

## Reflections on my experience as a learner of languages and on how that experience may have influenced my teaching style and practice

Mónica de la Riva de la Rosa  
Secondary school teacher

### Resumen

En este artículo pretendo hacer una reflexión personal desde mi infancia sobre mi propia adquisición y aprendizaje de idiomas tomando el castellano como punto de partida y siguiendo con el posterior estudio y adquisición de otras lenguas extranjeras. Esta introspección me llevará a analizar hasta qué punto las experiencias vividas, tanto positivas como negativas, han podido influir en los métodos y estilos de aprendizaje que imparto en mis clases al día de hoy.

**Palabras clave:** reflexión, adquisición de lenguas, estilos de aprendizaje, historia de vida

### Abstract

The following article is an introspection into my childhood and early youth memories in relation to language acquisition and learning of foreign languages. This analysis will help me determine to what extent these experiences, positive and negative ones, may have influenced my teaching methods and style to the present day.

**Key words:** reflection, language acquisition, learning styles, teachers' lives

### 1. Introduction

We all have a story behind, this is unquestionable. Personally, I have little doubt that my family and life experiences have most definitely conditioned who I am and what I am presently dedicating my life to: teaching.

Whenever I look back to my past, my memories of childhood and other periods of my life reveal a “linguistic part of me” which has always been latent. Though it is true I can only recall some scattered events or situations which took place at specific times, these minor details illustrate aspects related to the acquisition of my mother tongue, Spanish, or my first contacts or attempts to learn foreign languages. In the next few lines I will try to give an accurate narration of those recollections which, I believe, may have influenced my teaching profile as it is nowadays.

### 2. My family experiences as a child

My very first memory of a language reflection had to do *with language awareness* and was related to one specific event: as I was born in Málaga where the local accent is characterized by a strong “z” sound instead of “s” in the pronunciation of many terms. At an early age I could tell there was a striking contrast between the manner in which both my parents and the rest of my family, native of the Canary Islands, expressed themselves and the accent mentioned above. Thus, probably around the age of 4 or 5, I could feel that the people surrounding me had various accents and used the language differently. When I was in 4º E.G.B. (the educational system of the time) I remember having trouble with the enunciation of the sounds “s” and “z”, to

the point of mixing the pronunciation and spelling of culinary and other terms pronounced with an “s” sound by my Canary Island parents instead of the Castilian “z”. Another experience I can trace back was the strong emotional impact I felt on the first occasion my parents sent me to Tenerife to spend the summer there. My relatives’ accent was so catchy and powerful I picked it up some days after arriving there. Moreover, my efforts to adapt “my own accent” to theirs was deliberate not to feel ashamed and, most importantly, so that my family did not call me “goda”, a pejorative term for those coming from the peninsula.

My first contact with the English language came through my mother, I must have been about 6 years old at that time. My mother, who had learnt English in her youth, made an attempt to teach it to my sister and I using the only book she had at hand, a method for adults called “Essential English”. These classes were not terribly successful nor lasted very long, my sister and I could not help burst out laughing at the pronunciation of those “barbaric words” that seem to spit at us. I particularly remember my mother trying to make us repeat the word “vegetable” (she could not have possibly chosen a harder term!).

I was never afraid nor intimidated by the learning of languages; quite to the contrary, it seemed like a natural process to me and being “sensitive” to them help me adapt easily to new accents or local expressions and, often, to brood about all those language variations I could sense.

My second direct contact with the learning of a language turned up just by chance. The strong energy crisis that hit Europe in the early 70’s made my father lose his job and he was finally forced to accept a position in France where we all moved.

By mid-January we started our new life in Boisséjour, a small village in the outskirts of Clermont Ferrand. Days after our arrival I started going to a French Lycée. At the onset the experience was quite hard but eventually turned out rewarding with regard to my learning of the language. Although I felt lost and frequently panicked, I also realized I could infer the meaning of many terms and this fact gave me great confidence. It took me about a month to understand and follow everyday conversations. I must really have learnt to express myself fairly fast to the point of being categorized as talkative as the school reports from that time show. The French teachers’ comments were: “Quelle bavarde!”, proving I must have become a real chatter box!.

Until the end of that school year, 6º EGB, (5ème in the French system), I was not given official marks but sat in on the classes; the second academic year there (4ème), I was treated and evaluated like any ordinary French student. It was an enriching experience, a “forced immersion” which offered me the possibility of learning French and which opened my eyes to a totally different culture from the one I had experienced until then.

On our return to Spain we moved to the Basque Country. Again, I had to face a new kind of culture and social clash. Soon I began noticing strong differences with the South of Spain. I was receptive to the way people spoke, their accents, the expressions they used and the varieties in sentence intonation. I quickly assimilated these features and nuances without having any knowledge about them and used them in my benefit so as to become “one of them” as soon as possible.

