

THE STORY OF MY CAREER

I originally intended to teach in a university. My main interest was FL Education; I wanted to be the methods instructor. I heard teachers bemoan the mono-lingual state of the US, I heard teachers tell me that their enrollment was so low in upper levels that they had to combine levels or else eliminate levels. I wanted to help teachers build a more successful program. I wanted to help create a bilingual America, where the citizens had fond memories of their foreign language experience.

I began teaching in small rural schools that had NO foreign language. I introduced French and Spanish to these schools. They had K – 12 in one building. They had kids who had never been more than 100 miles away from their homes. These kids rode the bus for almost an hour each way just to get to school. These kids worked on the ranch or farm doing chores from before sunup until after sundown. They raised their own animals to get spending money. They milked their cow and sold the milk, or they raised animals and sold them. Their awareness of the big wide world was limited. They drove tractors and trucks from the age of about 10 in the fields or on country roads.

It was during this experience that I discovered how much I enjoyed 7th and 8th graders. As a result, I applied only to junior highs when I moved to Colorado Springs. Once I found my “dream job,” I stayed there for the last 28 years of my teaching career. I still wanted to help teachers become more effective, so I presented workshops for districts and at the CCFLT state conference.

I was always looking for a better, more successful way to teach languages. I was trained in audio-lingual method and behaviorist psychology. I did backward buildup, item substitution, all of the things that lead to memorized dialogs and manipulating the language. I made individualized instruction packets. I could see some kids doing well. I also saw many of them struggling. Even those who were “doing well” did not have the ability to speak with ease outside of their memorized situations. And when asked to write anything original, they sometimes produced incomprehensible garbage.

The 1974-75 school year saw the first significant experiment I ever ran. There were 9 students in a French II (9th grade) class. Five of them wanted to drop but they signed up on the condition that the new teacher (guess who?) could keep the class from being “torture.” As I got to know these delightful kids, I suggested that we just throw away

the book and speak French. I would give them a grammar lesson per week. We would do the exercises from a chapter in the AMSCO workbook, but in class we would sit in a circle and just chat. We would always try to implement the grammar of the week in our chats. What an experience that was! I got to know these kids so well, all about their families and their personalities and their interests. We took a weekend to go skiing together in the mountains. Another evening I drove them to a French restaurant in the mountains. We were really a tight-knit bunch. Furthermore, these kids spoke French with obvious pleasure! Their yearbook advisor told me that they spoke French while doing the yearbook! They just spoke all of the time! If they didn't know a word, they slipped it in (in English, but pronounced with a French accent) and just kept going. I was so thrilled at their speaking skills!

My school allowed me to buy new textbooks the next year so I never reproduced my experiment. I then tried to teach as the new textbook prescribed. I can see now that I purchased excellent materials ("Je parle français" by Encyclopedia Britannica Films) but I didn't know then what I know now. For a TPR Storytelling teacher, this was an ideal textbook. Each chapter had a little movie, located in a Francophone country. The stories were cute and the culture was authentic. Truly a perfect set of materials. But since I only knew ALM, I just taught the kids to memorize the dialogs and to do the substitution exercises. Darn, I wish Encyclopedia Britannica Films would make another series now that I know how to do it!

From that point on I continued to teach from textbooks and to implement them as best I could. I continued to experiment with everything I learned in conferences, from books, and from professional discussions. I tried "suggestopedia" for a couple of years. It was a fascinating experiment. There were many benefits (peaceful atmosphere, good student relations) and some frustrations (students balking at the relaxation exercises.) I tried directed dialogs (like Rassias but not so flamboyant.) I tried all sorts of simulations, communicative competence interviews, paired activities, team learning, cooperative learning, mastery teaching, every buzzword that came along. I considered the many methods found in Stevick's book, "A Way and Ways." Some of them (silent way, for example) seemed just too far-out. I implemented TPR and found that it was better than anything else. So I kept it for the first few weeks of level one. Beyond 5 or 6 weeks it seemed to lose its power so I went back to the textbook. I read voraciously about the brain and how it functioned.

When I first encountered Krashen's 5 hypotheses, they struck a chord with me. I knew they were true, but they did not seem to be applicable to the classroom. For one thing, it seemed to me that it required an incredible number of hours of comprehensible input to actually get acquisition -- especially of things like subjunctive! So I figured that it was a good theory but not geared for the classroom. Nevertheless, I learned as much as could about the natural approach and tried to implement it as best I could.

My major impediment was this: No textbook implemented the method and I was always cognizant of the textbook! I was always trying to get the students to do adjective agreement one week and the six forms of the verb "to do or to make" and the correct spelling of command forms all mashed together because that's what this chapter of the book said to do at this point in the year.

I invented well over 100 games to teach French grammar. I used games almost every day to teach or practice one thing or another. I made the kids talk for 10 minutes every single day of the year because it seemed to me that if they practiced speaking more they would get good at it. I began making them write weekly diaries. Nothing seemed like too much work for me to try!

During all of this time, I was receiving positive feedback. The principal respected my opinion and I became the foreign language department chair for the entire district! I served on the board of directors of the Colorado Congress of Foreign Language Teachers. My students performed well on the National French Contest. They came back and told me how much they had learned and how much they appreciated having been in my class. I served on the executive board of our district's teacher organization. The high school teacher praised me and told me that my students were well-prepared for the French III class. I was elected President of the Colorado Congress of Foreign Language Teachers. Parents of my students wrote me notes telling me how wonderful I was. I served on the board of the South West Council of Language Teachers.

But I continued to search. I knew that we still lost half of our students between the first day of level 1 and the last day of level 3. I knew that most students were not speaking with ease even at the end of level 3. There had to be a way to get better student performance and to get lower attrition rates!

When I found TPR Storytelling, I felt like my years of searching were

finally bearing fruit. As I experimented with it, I found that even the lower-performing students were able to perform in French! They could understand, speak, read, and write in French! I tried taking students from 7th and 8th grades to France to do a home stay. They could do it! One 8th grade girl actually pretended to be **my** interpreter with a clerk in a Parisian record store!

I had planned to retire from teaching at age 50, but by that time I was using TPR Storytelling. I was having so much fun (and success) with my students that I wanted to continue to try new things with them every year. I continued teaching four extra years simply out of love and enthusiasm for the success my students were having.

Now that I have retired, I am doing what I had originally set out to do: be a methods instructor for foreign language teachers. I am not on a university's payroll; I travel around consulting with individual school districts and presenting workshops on TPR Storytelling. I am still yearning for a bilingual America. I still dream of a country whose citizens have fond memories of their foreign language experience.

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