apply it on a daily basis? Renate Schulz, certainly an expert in this field, voices serious criticism of this idealistic concept and avers that unless the entire educational system in the United States is transformed in order to meet the same FL standards as in the European countries,¹ for instance, there would not be much hope to achieve such a goal. She states unequivocally:

communicative competence is neither a realistic nor a sufficient goal for the general education FL requirement. It is unrealistic because neither time nor instructional context is sufficient or appropriate to develop a meaningful and lasting level of

proficiency. It is insufficient because short-lived, communicative survival skills are taught without intellectually challenging content and do not provide those intellectually enriching insights into language-related factors that would indeed justify such study as a requirement for all students. (254)

But what should we, as FL teachers, aim for both in pragmatic and theoretical terms? Raising this question might be tantamount to opening Pandora's box, though a fundamental discussion of this issue cannot be avoided and would need to be in the back of the mind of every FL teacher. The present purpose, however, is to address a much more mundane and pragmatic approach toward building a new motivational inspiration and opening new perspectives toward FL at large, based on unusual teaching experiences over the last few years. I believe that both linguistic and cultural competence can be achieved in a FL setting if the circumstances are right. The question raised here is what the teaching of FL in the plural, instead of one specific language only, would mean for the educational goals of all our pedagogical efforts. Further, what interests me is the relation between the teaching of cultural history and the teaching of FL in light of public support of FL both today and in the future.

It is a universally accepted observation that FL students rapidly increase their understanding of the target language and its cultural context when they spend time in the target country and have to practice their FL skills in an authentic environment. But what might be the result if students travel through various countries with the goal to study a specific time period, or art history, or the history of architecture? There are many companies, working primarily with high school students, that have specialized in offering multi-country tours for American students, and their general purpose is to provide a fairly standard, but student-oriented tourist experience, with English-speaking tour guides and a carefully planned schedule that ultimately isolates the travelers from their linguistic and cultural environment.

In 2004 I organized a new kind of summer course for college students with a specific topic: the European Middle Ages. But the intention was not simply to establish an intensive summer course with a fixed location at one site and one language in mind; rather, the students were invited to come along on a travel course in which we traversed several countries and crossed numerous linguistic borders, exploring the continent's medieval history, architecture, art, and literature. But we also worked toward acquiring basic linguistic skills in a variety of languages. The course was limited to about three weeks and took us from France to Poland, with various amplitudes in our travel route, going both north and south on the general way toward Eastern Europe. At the end of the last tour, summer 2006, I decided to request students to fill out a questionnaire concerning their attitudes toward FL

both before the tour and after, especially because we had studied some basic linguistic elements of French, Italian, German, Czech, and even Polish throughout the entire travel time.² I asked the following questions:

1. What was your attitude toward Foreign Languages prior to this trip?
2. What languages did you know or did you study prior to this trip?
3. What was your experience with Foreign Languages during this trip?
4. What do you think about Foreign Languages now?
5. What will/might you do about Foreign Languages subsequent to this trip?
6. What would/will you recommend to others regarding Foreign Languages subsequent to this trip?
7. How has the experience on this trip influenced your attitude toward Foreign Languages?
8. Any further comments regarding Foreign Languages?

As this short list, which could have certainly been extended using a variety of other categories, indicated, the focus rested on attitudes toward FL and the long-term effect that such a travel course might have had on the students' mind-set.

Several factors need to be considered before we analyze some of the results. The students studied the history, culture, and literature of the European Middle Ages, relying on a standard American textbook. But they also had plenty of opportunities to explore the individual cities and sites on their own, so they had to cope with the constantly switching language codes in daily-life situations (restaurants, shops, toilets, museums, etc.). My investigation based on their responses to the questionnaire concerned general attitudes toward FL and the long-term effects of traveling abroad on the mind-set of a student in a general education class. There is no doubt that the direct exposure to cultural artifacts has a tremendous bearing on students working on the Middle Ages. In fact, the transfer of the regular classroom setting to the medieval scene in Europe powerfully brought home to everyone on this study tour the incredible relevance of that past world on us today in a myriad of ways (Paden; Classen, *Medieval German Voices*). The inspiration they received from the medieval cathedrals, castles, city walls, market squares, parochial churches, chapels, urban dwellings, and so forth cannot be underestimated. Of course, that was the very purpose of this course, to transplant students from the antiseptic classroom at their home university to the actual local setting where they could feel, see, touch, smell, assess, measure, and hence grasp, understand, and comprehend what we really mean by the term "Middle Ages."