### **3. My experiences with teachers**

My learning of languages continued, I went to a Bilingual French School called “Nazareth” for the course of 8º E.G.B and had English extracurricular lessons in an academy called “Inlingua”, where the teaching/

learning was exclusively based on the oral skill. This had as a result that particularly in the first courses of Secondary school my spoken level of the language was always better than my ability to write it.

The teachers I had in along this period were so peculiar and different from what I believe English teachers are nowadays that they became a clear example of what I would never want to reproduce in my future teaching.

The four years of secondary school I was taught by two different English teachers. They were really gloomy and, I dare say, “weird” for present standards, although I must admit that both had a solid knowledge of the language. However, making use of adequate methodologies was not one of their strengths and all their lessons were basically centered on the textbook and on doing lots of drilling exercises and choral repetitions as a habitual practice. We, students, were never taken into account, there was a syllabus to cover and that was the teachers’ unique concern when preparing and giving the classes.

Many years later when I started English Philology at University I had one of the best professors ever. He definitely became my model to follow and gave the sort of reflective lessons that made us want to learn more and more. He was Irish, incredibly knowledgeable and enthusiastic but also understanding, a good ear, motivating and warm; students really mattered to him!

At University there was another Professor whose positive influence still lingers. This teacher taught me General English and Phonetics for three intensive years. She was an extremely peculiar person in all senses: the way she dressed, her shyness and the fact of being an absolute workaholic who confessed that hardly slept as she would spend her nights reading English dictionaries. Her family was Spanish but she had been brought up in England and though her Spanish was correct, it sounded totally artificial. She taught both subjects equally well. Being incredibly well-organized she always had loads of interesting handouts set and ready for us to tackle. She prepared interesting materials, made us do oral presentations, was extremely accurate in her corrections but also reinforced our work with positive comments and praising. She demanded an awful amount of work from us but she was so dedicated that sometimes these corrections were even longer than the assignments we had turned in. She was no doubt one of the best examples I have ever had and I would always feel extremely grateful to her for setting such an example which I have always had as a reference in my teaching practice.

#### **4. Reflection on the type of learner I am and the influence this has had on my teaching methods**

After studying and becoming familiar with all the theories behind Gardner’s Multiple Intelligences Category, the results I can gather from the test show that I am a mixture of a linguistic-musical type of learner. As to other classifications like the one put forward by Strong, Thomas, Perini and Silver (2004), my teaching ways would comply with the mastery and understanding styles as there are characteristics of these two reflected in both my learning and teaching.

Not wanting to sound pretentious, as I became familiar with these theories many years ago through readings and training courses, I believe I have gradually attempted to include all kinds of learners in my lessons since. Interestingly enough, when I analyze the type of materials I prepare, there is a clear predominance of activities that are related to music, many tasks that include phonetics (work on sounds, stress, rhythm) and, increasingly, I have been trying to implement exercises where the students can

manipulate things: work with pictures, cuttings, paper strips, handouts with questionnaires they fill in mingling and interviewing their classmates, computer-based lessons (use of webquests), use of OHP, DVDs and others.

Non-the-less, there are still many areas that escape my teaching scope and which I struggle to insert in my classes; this is the case of tasks which focus on logical-mathematical and visual-spatial learners. To suit their needs, I try hard to make use of diagrams, graphics, pictures, problem-solving, and logic games, whenever suitable or relevant to clarify aspects or to better structure concepts.

Along my teaching career I have also modified aspects like breaking my tendency to give an overall idea of the concepts to be taught and, instead, insert approaches which first concentrate in details to later provide the whole picture, like those we find in activities that require the students to infer the rules themselves from a context or examples given.

In relation to my personal attitude towards instructing, my premise is to try to be reasonable and a good ear at all times; keeping this in mind, I seek to include the students' preferences in my lessons (I give them questionnaires at the beginning of the year to find out which they are) but without neglecting the syllabus to be covered. I also strive to be a model: "Values are caught, not taught". This is why I thoroughly prepare my lessons thinking of each group and trying to adapt the tasks to them in the most appropriate way so as to cater for all the students' needs. With my class attitude I want to show them how essential it is for me that they learn, that I worry about their process, their willingness to work, their behavior, and that other aspects like how they feel and get involved in the class matter a lot to me. In short, I love my students and struggle to prove this to them in my everyday teaching practice.

## 5. Reflection on the ideal teaching context and teaching strategies

There are no ideal classes though this would be all teachers' dreams as we all wish they existed. Every group is different and every group can evolve positively or negatively along the academic year: a class which begins working beautifully can suddenly change its attitude and end up having bad academic results; the reasons are diverse, sometimes they start relaxing and consequently neglect part of their work, the contents become too difficult for them to follow, there is peer-pressure not to study, the causes are numerous. It is our duty to keep up their effort and to be ready to work hard to make the most of our students despite the fluctuations or other impediments we may encounter. Dealing with mixed-ability classes, pupils with special needs, large number of immigrants in our classes, etc., are certainly big challenges for us.

