



The Adaptive Approach: Best Practices in Teaching L2s at Elementary Levels.

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Abstract

Best practices in the teaching of a foreign languages based on “clinical” studies and research depend almost entirely on the specific situation and circumstances under which the language is being taught. While proven best L2 teaching / learning approaches resulting from extensive research in psychology, neurology, and anthropology (human behavior), such as the natural or communicative approach, have shown evidence of success as applied under controlled or semi-controlled environments, those cannot be successfully applied under uncontrolled environments. For the specific case of underdeveloped departments of foreign languages in US institutions of higher education, it is very clear that specific socio-educational circumstances make it almost entirely impossible to apply any un-modified teaching / learning approach. Instructor are commonly forced to use an adaptive approach if they want to maximize learning outcomes versus meet the curriculum. Understanding the limitations imposed by the lack of environmental resources, is crucial for the effectiveness of the specific teaching approach to be used. I would like to discuss my teaching experience at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, as a faculty member and former Chair of the Former Department of Foreign Languages, and how institutional politics, departmental funding and curriculum development, UNC system interests, and the particular circumstances of the student body have a direct impact on how teaching L2s are understood, taught and learned.

Keywords: *Foreign Language, teaching, L2, language learning;*

Like most things in life, what is a best practice in teaching or learning a foreign or second language is debatable. The issue of when and how someone is best fitted to teach or learn a foreign language has been studied for years by renown scholars in a variety of fields that go from linguistics, to psychology, to anthropology to neuroscience. As of today, we count on an enormous amount of impressive results and evidence that would be considered ludicrous just a few decades ago. However, is there anything that can fairly be considered even close to be objectively called a ‘best practice’ or approach in the teaching (or learning) of a foreign language? This is a rhetorical question. I do have my doubts. Let me start then by clarifying that this paper is based exclusively on my own personal experience, teaching in specific institutions, with in turn, have their own specific and distinct mission statements and student populations. By no means I claim this to be a scientific study or a study based on statistics or other mathematical or clinical calculations.

To write this piece, I was motivated not just by my own personal realization, but by observation in different conferences of the increasing numbers of “best practice hunter-gatherers.” Based on my 23 years of experience teaching Spanish as a foreign language in several institutions of higher education in the united States, which include T1 institutions, such as Texas Tech University in Lubbock, TX; private colleges such as Methodist College, in Fayetteville, NC (now Methodist University);and public institutions such as Fayetteville State University and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, where I have taught for the last fifteen years, I conclude that such universal best practices do not exist as pixy dust does not exist. It would not take long for me to understand that each of those institutions required a different approach to teaching a foreign language. Not only they were very different from the funding perspective (private vs. public) and its implications, but their institutional mission, geographical location, and student population played a very important role on how the learning of a foreign language was or is perceived and, consequently, taught and learned in each one of them.

If the obvious differences between the institutions were not enough, in the course of these years I had the opportunity to compare best practices in teaching foreign languages from two different perspectives:



Teaching L2 in a native country (Spain and Colombia) and teaching a L2 in a foreign country (USA). I find these circumstances to affect the approach radically different ways. To my surprise, a PhD in Spanish who graduated from an accredited institution of higher education in the US, such as myself, would not even be considered a qualified professional by Spanish native institutions (Instituto Cervantes) and his/her methodology or approach wouldn't be acknowledged in the same fashion. Institutions in Colombia, however, were way more welcoming to specialists in foreign language teaching and their approaches, even though their own approach was different as well.