But how did they experience the many different languages while on the trip? A philologically correct approach would have been, in the first place, to teach some smattering of medieval Latin, Middle High German, Middle English, Old French, or Old Italian. But these students had, on the average, hardly any information about the Middle Ages, and came from many different subject areas without having been familiarized with any of the fundamental cultural-historical aspects so relevant for that time period. Nevertheless, the study of a wide range of literary and historical texts from the Middle Ages brought home to them the wealth of languages that were once spoken, and how much these historical languages have continued to exert an influence until today, though transformed into the wide gamut of modern European languages. It would be a crucial stepping-stone in all FL approaches to convey a sense of the organic nature of any language, which turns the attention to its historical roots. When students are concretely situated within a historical context, there would be very little effort necessary to explain the connections between, say, modern-day English and German via Anglo-Saxon, and so forth (Waterman).

More fundamental, however, seems to be, at least for our purposes here, what impact this FL experience had on the students' attitudes and whether the model presented might have an influence on our global approaches to the teaching of FL. The issue does not concern how much and/or how well the students acquired either German or French, Italian, Polish, or Czech. The questions, by contrast, targeted conceptual aspects, that is, the evaluation of FL at large and the long-term consequences of this encounter with FL in their original context on the FL learner.

Of the eighteen respondents (five male, thirteen female), most answered the question what languages they knew before the study tour in a way best captured in one representative response: "English and minimal Spanish." Many students had taken several semesters of Spanish, some also French, and German, and two or three had also looked into more exotic languages, such as Serbo-Croatian and Romanian. In other words, they represented the average American college student and, by analogy, the average American, as one respondent emphasized: "None of my immediate family members fluently speak another language." This does not come as a surprise and is the common experience almost all FL teachers encounter with a beginning class, irrespective of the teaching level (K-16).

The students on this trip, however, were constantly challenged by a variety of languages of Romance, German, and Slavic extraction, and they all managed to cope better or worse within an amazingly short time. Hence the subsequent question that gets very close to the critical issue at stake: "What was your experience with Foreign Languages during this trip?" The respondents were astonishingly frank in their assessment of their learning curve, as one student emphasized: "I learned that

not knowing the dominant language of a country is incredibly frustrating. But I was annoyed with myself because I always feel like I am insulting someone else when I can't communicate with them." On a more positive note, one respondent underscored how "vital" the knowledge of some FL phrases proved to be and how much this linguistic tool makes it easier to communicate with the locals. Another student expressed her frustration with the plurality of languages, but she also noted with glee: "now I can say thank you in five different languages which is very cool." A more mature female student who has had considerably more language exposure in her past formulated even further disappointment with herself: "It was hard to ask people for directions to certain churches or sights because I didn't speak the language." Another underscored that "plenty of smiling, eye contact and hand signals" had worked very well for him. The variety of language experiences motivated a student to comment on the helpfulness of Spanish because of its common roots with French and other Romance languages, whereas Polish and Czech left her baffled.

A common linguistic conflict seemed to have arisen when the students tried to order food and could not read the menu. However, upon reflection, we would have to admit that most FL classes hardly ever come down to that pragmatic level, let alone the arcana of how to understand the sophisticated specifics of foodstuff in a restaurant, apart from very general and common terms for, say, bread, butter, cheese, meat, etc. On the other hand, the respondents also realized that they did not need to know a lot of phrases in order to cope well in a foreign country, especially considering terms such as "please" and "thank you," which they picked up very quickly. One student offered the following answer: "I learned interesting ways to communicate on the trip, german kind of corresponds to english as much as I was able to read a menu, french I could do because of spanish, but polish doesn't really correspond to serbo-croatian enough to read, so I felt helpless in Poland." Finally, one student clearly indicated that she had had the key experience on the trip because "It's really interesting hearing all the different languages being spoken in their elements. I really enjoyed it, and it made me develop more of an interest in the concept of language."

FL teaching will always remain a big challenge for teachers and students alike because it is, by default, a long-term project and requires constant work, review, involvement, and untiring effort. But our task as FL teachers becomes considerably easier when the students demonstrate the right attitude and embrace the idea of FL as an essential tool in the global community of today. This led to the fourth question, "What do you think of Foreign Languages now?" Apart from one or two rather lackluster responses, practically all participants offered highly positive perspectives and comments that were of most constructive nature. Most of them wanted

to learn a FL subsequent to the trip, or expressed an intent to pursue their studies on a higher level and with more intensity, even aiming for fluency, whatever that might mean. More important, students reported that they felt excited about their certainly very limited yet still noticeable ability to communicate in a foreign country. As one respondent said: "I've learned that the language barrier is not insurmountable." Others expressed "a desire to learn more languages now," and an interest in FL at large because, as one person stated, "I want to be able to communicate with more people on a greater scale."

In a curious though certainly understandable twist, one respondent commented on the need to establish a universal language in order to communicate with everyone in this world. One student also formulated the significant observation that it pays off to know at least a little of a FL rather than nothing at all because it builds many bridges to the other world. The same point was reflected by another respondent who elaborated on it in greater detail: "I think just the basics in many different language[s] would be really helpful." And that was indeed the practical experience of most participants, as one student stated very clearly: "I learned the very minimal basics to several languages throughout Europe."

