

# BEST PRACTICES IN LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION: FOR WHOM ARE THEY BEST?

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Language teaching has the potential to be transformative. As part of a liberal arts education, many language professors believe the foreign language classroom is central to producing well-informed, thoughtful global citizens. Global meets local daily, as students move beyond their campuses and dorms to explore the world beyond and their place within it. Because I hope to elicit critical engagement with other cultures as a foundation for understanding our common humanity and acting in solidarity with them and since language is embedded in and shapes worldview, I integrate literature, film, and news media into my department's language curriculum. Still, I find that using authentic cultural materials sometimes has the opposite effect of my intention, and many non-Latinx students either exoticize what they perceive as Other or double down on their preexisting stereotypes about Hispanophone cultures. Spanish-speaking societies stand as fascinating—and in some students' minds comparatively backwards—novelties highlighted in the language classroom, despite my best attempts to counteract such myths. Language teaching (and language learning) has the potential to be transformative, but the lower-division language classroom presents challenges that are unique to the university experience. And the lower-division is where students with a language minor spend the majority of their program's coursework.

As the U.S. is regularly shaken by aggressions of white people toward people of color, I am uncomfortably, acutely aware of my role in my students' lives and education. The students I teach come from diverse backgrounds: approximately fifteen percent are international students, about half of my Spanish majors are Heritage Speakers of Spanish, and many in my classes are first-generation college students. As a white, non-Latinx Spanish professor, I find myself in the role of a bridge between cultures, and as the history of conquest and colonization reveals, the liaison often has enabled or reinforced oppression. As the only tenured member of my department, I have significant control over the curriculum. In my attempts to follow expert "best-practice" guidelines while building a program that encourages self-awareness in a global socio-historical context, I swim against the currents of the neoliberal paradigm that prioritizes transaction: students pay for a skill set we provide. However, I believe language faculty must question the underlying assumptions and priorities of our current best practices to ensure that language instructors are not simply acting as recolonizing agents promoting what bell hooks (1994) rightly calls a "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy" (p. 26). The language curriculum should not reproduce stereotypes or exoticization of other cultures. Rather, it should encourage historical and social self-awareness and promote democratic, anticolonial forms of social life.

I have turned to the *currere* method to reframe for myself the language instructor's position as bridge, liaison, and cultural interpreter, and to consider how we might teach language as embedded in and shaping culture. William F. Pinar (1994) noted that one finds meaningfully coherent themes through a review of one's own biography. Furthermore, he stated, "The biographic past exists presently, complexly contributive to the biographic present" (Pinar, 1994, p. 22). As I sometimes stumble, sometimes climb along my own anti-racist journey, I remember how language learning has been and continues to be transformative in my own life and worldview. Additionally, this

*currere*-inspired autobiographical excavation has contributed to my present imagining of a more progressive future. My goal, ultimately, is not only to avoid participating in oppression, but also to actively engage in deconstructing racism and removing barriers to cross-cultural communication in my classroom and, to the extent possible, in the courses taught within my department.

Growing up, I had limited interactions with people of other ethnicities. This led to an underdeveloped understanding of the experiences of people of color and the significance of BIPOC identities in the United States, which I did not realize until I left home to attend college. In my predominantly white, upper middle class, liberal-leaning community, friends did not self-segregate socially by ethnicity in the ways I have since watched my college students do at various institutions. Imposed limits on city growth in my hometown had led to relatively high housing prices, so Southern Oregon townships segregated us in a seemingly “natural” way: by socio-economic status. As a child, I was aware that two nearby towns housed Mexican-American and Mexican immigrant communities, but I had little direct contact with them. Based on snippets of adult conversations, I wrongly assumed that the people in those communities, all of them, worked in agriculture. To me, this produced vague images of low-income, brown, seasonal farm workers but did not cause me to reflect on my own whiteness. During my first year of college in San Diego, California, I also realized I was essentially colorblind in a way many of my peers, family, and nation were not. Hearing friends refer to another friend as Asian and my mom try to remember my black friend’s name startled me into the recognition that they were, in fact, Asian and Black. During each conversation, I had to scroll mentally through a list of (mostly white) friends, visualizing each in turn, to figure out who was being talked about. “Colorblind” was considered a positive adjective in the late 1990s, but I mostly felt surprise mingled with a slight sense of horror after these conversations. How could I, I wondered, have failed to notice the visible physical attributes of my friends? How could I, an introspective, observant person, have overlooked a central aspect of their identity? Surely their ethnicity affected them daily, I thought, if people used it to identify them. Rather than celebrate my colorblindness, I began to pay closer attention to how people talked about race, ethnicity, and social class.

