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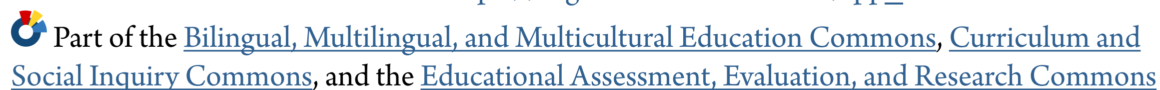
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A Retrospective-Introspective Look at Second Language Acquisition

Janet R. Zinner
MAT XIII

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree at the School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

August, 1983

This project by Janet R. Zinner is accepted in its present form.

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Abstract:

This is a personal paper in which I discuss my family's acquisition of French during a two year sabbatical stay in Brussels, Belgium from 1979 to 1981. I discuss the factors influencing our decision to learn French, our respective modes of acquisition, our rates and degrees of proficiency, and then how that second language fared upon our subsequent return to the United States. I also offer a comparison between child and adult second language acquisition based upon our experience as well as discuss certain relevant psycho/social intra-familial dynamics which came into play while there as a result of our individual language prowess - or lack of it.

I share our experiences involving language loss and/or retention faced upon our subsequent return to Belgium after spending 9 months in the United States and discuss the factors influencing this language retention and/or loss.

My conclusion offers some thoughts for incorporating the knowledge gleaned from this learning experience with an eye towards hopefully making more positive and effective the teaching of language in the classroom.

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Preface

By sharing our experiences as both child and adult language learners in a foreign community, I hope to make relevant the factors that we, as classroom language teachers, must be always sensitive to and appreciative of - i.e. the factors both academic and psychological involved in learning a second language. These involve not only understanding how a language per se is best taught but equally important being able to understand and be sensitive to the psycho-social stresses and strains involved in adjusting to a new environment.

Chapter 1: Second Language Acquisition in Brussels, Belgium; Child vs. Adult; Experiential vs. Classroom.

In August of 1979, my family (husband, daughter Meredith, aged 11, son Nicholas, aged 5), and I left the U.S. for what was to be the start of a two year sabbatical stay in Brussels, Belgium. It is the purpose of this paper to show the processes involved in our learning to speak French, one of the two indigenous languages spoken there. I shall discuss the factors influencing our decision to learn French, the mode of acquisition, rate and degree of proficiency, and then how that second language fared upon our subsequent return to the U.S. I shall also offer a comparison between child and adult second language acquisition based upon our experience as well as discuss certain relevant psycho-social familial dynamics which came into play while there.

To begin, some background information about our pre-Brussels language proficiency would be in order. My husband had studied French at university for three years, could read and write well, and could apeak at a low intermediate level. Prior to this, neither the children nor I had ever studied French.

Although my husband's sabbatical was, at the outset, to be for only a year, he and I both decided against sending the children to either the American or British schools for the following reasons: 1) Because of our desire to have an in-depth living experience in Brussels, to give our children a broader, less ethnocentric world view, 2) Because we would not be living in the American "ghetto" they would need the language skills of the host country and lastly, 3) For purely aesthetic reasons, we thought it would be an advantage for them to

have a second language. Because we were aware of the remarkable facility children have for language learning, we recognized this as a splendid opportunity for them.

Since the children never knew there was an option (of going to an English-speaking school), they picked up on our enthusiasm and positivism. Thus, the emotional climate for them was free from tension, stress or doubt. It was going to be an adventure. Indeed, as I recall, the only moment of anxiety from Meredith came when she thought she would have to wear a dress to school.