The students were also inspired by the certainly daunting task of learning various FL and expressed respect for those who had already mastered some. My favorite comment in this regard was:

I have already had an interest in it [FL], but because of this trip, I'm going to take a French class. It made me able to make connections between all the different languages and how they all connect so closely. I'm in Poland right now, and I see all the street signs and am able to understand what some of them say even though I'm halfway across the world. Everything is connected. Everything is similar.

Finally, one student recognized the importance of FL "in understanding other cultures," whereas another revealed her delight in the various situations on the trip when she was in the company with the group, hence knew that her professor could help with at least several languages. But she concluded: "but [it was] also nice to be off on your own and have to communicate by yourself."

The following question concerned subsequent actions by the students following the trip. Even though some of the statements could have reflected simply wishful thinking, it is still noteworthy to observe that most respondents expressed their determination to take up a new language, such as German, to become fluent in Spanish, to learn basic phrases in other languages, to add a second language, such as French, to gain the level of a bilingual speaker, to explore Latin, to complement her Spanish studies with Italian or another Romance language, and to acquire lin-

guistic skills in at least four languages. Of course, several respondents did not see any possibility of acquiring more languages, or were content with their previous linguistic limitation because of their academic program constraints. But overall the experience of traveling with a serious study tour had obviously transformed most if not all students.

This came through in the answers to the next question concerning what these students would recommend other students to do regarding FL. Time is an important factor here, and we all know that there are learning opportunities at specific moments in life, and once these have passed, they are no longer available or very difficult to catch up with. My students' recommendations pertained to the best timing of learning a FL in life, and they suggested consistently studying a FL at the earliest convenience and for as long as possible. As one student poignantly emphasized: "Languages are hard and take a lot of dedication, which I didn't understand until my freshman year in college. Imagine what I could have learned if I had [had] this determination in high school." Irrespective of what FL students choose, there was a consensus that any FL would do just fine, as long as it would break the barrier of the English-only world. As one male student underscored: "Expose yourself to an array of languages as young as possible. For this is the point when the body is most suited to the adaptation of another language."

The recommendations varied from studying a foreign language at large to learning "a little about other languages before you travel to that location." One person plainly insisted on getting the relevant dictionary for each language to be encountered during the trip ahead of departure, but another student mentioned the magical conclusion I had hoped for when I had created the questionnaire. The female respondent simply stated: "To learn another language, beyond the Spanish that all students in Arizona learn in grade schools." Another person was very pragmatic and recommended to study "basic Polish and a Romance language prior to this trip." And another exceeded even of my most optimistic expectations:

I want to know it all. I want to be able to express myself to everyone. We are all the same; we're all people. The language barrier is such an obstacle that you have to overcome. It creates such a barrier and a gap. During the trip we read a bunch of translations, and it was made clear to me that translations cannot truly express what is being said by the author. It makes me sad that I cannot truly understand fully what they are trying to express, but the least that I can do is try. Try is to understand.

Another person plainly put it this way, and this might well be the highlight of all comments in this questionnaire: "I recommend all others to learn at least one other foreign language. It at least gives you a glimpse at a culture different than your own."

Finally, as one respondent emphasized, even if the linguistic skills were failing, “know basic phrases in every language, especially ‘thank you.’ Don’t be afraid to ask how to say something and use non verbal communication.”

Altogether, then, the confrontation with multiple foreign languages created a plethora of responses, and we may already conclude that American students would be most responsive to the challenges of foreign cultures and languages if they were appropriately exposed to them not only in a school setting, but on a travel tour, hence on site.

We do not need to discuss whether three weeks traveling through Europe and studying the Middle Ages would be enough for achieving a certain level of one or two FL in the students. But this was not at all the purpose of the trip, whereas the global experiences and their long-term effects even beyond the generational limits deserve close attention. Students are the best recruiters for any FL program, which explains the last but one question: “How has the experience on this trip influenced your attitude toward Foreign Languages?” Not surprisingly, apart from one rather disgruntled opinion, everyone responded with great enthusiasm and indicated a radical transformation in their attitude. One person mentioned that she realized “the beauty of other languages,” whereas another underscored how much fun learning a FL can be if it is “not just out of a book.” The critical need to learn a FL was a point not missed by a female student, though she did not elaborate further. Another student, however, answering the same way, explained: “People respond so much more positively if you just show that you are trying to speak their language.” The personal encounter with various FL gave one student more confidence and an increased interest in learning other languages. A remarkable response referred to the problem of quickly losing FL skills when they are not practiced on a regular level. The student continued: “My experience on the trip really makes me want to reclaim the language and study it until I am conversationally proficient.” As to be expected, one respondent confirmed that her outlook on FL tremendously improved, which ideally will have the desired long-term effects. I also found it important that one student realized how limiting the focus on Spanish in the American school system seems to be: “Traveling through so many countries opened my eyes to the widespread use of other languages as well.” And another highlighted the need to communicate with the rest of the world in their languages, making the study of a FL to a top priority.