To aid us in the difficult task of teaching **motivation** should be one of our main mottos. I will mention some of the ideas I usually undertake in my lessons to encourage the students. Before starting any unit I spend some time analyzing the contents, this helps me look for entertaining activities which could complement the ones in the book. Whenever I intend to do these "extras", I announce it at the beginning of the lesson. This is in itself motivating and rewarding as the students will often do their best to work hard during the lesson to have enough time to get to the "leisure activities" part.

When the pace of the class allows it, I sometimes focus the whole lesson in these resources as it helps strengthen the rapport with the students (they behave differently when playing) and without them noticing, these games/tasks make them revise and consolidate vocabulary and structures. Similarly, if I see I will have

five/ten minutes left at the end of the class, I round it up with a short game I have ready to use in case I can fit it in.

Another thing that really works for me to motivate the pupils is to offer the students a wide range of possibilities to raise their marks along the evaluation. I look for tasks they can prepare themselves related to the unit of study and plan with them what they will do, how, when and whether it will be done in groups or individually. They like being given these opportunities and it is also a way of getting away from the book and the class monotony. I also make a point to begin the lessons in a different way every day as the surprise factor is crucial to keep their motivation and adrenalin level up.

I make it a point to take all the necessary time to explain things in detail and repeat them as much as necessary as I believe the instructions and procedures must be well-understood before they carry out any task making this time worth spending. I praise their work whenever I see they have made an effort, independent of the results obtained. When dealing with corrections, I always apply a double-correction system: first I look at their drafts and simply make general comments on the good or bad points of their work or have them do peer-to-peer correction. In this way, the students can review their work before turning in their final version, which will be reflected in an improvement in their marks.

Before every new academic year I revise all the teaching materials I have been collecting to select those which best fit the syllabus, work well for certain levels and groups and which the students might find useful and enjoy. By making a constant up-dating of the methods we use and having a critical stand on everything we undertake in class our work becomes more efficient (the students learn more) and I believe it also becomes more meaningful for us. In the last few years I have also tried to implement the use of ICTs in my lessons to open new routes and to offer the students more choices to expand their learning.

## **6. Other reflections**

My teaching philosophy is that all and every single one of our students should be our concern. One of my worries is to engage those students who seem lost, who switch off or who deliberately try to boycott our classes. Though there may be a reason for this behavior, the question is that we do not always have the time to find the causes and, consequently, intervene. Often the students' previous experience as learners has left an indelible mark which negatively determined their attitude towards the subject; modifying these conduct requires not only a good teaching practice, setting good examples, efforts to integrate them and other considerations. It needs our psychology, a lot of dedication and that extra time we often lack.

The coming of immigrants into our educational community is another important issue to reflect upon. They are "special" because their circumstances are also special; their attitude often shows that the English class terrifies them, they compare themselves with the other students and are aware of their lower level, which makes them "get blocked", particularly when they have not been schooled in Spain since primary levels. Showing that we care for them and offering them extra support to help them "get there" can be the key to their success, though for many this might not work either.

Motivating our students sounds easy but it is terribly complicated. Many pupils experience the classroom as a setting where they will not discover anything new (the Internet, TV, consoles, computer games have already anticipated much of the information we teachers are suppose to discover to them). Developing in

them a sense of responsibility and ethical values and help them become reflective human-beings should be one of our main tasks as educators. Changing many of these attitudes can be a whole-life path, it takes time to modify things but it is worth the effort even if only some students finally comply with our ground rules.

Teaching is a complex subject full of nuances and diversities to be taken into account and thoroughly analyzed. Our classes are a melting pot where many different situations can occur and we must be ready and alert to deal with them all. As a final reflection, I would like to insist on the fact that we are working with people, youngsters who need guidance, references and adequate models to follow; we should provide all that for them and much more.

With regard to the teachers I had, it is evident that those we best recall are those who took the time to praise us at some point, had faith in our possibilities and encouraged us showing their care and affection. However, one obvious difference between my times as a student and the present is that we were not taken into account in the way the students are today. It would not be wrong to state that we have made headway as more holistic adequate strategies and methodologies are being applied to cater for our students and this is already a giant step.

Yet, if we compare the role of teachers in society with those of the teachers thirty or forty years ago we are in clear disadvantage. We have lost the respect and social influence we could have had in the past and, what is worse, our work and dedication are not given the value and consideration they deserve. Hence, we should regain our place in society making our voices be heard again. We have the weight of experience, preparation, knowing-how-to in our backs and should have something to say, not only in educational issues, but also in many other areas of society where we could bring in our expertise and common sense.

The improvement could be better achieved by establishing stronger links and having a permanent debate on the course of education with the whole educational community: students, teachers, parents, institutions. We should all row in the same direction to obtain the levels of quality and success we all wish for.

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**Mónica de la Riva de la Rosa** has been Catedrática de Inglés de Secundaria since 2000 and Secondary School teacher in state schools for twenty years. She has a degree in English Philology from the Universidad del País Vasco, a degree in Lettres Modernes-Traduction from the Université Catholique de Paris and holds a Master Degree in Teaching English in Bilingual Schools from the Universidad de Alcalá.

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