Belgium has a bi-national/cultural population consisting of the Flemish and the French. We happened to settle in a Flemish commune, but the majority of our neighbors were native French speakers. After looking about for an appropriate school, we decided in favor of the Ecole Internationale Le Verseau, an international bilingual (French/English) school which follows the Belgian curriculum but offers English courses up to "O" and "A" levels for English speaking children as well as EFL(their designation) for other children. Of the approximately 350 students at Le Verseau, 45% are non-Belgian. (Since Brussels is the seat of the Common Market, there is a large international community.) The language spoken at the school is French, yet there are two kinds of English classes as well: the first is English for English speaking children. At the first grade level, this consists of beginning reading and writing; at the second grade level, and through grade twelve, English literature and history are added. These courses are designed to prepare the English speaking child for university in England. They meet daily for one class period and are taught by British teachers. The other is an EFL class which begins in first grade and goes through grade twelve, meeting 2-3 times a week for one class period. These classes are taught

by both French and British teachers. This is the only time that the English speaking shildren speak English. All else is carried out in French.

The first year we were there, Nicholas entered first grade and Meredith entered fifth grade. Although Meredith should have entered the sixth grade, the school thought it best to put her back a year because of her language deficiency, the sixth grade year being a terminus and therefore that much more difficult a year.

Simultaneous with the children's entering school, my husband began his sabbatical work doing research at a Brussels cancer hospital and I enrolled in an intensive French language program. This course met daily for three hours and was to last five months. I spent, therefore, approximately 300 hours in the classroom. The mode of teaching was audio-visual. The language of instruction was French. We followed a standard text accompanied by slides and tape-recorded text. Discussion was limited to a great degree to the confines of material contained in the text. We were 10-15 multinational students, most of whom had previously studied French. I was the sole novice.

At their school, the children were receiving no special language instruction. They were merely attending class. Although they should have been terribly bewildered (author's bias) they gave no overt evidence of this at home .. (save for acute leg pains suffered by Nicholas about the third week of classes. According to the doctor, these were brought on by anxiety. After the doctor made his diagnosis (to us), he sagaciously told Nicholas that what he was experiencing sometimes happens to 5 year old boys but that it just lasts 3 days. Since that was the third day, the symptoms vanished within hours. This symptom of Nicholas' may or may not have been brought on by the new language. It might have been caused merely by his going to any new school all day for the first

time.) I do believe that the support network at the school was greatly responsible for this absence of bewilderment. There seems to have been much understanding and compassion for Nicholas and Meredith. They were not the first English speaking children to attend Le Verseau. The school was knowledgable and experienced in dealing with such situations. There was respect shown for their native abilities. Although Nicholas needed no formal testing prior to entry, Meredith had to take a math test. This was administered to her in English by the English teacher. Thus, there was a real effort to understand what her skills really were. The philosophy and policy of Le Verseau is to continue and improve the English speaking children's English in all skill areas while at the same time to help them be equivalently skillful in all areas in French, thus arriving in the end at perfect bilingualism for the English speaking students, a strong knowledge of English as a foreign language for the French speakers. An interesting thing to note about this is that although the French speakers are only taught English as a foreign language - the emphasis always being on French, the English speaking children are never explicitly taught French as a foreign - or second - language. They are expected to learn it by assimilation. They do.

It is worth repeating here that the children's and my language skills began at the same level, yet within two weeks of school time my ability to use French was far stronger than theirs. While I was beginning to put words together - very deliberately, one word at a time using only vocabulary I had studied and mentally translating all the while from French to English to French, there was no attempt on the part of the children to speak French - either at school, home or in the neighborhood. I was forced by circumstance to speak - to do the shopping , to run the house, to live in the community. When my husband was home, he would be the spokesperson, but when he was not, I was the one in charge. The

children had no such onus. They were never forced to speak at school.

