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PUSHING THE BARRIER IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Shuning Yan, Bryn Mawr College, 2014

This semester I have been working in the role of student consultant in partnership with Ariana Huberman, a Spanish professor at Haverford College. We focused on exploring the idea of threshold concepts in classroom teaching and language learning in her Intensive Intermediate Spanish class. The way I have come to think about threshold concepts is as gate-keeping, door-opening and bridge-building concepts in and between disciplines. This semester, Ariana and I explored this idea in two ways: in relation to incorporating grammar with the reading, and in relation to boosting students' confidence in speaking the language. In this article I would like to give a summary of our journey this semester with my own experiences as a Spanish learner, written in italics, woven into my observation reflections on Ariana's class. I hope this weave of student, professor, and TLI consultant perspectives will help people better understand the apprehension many students feel in learning a language and provide future teaching references.

Threshold 1: Learning Grammar

When I started learning Spanish, one of the biggest obstacles I encountered was how to use the complicated grammar. As a very hard-working student, I spent nights copying and memorizing the different conjugations and verb tenses. Often I would have to throw out whole bags of Spanish scratch paper by the end of a semester. As you can imagine, this type of rote memorization of the grammar didn't get me very far. When it came time to pick which language tense or verb to use, I would still be lost.

The students of the Intensive Intermediate Spanish were going through a typical textbook learning stage, where learning grammar and the language itself are separated. So even with all of the verb tenses and conjugations learned, they still did not necessarily know how to use and incorporate each type into the appropriate situation. To target this weakness, Ariana had shifted from the textbook Spanish learning into a reading and writing intensive course. Instead of a cover-it-all textbook designed for foreigners, the students read short stories, literature and argument pieces from native writers. The book they used for grammar was a comprehensive grammar guide that is also often used by native speakers. This shift of study material set the tone for the semester as an immersion language learning experience.

Each class was divided into grammar problem sets and reading discussions. In the beginning, as a way to bridge between grammar and application, Ariana and I tried implementing an exercise whereby students found the grammar points from each week in the reading text. For example, when we were talking about the usage of pronouns, we would ask students to identify pronouns used in the reading as a way to bridge the theory of grammar with application in real life writing.

The result, however, was not as positive as we had expected. During the mid-semester feedback, most students expressed that they had not found this exercise of combining grammar with reading to be helpful. In fact, they were perfectly happy with separating out the two. Our initial arrangement to help students cross the threshold of application of grammar did not seem to work out. Upon careful reflection, we have found that grammar was not an essential barrier to reading.

Even without knowing the grammar structure or tenses, as long as students know the verb root and vocab, they can still get the general idea of the sentences. Thus they don't find this type of grammar identification to be interesting and helpful. Instead, grammar usage really comes in in writing, and that is where we focused our attention on during second half of the semester.

Threshold 2: Gaining Confidence

During my study abroad experience, I didn't focus myself on grammar learning at all. Instead, I spent time learning Economics with local students. This was a horrifying experience at first, since I couldn't keep up with the class. Also, I was afraid to speak up in class in my broken Spanish as I was the only exchange student at the university-level class. However, through this sink-or-swim method, I quickly caught up and by the end of the semester, I was very comfortable doing group work, still with my somewhat broken Spanish, but I felt much more comfortable with the language. For me, the study abroad experience wasn't about just building up vocabulary or gaining an accent, it was about building this confidence in using the language and speaking up.

Lack of confidence is the fundamental barrier and threshold to language learning. Without speaking up, existing problems with the grammar and language usage can never be discovered and improved on. That is why building student confidence to speak up in class was another critical threshold concept Ariana and I worked on.

To facilitate more conversation and discussion, we applied a small and large group discussion method. Students would come into the classroom already having read the article to be discussed. They were not expected to have a full grasp of the text, but some basic understandings. Instead of jumping to a class discussion, the students were first put into smaller groups of 2 or 3, and they answered a few questions. This smaller group discussion was designed to solidify students' understanding of the text, as well as provide an opportunity to practice answering the questions prior to presenting in a large group, which can often be stressful.

Students liked this combination of small group discussion and large class-wide discussion. Even though they might be reporting back what they had talked about in small group discussions, student did not find the process repetitive and even liked the chance to say the same idea multiple times for more practice.

I have found that the most difficult writing task was not a difficult topic, but no topic at all. Without any instruction or structure, the infinite possibility can seem daunting.

The best discussions are often generated with some type of structure or guidance. This is why Ariana would post a few discussion questions for each reading ahead of class. These questions can act as an overall structure for understanding the text, as well as check list of comprehension. Students enjoyed this and often use the reading questions during exam reviews.

When I was living in Barcelona, I enjoyed carrying a pocket dictionary with me everywhere I went. It assured me that there was always this backup solution in case I failed at communicating my ideas. It helped me stepping into a bank, interviewing for a volunteer position, as well as

talking with interesting strangers. This type of support was what made the exploration of language possible.

At the beginning of the class, students often complained about the long readings they had to prepare for each class. Sometimes the readings were so long that it discouraged the students from even getting started. To help students with this, we planned on making keyword lists for each reading. This way, the students could feel that there was a cane to support them when needed and thus they would be more willing to venture into unknown and difficult text.

Conclusion

I hope that through sharing this semester's feedback in the learning methods Ariana and I explored in helping students overcome grammar and confidence issues in language learning, we are able to offer a source of inspiration for future language professors. We understand that we did not get to explore very thoroughly nor were we able to cover all aspects of language learning, but we hope this can be a ground for future inputs and discussions.