As I continue to use Pinar’s method to reflect on my experiences, I wonder how I could have arrived in college proficient enough in Spanish to begin in upper-division literature and history courses (taught in Spanish), while at the same time having such a poorly developed consciousness of race and ethnicity. Looking back, I believe the lack of diversity in my schools and a language-centered curriculum contributed to my learning Spanish, a language strongly racially coded in the United States, without associating ethnicity and language. The public elementary schools in my hometown offered either Spanish or French, so I began learning Spanish in the second grade and continued, with the exception of seventh and eighth grade, through high school. While my memory may be faulty, I only remember learning language that was pertinent to my life (colors, numbers, animals, rooms of the house, etc.). I never had a native Spanish speaker as a teacher, and high school courses focused on accurate tense usage. Early on, my love of math, which I saw playing out in the patterns and creativity of language structures, motivated my love of languages.

Trips abroad during high school did little to challenge my understanding of language as transactional. However, spring break mission trips with my church to a Mexican orphanage did give me another reason to learn Spanish: speaking with people. Playing with the kids was fun and learning to mix cement was novel, but I was most interested in talking with residents my own age. In between trips, I frequently exchanged

letters with a Mexican friend, and my church leaders allowed me to attend school with her during our last year of high school. Language was a lens into my friend's life experiences and opportunities, so different from my own. Without a framework for understanding culture as anything beyond food, dress, and dance, and seeing that across the international border we ate and dressed similarly, I failed to understand language as anything more than a medium for conversation. Its connections to broader worldviews (i.e., cultures), the white savior complex that motivated my participation in these trips, and the problematic international economics of U.S.-Mexico border orphanages were beyond anything I could fathom at the time.

I have since learned that effective cross-cultural communication must take into account the trifecta of history, language, and ethnicity. Even more significantly, effective communication takes the relationship between interlocutors into account, including their historic power relations. Raymond Williams (1997) explained,

The complexity of a culture is to be found not only in its variable processes and their social definitions—traditions, institutions, and formations—but also in the dynamic interrelations, at every point in the process, of historically varied and variable elements. (p. 197)

Culture is not static, but instead shifts, responds to, and engages hegemonic forces. How we understand, or misunderstand, other cultures is directly related to our ability to engage with communities different than our own, whether on an individual basis or within and between societies. Language is one expression of culture and an equally dynamic component of communication. However, the neoliberal model of education yearns to equate communication and language and to reify them as entities independent from ideology.

My above analysis of how I arrived at college “colorblind” and what I would call “cultureblind” yet conversant in Spanish demonstrates a common misunderstanding about the inseparability of culture and communication and the divergence between communication and language. Failing to understand what culture was, I mistakenly assumed that my Mexican friends and I thought alike, reasoned the same way, and had similar assumptions about the world (to my peril, which played out in sometimes comical and sometimes uncomfortable ways). Several years ago, I heard a metaphorical phrase that has stuck with me and helps me to be more self-aware than I was then: “if I speak with an accent, I also think with an accent.” In other words, if I hear or produce speech that sounds different than the speech of those around me, I should pay attention because the other speaker(s) and I likely understand and experience the world differently as well. Though language instructors, including myself, tend to discuss language and culture as mutually embedded, my experiences show otherwise: one may learn how to speak without learning how to communicate. Rather, culture and *communication* are mutually embedded, but communication can break down even when *language* is correctly expressed and mechanically understood. Even as faculty and organizations elevate the Communicative Method of language teaching, the structure of language learning means that teaching primarily in the target language and privileging student language production at the lower-division level may result more in transactional language than in real cross-cultural communicative competency.