At the end of two months, my speaking and listening comprehension skills were progressing well. I was still mentally translating - both in listening and speaking, stringing isolated words together one at a time, very deliberately conscious of tense, gender, and person, mindful of the 'tu' and 'vous' forms of address (although at that point I had had no occasion to use the 'tu' form.) It was at this point that the children began speaking - Meredith at school and at home, repeating oft-heard phrases; Nicholas not speaking at school but venturing a bit at home. (At this point in time, although the children were not speaking at school, they were, nontheless, doing the work.) At this beginning juncture two incidents stand out in my memory. I remember having great difficulty in understanding what the children were saying. It didn't sound anything like the French I had been hearing at my school. They weren't speaking in separate words. An example of this was in their saying "I don't know." Both children began using the expression "J'ai pas" (I don't know) - accompanied by the appropriate non-verbal gestures of hands in the air, shrug of the shoulders with a small puff of an unvoiced 'p' sound following the words. Having never heard such an expression I asked them what it meant. They responded "I don't know." I immediately countered with "No, that's not correct. To say it properly you must use two negatives - the 'ne' plus the 'pas' resulting in the correct "je ne sais pas." I was, of course, using grammar rules, while they were merely repeating what in fact they had heard - and what most Belgians use - outside of the French language classroom. Not entirely convinced, I had all I could do to refrain from correcting my French speaking neighbor, Madame Cambier.

The other incident involved numbers. At the dinner table,

my husband, still the 'expert', would test our progress. Although at this point I was far and away the 'winner' for vocabulary, the children were winners hands down at numbers. While I hadn't yet reached the lesson on counting (no high marks here for sequencing) the children were working with numbers every day.

Midway through our first year, approximately after four months of class/school, it became apparent that I was no longer making the "most progress". Indeed, while I had been merely parroting back bits and pieces of carefully chosen language, the children were carefully absorbing the whole. And at this point, when my day to day progress was hardly noticable, the children's speaking pace began accelerating and their progress was exponential. While I was still tacking on new vocabulary uni-piece by uni-piece - and tense, one a week, the children were using phrases. I was aware of words, where they began and ended; they were aware only of sound attached to meaning. I was aware of the 'tu' and 'vous' address forms; Nicholas used the 'tu' form indiscriminately. It was all he'd heard in the classroom. When I asked him to please use the more respectful, more formal 'vous' form with Monsieur Cambier, he had no idea what I was talking about.

After six month's time, close to the end of that first academic year, Monsieur Cambier made a pronouncement. My husband, having been our family spokesperson at the outset, was placed - by Monsieur Cambier - at the 4th position of language proficiency. (In all fairness to him, although French was the lingua franca spoken at the hospital, there was a major drawback to his being in an entirely immersive medical situation. The majority of the medical literature is written in English; therefore, most of the personnel in his laboratory conversed in English.) According to Monsieur Cambier's 'chart', I was

first, followed by Meredith and then Nicholas.[1] This 'test result', however, came only from over-the-fence type data and the fact that at this point the children were just beginning to speak conversationally. I had been speaking all the while - and he could see my progress. He was also not privy to any data involving reading and writing skills. Since I had taken an audio-visual program, I had little familiarity with written French. The result was that I was sadly deficient in these areas, and had to rely on the children - or my husband - to read the school notices for me. Because Nicholas was just learning to read and write (simultaneously in both languages) he was of little help. Meredith, however, became more and more helpful as her language proficiency increased. I could understand the notices - if she read them aloud to me, so unbalanced were my skills. (I shall expand further on the effect this language learning -and/or lack of it -had on our familial interaction a a later point in the paper.)

By the end of that school year, both children were completely bilingual, understanding all their schoolwork, responding in class, socializing with their French-speaking peers, and not giving French a second thought. Meredith had a role in her class play and gave a presentation about our canaries in both her English and French classes (in the respective languages.) Also at the end of the year, Nicholas joined his class in a thorough demonstration dealing with the art of making crepes. Both children went to as well as gave birthday parties attended by both French and English speaking children. The choice of language seemed to depend on group majority - although it

1. N.D. At the end of two years, the order changed: Meredith moved to 1st place, followed by Nicholas, me and then my husband.

never seemed to be a conscious decision on the part of the children. Meredith can remember when she didn't know French - yet cannot pinpoint the time when she did - testimony to the unconscious, natural process involved. I, in contrast, can remember when I arrived at the point of being able to listen and speak comfortably, testimony to the very conscious, deliberate and focused process involved. My proficiency remained at an intermediate level, never even approaching the full proficiency achieved by the children. My husband feels that his French did not improve significantly although he saw progress in his listening comprehension.

