

What I Learned From Being a Beginning Language Student Again

Jan Underwood, Portland Community College

A 20-year veteran teacher of college Spanish, I decided in the summer of 2012 to take an intensive First-Year German course. What I found in German class was not only a delightful opportunity to acquire another language, but a rich source of insight about the language teaching and learning process itself. Alongside my German notes, I filled a notebook with observations about this process, some of which affirmed what I had already discovered, and some of which have altered the way I teach. Below I describe some of these insights.

You must study out loud. When I became a language student again it became very apparent to me that I needed to say aloud everything I encountered, in every study task—in instruction lines, sentences in grammar activities, introductions and explanations, as well as in actual “readings.” Studying aloud gave this learner many needed opportunities to get her mouth around uncomfortable new sounds; it made patterns and turns of phrase more familiar; and, for reasons I have not fully come to understand, it aided my comprehension a good deal. Before I took German I think I had encouraged my own students in this regard, but only in a casual way; I did not hammer the point. Now I hammer it. You cannot learn to speak a language by studying in silence.

You must do more than complete the assignments. Class time, I quickly came to realize, is only an introduction to the material, and homework is only a minor reinforcement. Mastery comes with devising strategies that work to personally address your weak

areas, to answer your questions and to create sufficient practice opportunities. As with all worthwhile endeavors, you get out of it what you put into it. I studied 12-16 hours a week outside of class for my six-credit course, which is along the lines of what the college recommends, but which represents far more than is required to complete homework assignments. As an instructor I realized that students need to be told this information up front. They need to be coached to study—not merely do their homework—and they need to be shown *how* to study a language. I have started giving my own students a greater variety of homework tasks to model and expose them to the variety of tasks they need for themselves in their study time.

You must study every day. I have long told my students that it is better to put in 15 minutes a day than to study for two hours once a week. What I overlooked until I became a student again is that life gets in the way of even the most committed students. It is quite difficult to study every day. As an instructor, I've started giving assignments that have to be completed daily or nearly daily—completing on-line assignments, for example, for which I can set frequent due dates—instead of only having homework due on class days.

The immersion experience is extremely powerful. I learned at least as much German from my instructors' side comments—“Where did I put my marker? Oh, there's no room left on the board. Oops! I've lost the cap...” —as from the lessons themselves. These spontaneous moments, spoken with-

out artifice, became for me a rich source of new vocabulary, syntactic patterns and pronunciation modeling. Students should be coached to pay attention to these moments and even take notes on them. Some students will imagine that only the explicit content of the lesson is important, and they will miss an exciting opportunity to expand their interlanguage. At the beginning of this year in my own teaching, I took my German notebook to class and showed my students how I had taken notes, with the content of the lessons in the center of the page and my teachers' "asides" in the margins. Over time, the marginalia grew to take up more and more of the page, as I realized that that was where most of my learning was taking place.

Chance favors the prepared mind. To my surprise, I found it extremely helpful to read and study upcoming topics before class, precisely because coming prepared to class allowed me to make more of the immersion experience. If the material was entirely new to me, it took all my concentration just to follow the lesson, but if I already understood the points that were being presented, some of my attention was freed up to attend to other details. This experience has changed the way I teach: I used to prefer to be in charge of the way students first encountered a topic, and I assigned homework on a topic only after I had presented it in class, but now I prefer to have students study and practice a topic before I present it. Their time in class is then spent on fine-tuning their understanding, and on absorbing as much as they can of the "marginalia."

Everything they taught me in graduate school is true. My personal bias in teaching has long been toward an inductive, rather than a deductive, approach, and this bias was

very strongly reinforced when I sat in the student's chair. The difference between how much I learned when material was presented in a contextual, meaning-focused, hands-on manner, and how much (or how relatively little) I learned when it was presented deductively, was nothing short of amazing. It became extremely clear that the *least* effective way to present, say, the formation of the past tense, is in a teacher-centered lecture format, with structure separated from a meaningful context, and with a long list of grammar points presented at one time. It is *much* more effective to introduce just one or two points at a time; to present them in the context of a thematically relevant piece of communication, oral or written, in which students have already had time to focus on meaning; to give students time to notice the patterns for themselves; and then turn it over to them to play with and explore. I know why we teach deductively: we do it because we're in a hurry. But students learn more thoroughly, understand more deeply, and are able to use what they've encountered more effectively, if they are given less to work with and more time to work with it, and an active rather than a passive role in the lesson.

Students learn with ... an active rather than a passive role in the lesson.

Reading and listening comprehension are critical. It also became clear to me over the course of the summer that in the language teaching profession we tend to privilege production over reception. In other words, we spend most of our time trying to get students to speak and write, and we downplay, both in the classroom and in our textbooks, the attention we give to reading and listening. This lopsided emphasis is problematic for two reasons. One is simply that the receptive skills are as important to communication as the productive ones. But the other is that learners *rely* on reception in order to develop

production skills. Only with rich, contextual, abundant, comprehensible input can learners internalize new words and patterns. Reading and listening, so often marginalized as “enrichment” activities that take place only if there is time, should in fact be built into every lesson and should *precede* production. Otherwise speaking and writing become exercises that occur in a vacuum. The gears grind, the language doesn't flow—every word must be searched for and struggled over—and the speaker can't hear her own mistakes, because she simply has not been exposed to enough authentic language. My own German took a great leap forward when I set aside the extra grammar exercises I'd been poring over and devoted that time instead to reading. Since then I have reduced the amount of grammar homework I assign to my own students, and I have increased the listening and reading activities I ask them to do.