What would be the overall conclusions that we can draw from these observations, as anecdotal as they might be considering the small size of our sample? Generally speaking, the students responded highly positively to FL when they encountered them personally and realized quickly how important it would be to know at least

a smattering of basic phrases in a FL in order to break the linguistic barrier and to communicate with other people. It might be doubtful whether they will actually enroll in new language courses, as many indicated on the questionnaire. But their attitude to and concept of FL had certainly changed to the positive or had profoundly improved. The exposure to a number of FL within three weeks also removed another barrier in their minds because instead of embracing the idea that Spanish is good enough to meet the FL proficiency requirements, these students now believe that everyone should learn at least several FL. They also signaled in their responses that the study of FL would definitely improve if they could be learned on site within the country of the target language. As one student commented: "They are nifty!" Another student underlined how much the knowledge of a FL provides access to the foreign culture, hence to the people in the foreign world: "It lets you become a part of the society and opens more doors for your future."

But studying a FL simply takes time, and some students expressed frustration with their own educational experience in the past, which might have consequences for the future: "I really wish I had started speaking a different language in my early schooling. I wasn't even aware that one could study foreign language until I got to high school." Fortunately, as another emphasized, already these three weeks immersed in a host of different FL left an indelible mark on these student travelers: "the experience will be with me forever." A male student clearly perceived the need for all Americans to accept FL as an important educational value: "If you can understand another culture then you can better participate in a global community."

Ultimately, what will be the consequences of this whirlwind experience with at least five different languages encountered within three weeks? These students will retain this experience forever, and they will talk to many people in their social environment about it. One day they will have to make recommendations regarding the study of a FL by their own children, or by friends and relatives. Or they will be asked to decide on the FL program at a school as part of a community group, or as politicians, or as administrators. Most of them will enter some careers, and many of those might require either traveling or the use of FL. Although the immediate impact of this medieval travel course might seem rather elusive, the long-term effects cannot be underestimated. This small cohort of students, who will soon be joined by many others after they have traveled through medieval Europe studying that time in real terms, like in a historical lab, will transform into the most outspoken and energetic defenders and supporters of FL in public, especially within the political arena, because they experienced them first hand. As one student underlined regarding what she would recommend to others: "I will recommend that people

take any chance they can to learn a language. Whether it be a friend or a professor, they should jump at the opportunity.”

There would be many opportunities to apply the model outlined here to numerous other travel courses. The focus could rest on linguistics, on modern-day European politics, on gender issues, on economic and political concerns, and so forth. The key motivational factor would have to be a specific course content, a topic, and the language/s would come in through the backdoor. Selling FL up-front would meet the serious challenge of typical American monolingual mind-sets that discount the relevant of studying any other language but English, whereas the confrontation on site eases the barrier and offers many incentives to embrace FL as a worthwhile study subject because, as one student commented: “I think that after this trip I understand the need for basic foreign language skills in many languages. Before I wanted to work on perfecting one language, but if I plan to travel the world, I think just the basics in many different languages would be really helpful.” Another student remarked, regarding possible recommendations: “Total immersion. That’s what everyone has said to me, and I truly believe it now.”

Indeed, if we are still looking for the most effective ambassadors for the study of FL in the U.S., then we can easily rely on students such as those who experienced a multi-language study tour and immediately realized the need to understand them all somehow in order to communicate and cope well with other people and cultures. Hesitant and unmotivated FL learners become highly dedicated and enthusiastic advocates of FL once they have witnessed the richness of the pluralistic language community in this world. Of course, this is not at all to challenge the study of only one language, such as in an intensive summer program (DuFon and Churchill; Taillefer), but the experience with students traveling through various countries and studying a unified historical topic, among others, in Europe confirms the validity of exposing the learner to a polyglot situation as a highly effective strategy to transform them into strong advocates of FL at large. Considering the uniformly enthusiastic responses by all participants of by now three medieval travel courses (2004, 2005, 2006), we can be certain that this unique learning environment—on the road, so to speak—will have a long-term impact both on the participants themselves, their social context, and, in all likelihood, the next generation as well. ✱

Notes

¹Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp.

See also: <http://www.cambridgeesol.org/exams/cef.htm>. (30 Jan. 2007).

²See the specific websites for each travel course:
http://www.gened.arizona.edu/aclassen/medieval_travel.htm
http://www.gened.arizona.edu/aclassen/england_2005.htm
http://www.gened.arizona.edu/aclassen/medieval__tr07.htm

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