There are interesting comparisons to be made in our separate processes of second language acquisition. I learned in a structured program, assimilating only what was directly taught. Because it was an audio-visual class, I began speaking straight away, beginning with simple vocabulary and present tense, the material having little relevancy to my world and to my experience. On the other hand, my children, being surrounded by the language much as a baby is in learning his first language, were exposed to the whole of the language at the same time and, contrastively to my learning process, all was relevant to their world. To approach it another way, my language was presented horizontally, on a learning continuum, one step at a time, 'simple' to 'complex'; the children's language was preented spherically - the whole of it at one time and constantly. Therefore, while my learning was easier to ingest and spew out as each small piece was given, the children, being exposed to no such piecemeal approach, needed time to sort out the whole, to make sense of and process what they were hearing.

Because I was learning bit by bit, I had space and time to equate the new language with the old. I was never without my French/English dictionary both on my desk and in my head. What did the French

mean in English? Then I could understand. The children, in contrast, did not equate or translate the languages. I remember asking Nicholas what the French word for 'plate' was. He couldn't answer me. I knew he knew the word. Because he was learning coordinately - learning through direct experience - he, unlike me - learning compoundly or finding meaning through translation - never associated the two languages. If I had shown him a plate and asked him "Qu'est-ce c'est?" (what is it?), he most assuredly would have responded with "C'est une assiette." (It's a plate.) Concomitantly, because of this divergence in learning methods, my world view remained much the same; the children, however, were not only learning a new language, but were learning and identifying with a totally new perspective, a new and different world view.

To further differentiate our language acquisition processes, I was fully aware of the lexical parameters, translating word for word, being most distressed if I heard words strung together such as 'J'entendu' (I heard.) I would need first to untangle them in my mind, sort them out word by word, translate them word by word and only after that would I be comfortable with what they meant. The children, as with their 'J'ai pas' never analyzed, questioned or dissected what they heard. They associated the whole with its meaning in its setting. They equated the whole with the whole; for me the whole was equal only to the sum of its parts. By far the children were the greater beneficiaries.

As I learned the verbal, non-verbal and appropriate coding separately and at different points in the program, the children learned them all simultaneously and contextually.

As I learned the above aspects separately, so did

I also acquire pronunciation separately. As in most foreign language schools, we had language lab sessions where we would try as best we could to duplicate the native speaker's pronunciation. However, we were still basing the pronunciation on our native language sounds. Contrastively, the children, by not making any connection between French and English, merely spoke French as they heard it. There was no conscious effort made to 'work on pronunciation." It was there - with the language.

There are some similarities which I see between our respective language acquisition processes. Since this was a second language for us all, we - as contrasted with first language learning, did not begin on the phonemic level but at the morphological level with words and/or groups of words. Consequently, the rate of acquisition, for all of us, was that much more accelerated.

On another level, we all had strong motivational reasons for wanting to learn French. According to Nicholas, we had to learn it to know what was going on. Simple as that. We all were surrounded continuously by positive reinforcement both by being in the midst of the French language community and in the case of the children, there was an extra supportive aspect: because they were being simultaneously taught in English, there were no negative factors to overcome, no pressure to prefer one language to another, no pressure to choose. All was positive and constant.

Chapter II: Sociological/Psychological Factors Affecting the Family While Living Abroad.

It would be noteworthy here to point out some sociological/psychological intra-familial factors which affected us while living in Belgium. These are factors one doesn't read about in "Survival Tips for the Overseas Visitor" type brochures, yet which played an instrumental part in our day to day functioning and interrelating.