There was no reason for a graduate student in a T1 institution such Texas Tech University back in 1999 to question the teachings of faculty in courses such as Methods of Teaching a Foreign Language (any, Foreign Language). Along with specific instruction on pedagogic methodology came the formal professional training received by Graduate Teaching Assistants who were put in charge of teaching lower level foreign language classes. Both, specific course contents and formal training, strongly emphasized the so-called natural approach, developed in the 1970's and 1980's by Stephen Krashen and Tracy Terrell, which focuses on subconscious language acquisition. As language instructors, all were to apply this natural approach in our classes emphasizing every-day information, realia, active synchronous verbal and asynchronous written communication, as well as acting and performing in the classroom. At the same time, it was a clear understanding that time dedicated to formal grammar explanation should be assigned as homework, while minimized to no more than 5-7 minutes in the classroom. As enthusiastic trainees, we watched videos, received copies of instructional materials (textbooks, workbooks, audio tapes (later CDs), and transparencies). The approach was rapidly implemented in our classrooms and closely monitored by faculty supervisors in charge of TA's. I was a supervised TA at the time, and I had no criteria to judge the results of the approach. It seemed to work, though, and supervisors were satisfied with the results. Just a handful of students would fail the class every semester (nothing abnormal) and we all had a general sense that it was working and the way to go.

In 2003, I was hired by the department of English, Theatre and Foreign Languages at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke. I joined two colleagues as we were in charge to develop the program of foreign languages in this rural campus of the UNC system. In three years we established the major in Spanish and we were simultaneously teaching Spanish, French, German, and Russian. In 2008, what was a languages program, became the Department of Foreign Languages. All three faculty members used the natural approach in our classes based on consensus, adopting "Dos Mundos" (by authors Tracy Terrell and Rachel Andrade) as the textbook. I started implementing it with great enthusiasm since classes were fun and relaxed. I had always obtained good results after all. However, I soon noticed that it was not only not working as expected. Something was not right. Students enjoyed the show, and they appreciated the relaxed environment, that mistakes in oral production were not that relevant, but at the same time, they were very conscious of the learning process. They were being evaluated after all and they started to point at a disagreement between what was expected from them in the classroom on regular class sessions versus on the assessment artifacts. At the end of the day, what matters most to them was the final grade. After a few semesters of the same feedback, I decided that the situation deserved a second look. What had changed was very important for a student of any foreign languages: their motivation. Why are these students learning a foreign language, in the first place, had major implications on how would they approach the class. I had already noticed that most of the students were taking Spanish classes because it was either requirement for their major programs (i.e. English) or it was an 'easy' class to take to fulfill the General Education requirement. Very few, if any, were taking the class because they actually wanted to major in Spanish or learn the language. The great majority were guided by their experience in High School, meaning that these were supposed to be second or even third-class college classes, taken as a band-aid to complete requirements for graduation or to fill the "gap" doing something easy. Now they were confronting a language class professionally taught by means of a teaching approach they did not understand. The effect was in many cases devastating. Students would drop the classes and I would get frustrated not knowing what was causing the alarm. Once I understood the situation, I experimented a little bit with the natural approach, adapting it to a different audience: students who are not necessarily motivated to learn the language, but still need to meet certain requirements by taking my classes.



A couple of years into my job in Pembroke, I had the opportunity to teach evening classes at FSU (Fayetteville State University). While still in the UNC system, FSU is a historical 'black' public institution. This was, by itself a major change. In this case, not only I was teaching what is known in the states as non-traditional students by teaching in the evenings, but a very specific demographic group in a very specific institution. I will not elaborate much about my experience at FSU. Enough to say that long gone were the days at TTU, but contrary to my experience at UNCP, at FSU students were surprised that I was attending classes. Any kind of teaching approach was futile. My understanding is that things have changed dramatically in the last few years.

At the same time, I also taught some elementary Spanish classes at Methodist College, in Fayetteville, NC. Again, a dramatically different student population, a new institutional mission, etc. In this case MC (now MU) is a private institution. Students pay their tuition out of pocket, so they –or those actually paying the bill-- are more careful at selecting classes and the academic advising in general. Even though these were also evening classes, the academic environment was different. Students were more motivated and had higher expectations from faculty. This environment facilitated the implementation of the natural approach, but, again, with badly needed adaptations. While many wanted to learn the language and were motivated to learn academically, almost none understood the natural approach given the time restraints.