Reflecting on classroom examples of the interconnectedness between culture (or worldview) and communication (beyond language) aids my thoughts on how to improve my instruction. After my undergraduate college experience, I spent a short stint in social work before earning an M.A. in Latin American Studies with a concentration

in Sociology and a Ph.D. in Literature and teaching beginning Spanish through upper-division courses at a small liberal arts college in the U.S. Mountain West. Since my specialty is Southern Cone post-dictatorship literature and film, my courses emphasize how cultural production reconstructs historical memory to give it new meanings or to reinforce past ideas and how discourse shapes inclusion and exclusion in the national identity. In seminar discussions, conducted in Spanish, I occasionally, but regularly, witness complete language breakdown as students attempt to make sense of their own worldviews in light of new ideas. One of the most memorable moments in which this occurred was late in the semester during a pre-tenure observation by a senior faculty member. The senior faculty member not only saw the student's outburst, but later emphasized the significance of such teaching moments, which has kept the moment at the forefront of my teaching memories. As students and I discussed how Latin American detective fiction reveals political and social institutions as complicit in producing crime and injustice, a high-achieving student grappled with what this means for economically and/or socially marginalized people. She jumped into the discussion in Spanish, stuttered for a moment, and then burst out in English, "I can't think of how to say this in English or Spanish!" She was struggling with concepts beyond her ability to express in either language. For her, as for a younger me, language had been a transaction, an equation. In that moment, language was insufficient as a medium for the expression of worldview (i.e., culture), and when the student attempted to explain the collision that she sensed between her own understanding of society and several authors' shared worldview, she needed a new "language" in both English and Spanish. Market- and self-oriented language-as-tool, though applicable in some settings, failed when the transformative capacity of culturally informed communication was necessary.

Moments in the classroom like that one make me proud, and I start to feel that I have achieved that lofty goal of excellent teaching. My students do regularly reach moments of higher-order thought beyond what language can express. But unfortunately, I have also heard graduating students who have experienced similar moments of self- and social awareness, that over time might have become transformative and potentially helped to produce a more inclusive, antiracist, globally conscious citizenry, express sentiments entirely to the contrary. They, like me, are living through a learning process, with strong social currents challenging incipient antiracism and anticolonialism. Deep learning does not take place in one class session or even in a whole course. True communication requires each person to recognize the equal humanity and inherent value of the other speaker, which is rarely fully achieved in a lifetime. Excellent teaching, then, for me, is that which points students to this path and encourages them to walk along it. This realization provokes my reflection on where our society is and where to go from here in the language curriculum.

Language is inherently social, fundamentally communal. The language classroom at best approximates the interactive aspects of intercultural communication and lays the foundation for a more truly democratic, cross-cultural solidarity. The conundrum of the language classroom is twofold: best teaching practices include teaching in the target language, and student learning expectations are to acquire the skill of written and spoken language. Regarding the latter, my students generally say they are interested in learning Spanish both to become stronger job applicants and to be able to communicate more effectively with Spanish speakers in the future. In pursuing the Spanish minor or major, many express the earnest desire to relate more authentically to people of other cultures through their language. This is a worthy goal, and I find it more motivating as a teacher than when students simply express the market-oriented objective. Still, I have come to realize that few students approach the language classroom to gain a broader

understanding of the world or their place in it. Rather, as with many of their courses, learning a new language is a tool for personal growth, use, and enjoyment: *I need job skills that will make me more marketable, and/or languages will allow me to help other communities (undergirded by the belief that, as the college graduate, I will be the expert in my field and, therefore, well-positioned to define how this help is to be given and received).* Simplified travel is an added bonus. An effective language curriculum must counterbalance this skills-oriented approach that centers the “I” and reestablish language as a living, breathing, communal essence.