Because of the language differences and because the children were able to learn not only the spoken language but the unspoken, non-verbal language more quickly and far more effectively than we, the parents/adults could, the family as a whole underwent some status/role shifts and reversals.

Whereas the normal familial pattern is for the parent to be the guide, interpreter, authority figure, when that authority figure cannot command the same respect or following as he formerly enjoyed due to a diminished facility for leadership, that authority is proportionately lessened. Due to my limited ability to speak French, I wasn't able to fulfill my role as authority figure as I had in the past. If I didn't know, and the children did, our previous roles as authority figure and followers respectively, become quite muddly indeed.

For example, when notes came home from school written in French, and I could not understand them, therefore not knowing what appropriate action to take, my authority and credibility in the eyes of my children had to diminish. In another example, we needed a

specialized part for the heating system which we had to buy on our own. Although I had learned proper French and could conduct myself perfectly acceptably at the shops, at this particular hardware shop we were helped by an attendant who spoke Flemish-French, a Belgian dialect with which I was unfamiliar. In fact, I had no idea what he was talking about. Meredith, then 12 years old, had to carry on the transaction. She, of course, understood perfectly well what the man was saying. Further examples occurred when the children and I would visit with the Cambiers. I would begin a sentence and sometimes stop midway, trying to think of the proper tense or verb ending. Meredith's eyes would roll skyward in that universal non-verbal gesture redolent of "Oh no, Mom, not again."

My authority was diminishing and my daughter's increasing. This shifting of dependencies happened almost imperceptibly and, little by little, I began to depend on the children more and more. Because they sensed this (I have no idea how much they understood of this on a conscious level), our pre-existent familial pattern began to undergo some subtle shifting.

Whereas before, my 'word' was final and indisputable, now it was open to query. Whereas before, I was the sole investigator, information-gatherer, now the children took over at train stations, with official registry business and the like. In short, in all aspects of our day to day living in which my command of French was lacking, not good enough, slower or less effective than theirs, the children took control.

An almost complete reversal of roles came about when Nicholas was ill and the doctor came to the house as is commonly

done in Belgium. She (the doctor) spoke French so quickly, I could not seem to make her understand that I could not understand her, try as I did to slow her down. Because we had spoken before in French - albeit slowly- she assumed I was understanding everything. After the examination ended, Nicholas himself, weak with a high fever due to some sort of flu, had to tell me what he had and what I then had to do with regard to medication. This was indeed a hefty onus for a then 7 year old child as well as an equally hefty onus for me - hoping he was translating correctly. Thus, instead of the child blindly and trustingly following the parent, the roles in part changed and I, the parent, because of language inabilities and limitations, had to follow the lead of the child.

For me, this was a valuable although sometimes painful insight - seeing this kind of role reversal behavior in our family - as well as in the shifting roles of friends and their children. I remember one friend's child snickering behind his father's back as he (the father) tried to speak French with the gas man in his home. The father was Hungarian-born, had had to move- one his own - to England as an adolescent, and still spoke English with a marked Hungarian accent. His less-than-perfect French was spoken with a Hungarian-English accent. Rather than being proud of his father's accomplishments, the child was literally ashamed of the man because of his less than native French accent. Curiously, the boy was not ashamed ot his father's heavily accented English - perhaps because he was fluent, conducted most of his (micro-chip) business in English and was easily understood. His French was more awkward, he used it infrequently, and was not easily understood.

Therefore, the ability to communicate not only effectively - but with native inflection was of high survival value and linked strongly to the power and authority within the family. If this were achieved by the children and not the parents, the traditional family balance could be radically altered, bringing about the shifting and/or reversal of the traditional family roles - and in its wake the obvious frustration, bewilderment, shame and loss of self esteem this would bring to the parent. All else the parent possessed previously - education, status in the community, authority in the home - could soon become insignificant if it couldn't be put to effective use in the new country.