My experience at the four institutions, TTU, UNCP, FSU and Methodist College, made me reflect about what is the best way to teach Spanish. I concluded that teaching Spanish under those circumstances and with institutions pressing increased student retention from above, there had to be compromises. Also, there were a couple of additional experiences awaiting me. In 2011 I attended a conference organized in Madrid, Spain, by the Instituto Cervantes. This is when I became aware that officially qualified professionals in the US –and I presume in other countries as well— were not necessarily recognized as such by the Spanish institution. They have their own ways, and there are no others. I tried to understand that teaching Spanish in Spain or any other Spanish Speaking countries, was essentially different than teaching it in non-Spanish speaking countries. The nature of the student population is, again, dramatically different. Who studies Spanish in a Spanish speaking country? A native student who wants to study Spanish linguistics or literature at very high levels, or foreign speakers in study abroad or immersion trips. In other words, students who are not necessarily concerned with a final grade, their GPA, the midterm exam, etc. and normally, they benefit from the ultimate classroom which is the city itself. Under these conditions, students would accept a more communicative approach in the classroom, since they will immediately apply their learning after class.

An additional experience that I had related to teaching Spanish as a Foreign Language was with the US Department of Defense, for which I prepared two different Spanish language courses (SOLT I -Special Operation Language Training I and II) and Spanish for Military Heritage Speakers. In this case, I was not teaching classes, but creating pedagogical materials for teachers in the military. For these materials, --and understanding the motivation of military personnel--, who would apply their acquired language skills under difficult circumstances, I created platform based on a limited version of the natural approach. Interactive and highly communicative activities for the classroom and continued practice outside the classroom, all based on digital or electronic format (first iterations of Blackboard). I counted with an impressive team of content developers, graphic artists, and computer specialists who created the scenarios students needed outside the classroom.

I need to go back to 2009, as the Department of Foreign Languages became its own entity. This was our opportunity to launch a serious campaign to promote foreign languages at UNCP. A proposal to make at least two semesters of foreign languages mandatory across the board was submitted to the Faculty Senate and we collected opinions around campus via student and faculty surveys. The implementation of the policy did not pass the Senate arguing that it would be too complicated to add hours to academic programs, especially in the schools of science. This was also the time when most, if not all, American institutions were hit hard by the financial recession of 2008. Along with severe budget cuts came the consolidation of academic programs. In 2013, the Department of Foreign Languages ceased to exist as such, going back under English and Theatre in spite of ever-increasing numbers in Spanish majors and



minors. French, Russian, and German were eliminated, and Chinese survived until 2006 through a special program that provided UNCP with Chinese instructors for periods of two years. This is how politics work in academia.

Fast forwarding to 2018. Having reached this point in time, it was years ago at UNCP that I noticed that even within the same institution the same adaptive approach not always worked with good results, and with the pass o time, the success of the original natural approach as applied back at TTU or its adapted version, no longer worked in my classes at UNCP. I noticed that some other factors were influencing the need to change the teaching approach. One of the most important factors was technology, followed by change in student demographics, popularity of (or institutional support for) the program of Foreign Languages at UNCP, the broader institutional interests of the UNC system as it introduced the FL Exchange, and the needs of our newer generations in the ever-changing society.

In sum, after years of internal debate and afraid of disclosing my personal understanding that there has to be much more than just some “best practices” in the teaching of foreign languages, I now come to the conclusion, that there are, in fact. best practices in the teaching of foreign languages, but each institution at any given point in time, has its own, whatever they are, and that sometimes those best practices could be shared among teachers and professors who perform under similar conditions, but that there is no universal “best practice” that applies to the discipline as a whole. I cannot anticipate what is going to come next, in terms of technology or institutional interests. I am not the same, my students are not the same, my institution is not the same, and society is not the same. With all these ever-changing factors, I start every semester prepared to change my teaching approach and my syllabus as it best suits the interests of my students at any particular time.