I have reduced the amount of grammar homework I assign.

Reduce, reuse, recycle. I found it extremely helpful whenever, in German class, we did an activity from a previous lesson at the end of a new lesson—not only because review gave me a little ego-boost and served as a helpful reminder, but because as we go along, we learners understand previous material at a deeper level than we did the first time we encountered it. The old material makes more sense, given the broader context we now have, and we can fine-tune, expand and extend our mastery of it. Activities that recycle previously encountered material should be built into our curricula at regular intervals. A good textbook includes such recycling, but in its absence, it is incumbent upon us, the instructors, to create opportunities for our students to revisit old topics with new eyes.

Less is more. It became extremely clear to me in my study of German that a myopic

focus on grammar instruction was not helpful to me, even when I was enjoying it. My grammar improved only as my overall proficiency—my listening and reading comprehension, my vocabulary, and the fluidity of my conversational skill—improved. In other words, accuracy improves in tandem with communicative proficiency and not separate from it. Beyond a certain necessary amount—perhaps one-sixth of my in-class and study hours—time spent on discrete-point grammar exercises, and on accuracy-focused production, did not improve my accuracy in spontaneous speech and writing. I made exactly the same kinds of mistakes my students of Spanish make—not because I didn't understand the concepts, but I simply could not internalize the patterns, and I could not “hear” my own mistakes, until I had had

more experience using the language communicatively. We must, of course, teach grammar: but only enough that our

students understand the concepts and have targets to aim at. Students are best served if they get a controlled infusion of focused grammar instruction—just the right amount, and on just the right topics—and spend most of their time reading, writing, speaking and listening in ways that focus on the actual exchange of novel information. I knew this before I took German, and decades of second language acquisition research has underscored it, but I appreciate its truth on a deeper level having experienced it from the learner's point of view. My main strategy in teaching grammar now is to focus mainly on receptive activities for new material and to focus on production mainly with review material.

More is also more. What I also discovered early on in my German adventure was that vocabulary was critical, and the more, the better. Vocabulary is both an end in itself

and a language-acquisition tool: the more vocabulary you already know, the faster you acquire more. My German vocabulary not only allowed me to speak and write with greater ease; it allowed me to understand what I read and heard more readily, which in turn led to the acquisition of yet more vocabulary. Yet oftentimes vocabulary is perceived as the “easy” part of language-learning and instructors do not do any explicit vocabulary teaching in the classroom. This is a mistake for a number of reasons. One, as I have previously mentioned, is that many students do not know how to study, and they will not know how to learn vocabulary effectively. Strategies for vocabulary study need to be made explicit, and should be modeled and practiced in the classroom. Another reason is that students will wisely allocate their study time to whatever the instructor most emphasizes in the classroom. They follow the lead of their teachers and of the textbook. If the instructor spends most of her class time on grammar that is what students will devote their study time to, because they believe it is what is most important to the instructor. In most of the many language classes I've taken over thirty years, instructors have said almost nothing about vocabulary. I think they were assuming it would be obvious to us that we needed to study it on our own at home—but the truth is, nothing is obvious. Students need to be guided.

Vocabulary in texts is generally presented thematically, and for good reason: we acquire new words more quickly when we associate them with other related words. However, we must not limit our students' focus to thematic vocabulary. If a student knows the names of 40 kinds of sports and leisure activities, she does not have much communicative ability. But if she knows 40 high-frequency, general-purpose verbs, nouns and adverbs, she can tackle a discussion on sports or on many other topics. In

teaching “themes” we must not neglect the very powerful, all-purpose words that come up in every interaction, regardless of topic.

Students have ESP. My final observation has to do not with the pedagogical but with the affective dimension of second language learning. I had forgotten, until I sat in the student's chair again, how much authority an instructor wields, how badly students want their instructors' approval, and to how fine a degree students are attuned to their instructors' moods. Instructors are not saints, but watching my own emotional life and those of my classmates over the summer, I was re-inspired to be as sunny, as encouraging, as understanding and as supportive as I possibly can be—holding high expectations of my students while always respecting their intelligence and their efforts. It matters.

My experience studying beginning German was so exciting to me from a professional standpoint that I began to feel that all language instructors should take on another language from time to time: to remember what it feels like to be a beginner; to remember that the characteristics of the foreign language, while obvious to the teacher, are not at all obvious to the learner; to remember that students do perceive the difference between adequate and good, and between good and excellent; to remember what an enormous undertaking language learning is. I am now in a Second Year German class, and I intend to keep studying this and other languages throughout my career. It has been a challenge and a joy, and I am a better teacher for it.

Jan Underwood has taught Spanish at Portland Community College since 1992. She holds a Master's degree in Spanish and French with a secondary focus in Applied Linguistics from Portland State University. Over the years she has studied Spanish, French, Italian, Greek, Latin, Hebrew and German.