Chapter 111: Re-entry.

We returned to the U.S. after spending two years in Belgium, the children and I to Vermont for the M.A.T. program, my husband back to his work at Brown University. The children began classes at The Grammar School, a very small (40 students K-8) private school in Putney, Vermont. The Grammar School was very supportive of the children's bilingualism and encouraged them both in continuing their French. There was a French program which both children began when they entered, both attending the 8th grade French class.

After looking about unsuccessfully for a French teacher for the younger grades, the director of the school asked Meredith if she would be interested in the job. She was, and indeed proceeded to do a splendid job in the classroom. She taught exclusively in French, and by the end of the year, the children were able to perform 'Le Petit Chaperon Rouge' (Little Red Riding Hood) entirely in French. Because she was rather out of place in her 8th grade French class, there being little chance to speak, her teaching time was scheduled at the same hour. Because Meredith was using her French almost daily, in a working, communicative, meaningful, functional way, she retained her language skills. When her class visited Quebec at the end of term (10 months after our return to the U.S.) , she reported that she could speak French as easily as she had in Belgium. Indeed, she was the official interpreter and guide for the group while there.

Nicholas, on the other hand, because to quote him, "No one here speaks French. There's no reason for me to speak French" subsequently 'lost' much of his facility in speaking French. (I shall

share my hypothesis as to why this happened in the following chapter.) He could still read, write and understand spoken French, but his speaking skills declined greatly. In spite of the fact that he was in the 8th grade French class, he found the class 'boring.' To this pragmatic youngster, that predictably American classroom approach to the teaching of French bore little resemblance to what he had learned and had spoken in Belgium. In Putney, Verment, French was merely another course of study; he really didn't fit into any of the French classes; studying French there was irrelevant and boring for him. Contrastively, in Belgium French was the sole means of communication, relevant and necessary. It was also never definitively bound up as a separate 'course'; it was all around, pervasive : an integral part of his world. To have it lifted up out of context was confusing for him. It just wasn't the same.

The children and I returned to Belgium at the end of that academic year, in June, 1982. It was interesting to see then and there to what extent we had experienced language retention and/or loss.

Chapter IV: Re-Acquisition: Return to Belgium.

The children and I returned to Belgium in June, 1982, after 9 months in Vermont. What transpired with regard to our previous language acquisition was both heartening (for me and one child) and unpredictably frustrating (for the other child). In my case, not having spoken French at all for nine months made me 'rusty' indeed; yet it took me only an hour or two to feel comfortable with basic phrases and after that, the more I spoke, the easier it became.

Meredith, who had, because of her teaching in Vermont, and perhaps because of her age and motivation, found that although some of her vocabulary was missing initially, after speaking more and more, she felt quite comfortable and re-assimilated easily. She socialized with both English and French speaking friends, dividing her time indiscriminately, feeling at home in both situations.

But Nicholas! Here was the rub and (author/mother's) frustration. Since he had made it patently clear that he was not interested in speaking French in America, I came to Belgium armed with virgin notepad eager to recapture his "return to bilingualism." During our first week there, he told us his plan of not speaking French; he still "hated" it; he was an American ~~and Americans~~ don't speak French. This bravado/chauvinistic attitude might have come about from fear of not being able to speak as well as he had before leaving.

An interesting experience happened, however, that first week. We visited our "old neighborhood." Our across-the-street neighbors were Dutch and our common languages were French and English. The common language for the children, however, was French, their son

speakingDutch and French only. Since Nicholas and Marcel apparently wanted to play, the boys had to speak in French; they had no choice. Before we knew it, there were 4 boys playing: Nicholas, Marcel, a Flemish boy and a British boy. Again, the common language was French. This kind of international play group was most common in Brussels. The intriguing thing about it to me was that there seemed never to be any discussion as to what language they would speak. It would just 'happen'. At this neighborhood play group, the language spoken was French, common to each of the boys. Nicholas began by not speaking - just playing, with an occasional "oui." Gradually his French speaking increased, until by the end of the afternoon, I was fairly sure he had retained much of his comprehension and speaking skills. By the next day he was experiencing interference in his English, asking me "Did you take horse riding lessons when you were lot young?" By using the words "lot young" and not "a lot younger" - or even "younger" he was using the French grammatical form for comparison, i.e. "plus jeune" (more young.) Obviously the wheels had begun turning. He resumed violin lessons with his former French teacher and I thought it was to be easy sailing ahead.

Such was not the case.

Unlike Meredith, who could play equally comfortably with both French and/or English speaking friends, Nicholas seemed to seek out his English speaking friends (and, in point of fact and in all fairness, they were the ones most accessible); therefore, his need for speaking French was practically nonexistent. His violin lessons stopped being an interchange of conversation, Nicholas responding with merely "oui" or "non" or very simple basic vocabulary. When we went to visit our

neighbors, the Cambiers, while Meredith and I spoke French (the women spoke no English), Nicholas refused to even try to speak French, even acting sullen on some occasions. I tried everything I could think of to re-kindle his interest - even resorting to bribery disguised as "If you ask the man for directions, you can have a ________" or "If you want a drink, you'll have to ask for it."

I've thought at great length about this very marked difference in my children's attitudes toward their speaking French and I'd like to submit the following hypotheses as explanation: Meredith, being 13 when she returned to the U.S., could appreciate more fully what she in fact had done. She could see beyond the pragmatic. She could see the social, cultural and academic advantages a second language afforded. Psychiatric data [2.] confirm the fact that pre and/or full teenagers, in addition to needing peer approval, there being strong pressure to conform, need, on the other hand, an individual "trademark" - something that is theirs uniquely, that sets them apart from the others. Meredith's bilingualism was her "trademark." For all these reasons, therefore, she revelled in her knowledge of a second language, was proud of her accomplishments while in Belgium, and even more proud of them in Vermont, where she was special, unique. She was at a receptive age to appreciate and take full pleasure from this uniqueness.

Nicholas, conversely, with the same amount of encouragement from us and his teachers, and although his French was equally as 'good' as Meredith's while in Belgium (indeed, even possessing a 'truer' accent) couldn't see any advantage to knowing a second language

2. Information received from an interview with Maxim Daamen, M.D., Assistant Professor of Psychiatry, Brown University, Providence, R.I.

other than the obvious pragmatic reason: necessity. He had to speak French while in school in Belgium. He had no choice. It was a given. And when forced, as he was in those early weeks on our return to Belgium to speak French, he could - and did - albeit with great reluctance. However, when one is 8 years old and in the 3rd grade in Putney, Vermont, and when one is also the "new kid in school" - it's much more important to be like the "rest of the guys" - and not be different. Where it was more than socially acceptable - indeed it was a positive plus - for Meredith to be bilingual, it was exactly the opposite for Nicholas. He was different from the others and uncomfortable because of it. The factors which were a plus for Meredith were not for Nicholas. It was a positive value for Meredith to be a little "different"; for a then 8 year old Nicholas, being a little "different" carried a negative value.

For me, who had never achieved bilingualism, and after not speaking French at all during the previous 9 months, speaking again felt not unlike cranking up a vintage model T Ford. It took a while to sort things out - and initially I was translating everything, worrying about tense, person, etc., forming each word individually - a slow beginning. The comfort soon returned, and along with it the confidence, and in the end, the language. It was always there, but it had to be dredged out. A disturbing yet interesting point: though the language had returned, the "accent" had not. This was confirmed by the Cambiers, who told me that my accent had deteriorated badly over the 9 months away from Brussels. Yet, for the children, when the language reappeared, it reappeared intact; words and music together - as they had first learned it. I had learned the language piecemeal - and so it returned - in pieces, the pronunciation following the words.

Since our stay in Belgium was for less than 3 months, my pronunciation never reached its pre-U.S. level. I do think, however, that with more time and practice, it would have.

Chapter V: Summary: Ramifications and Relevancy to Classroom Teaching

After stepping back to analyze, contrast and compare my second language acquisition process with that of my children's, I can make some general observations relevant to second language learning and teaching. It seems to me that second language learning needs mimic first language learning as closely as is possible. Whereas my learning of French didn't, my children's learning of French approximated more closely the first language experience. They had an introductory period of just listening to the language, watching it work, hearing phrases repetitively, and not having to use the language until they felt comfortable with it, until it became a natural extension. They then had the time, confidence and motivation to experiment with small chunks - having no fear of "making mistakes." Since they had been totally surrounded by the language initially, to finally use little bits and pieces was comfortable as well as meaningful and relevant to their functioning. They got immediate feedback from these initial speaking ventures and little by little, as in first language acquisition, their command of vocabulary and structure grew. Because they were in the midst of the language, and comfortable with the sounds and intonations, they added to their whole language mind set, rather than equating one language to the other. Because after a while French was comfortable and natural, it was mastered. And because they were children, as opposed to infants, the process took 3-6 months as opposed to 2-3 years. In my case, I was allowed no luxury of an initial passive immersion; on day #1 we were expected to repeat what he had heard, regardless whether or not we had understood. Without this preparatory period, it was almost

impossible to duplicate authentically the French pronunciation - or to speak naturally without translating first. Speaking naturally came in time but only after extensive use in day-to-day life. Because I hadn't been given the time to assimilate and become comfortable with the new sounds, the sounds were to remain always "foreign"; pronunciation was always to be separate from vocabulary. The language, for me, was never a totality.

Therefore, in drawing from this retrospective analysis, I feel that language teaching in the classroom needs to approximate as closely as is practically possible, first language learning. That is, that it be in a totally immersive setting (only the target language spoken), that it be a comfortable, non-threatening situation, that language be rewarded when effective, that the language be relevant and meaningful to the students, that there be a great deal of time for interaction, play, creativity, practice and repetition.

Ideally, there would be an initial period of passive listening - to get attuned to the music of the language, the sounds of the language - to hear and to see how it works, perhaps via repeated film sequences portraying simple, clear action and appropriate dialogue. I see this initial phase as an important foundation. When the students had become more comfortable with the sounds, and were ready and eager to try language associated with meaning, they could begin speaking.

In my classes this past year, I have drawn heavily from our Belgian experience, using great amounts of language with "doing", great amounts of repetition, accepting the "doing"; minimizing the "explaining" and always trying for relevant and

meaningful exercises. For example, I have used extensively exercises from Live Action English,[3] basically a TPR approach to language learning by which the students carry out and then instruct each other in a series of commands while learning the appropriate vocabulary. The situations are common and everyday, incorporating simple, everyday language. One situation, for example, involves washing one's hands and incorporates vocabulary such as "Turn on the water", "Pick up the soap", "Turn off the water" and so on. I give each student a small soap and towel so that they can fuse the vocabulary to the action/meaning. We also do a lot of role playing, using everyday language and situations - i.e. grocery/clothes shopping, going to the doctor's office, making appointments over the phone, interviewing for a job, and the like.

My students learn in an all-English classroom. If there are questions, they must query me in English as best they can. If there is chatter, it must be in English. We listen to tapes of many different languages to compare and contrast the music, stress, intonation, to be aware that language is more than vocabulary.

In summary, our experience in Belgium, coupled with the chance to analyze it, has contributed much to my understanding and appreciation of the difficulties the language learner faces. I hope that this insight serves also to help me be a more sensitive, effective teacher.

3. Live Action English, Elizabeth Romijim and Contee Seely, The Alemany Press, P.O.Box 5265, San Francisco, Ca., 94101, c. 1979.

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