The conception of education as a product that students (and their parents) can purchase contributes to the individualization of the potential social good acquired through language learning. Built into the twofold challenge of the language classroom is the underlying assumption that the goal of language instruction is linguistic proficiency. On the surface, this seems entirely reasonable, but ultimately it individualizes what is inherently communal. The neoliberal model of education encourages students to prioritize specific career paths, rather than their formation as an educated citizenry. Julie Wilson’s (2018) *Neoliberalism* lays bare the shift in ideology that has reduced the neoliberal citizen to little more than the labor he or she performs, thus, necessitating a skills-based education and proficiency-oriented expectations for language programs. “Neoliberal individuals are selves who think of and relate to themselves as an investment, that is, as subjects who are constantly working to *appreciate* the self and its value over time” (p. 65, emphasis in original). According to this model, a Spanish minor student should graduate speaking and reading Spanish, ready to put those skills to use in the market for the creation of surplus value. However, the neoliberal model of education conflicts with a liberal arts education, which is grounded in enlightenment ideals that treat humans as agents in the development of history. The mission of the college in which I teach is to “[prepare] students to lead productive and fulfilling lives” (College of Idaho, 2021, n.p.), far beyond mere skill mastery or career training. Still, the hegemony of neoliberal thought means students, parents, administrators, and even faculty often understand “fulfilling lives” reductively, as the ability to work in a career they enjoy. For this reason, the longer I teach, the more I question for whom are the best teaching practices actually best? If, as Talbert (2019) rightly argued, “Education is, fundamentally, a project of enacting particular values in/through a given sociocultural context” (para. 3), what values do I enact in my language classroom when I follow current “best” teaching practices?

Best practices in language teaching encourage a “flipped” classroom model and teaching at least 90% of the time in the target language, which maximizes opportunities for students to increase proficiency (and, thus, necessarily minimizes opportunities for deeper intercultural understanding). The problem facing the language classroom is that an emphasis on language proficiency requires a trade-off between proficiency and early, in-depth cultural study that continues throughout the program. Though current best practices include an emphasis on culture, beginning students are linguistically incapable of meaningfully exploring cultural issues in the target language. It should not come as any surprise, then, that many students complete the minor program with reinforced stereotypes about communities that speak the target language, no matter how culturally sensitive the instructor and the curriculum may be.

Additionally, the outcomes and Can-Do statements of major organizations (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language; Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; Interagency Language Roundtable) demonstrate novice and intermediate language production as heavily centered on the learner and his or her immediate environment, where advanced language users expand

their linguistic circle to the larger social or global community. These descriptions are not inaccurate, given the current best practice of teaching primarily in the target language. The first-year classroom in particular focuses on the students' own limited, first-person experiences and presents target language texts and videos within the restricted linguistic range of the students. Over my 15 years as a college Spanish instructor, I have regularly taught upper-division classes that delve deeply into socio-historical dynamics of power relations in Latin American societies and between the U.S. and Latin American countries. At the same time, at a small liberal arts college, I also teach lower-division language courses that emphasize the students' ability to communicate and understand in basic situations: college and family life (daily schedules, personal descriptions, location, preferences), travel (food, clothing, shopping), etc. I often attempt to patch the first- and second-year language curriculum with English-language homework, including thought-provoking material and antiracist linguistic studies, while lamenting the superficiality of elementary language learning that reinforces a self-focused approach. By filling in the gaps, I hope to encourage an understanding of the object of study as spoken by people of equal worth and similar subjective experiences, and to refute a simplistic understanding of other cultures. Conducting class in the target language, however, confounds the basic language instructor's ability to structure classroom time in such a way as to encourage transformative moments of self-awareness throughout the program, so important for developing an understanding of other people and communities.

Again, I return to my question of for whom this practice is best. It is certainly the most practical and expedient response to a transactional model of education. However, we often sacrifice in-depth socio-historical and cultural content early in the program to be able to discuss more advanced ideas in the target language in later upper-division courses. Through the early focus on basic language (and, therefore, very basic cultural elements), language minors, who vastly outnumber the majors, miss the majority of those transformative experiences that in-depth cultural exploration can instigate. Although I do believe students with a minor in a specific language should graduate with a certain degree of proficiency and practical use of that language, realistically, the transformative potential of learning to communicate across cultures (mine *with* yours and vice versa) begins in earnest in intermediate courses, often the highest courses of the Spanish minor, immediately prior to the students' graduation. By the time students are just beginning to be able to grapple linguistically with significant issues in the classroom, we send them off, degree in hand, to believe they have completed the transaction and are done. Complete. Competent.

As I reach this stage of my analytical reflection, I am obliged to conclude, at the risk of professional ostracism, that the "best practice" of teaching primarily in the target language primarily benefits those students who are already privileged within contemporary paradigms and reinforces the hegemony of the previously mentioned white supremacist neoliberal, transnational capitalism. An approach to language learning that centers the self and encourages a belief in communicative competence upon graduation is unlikely to increase the prominence and reach of Spanish-speaking voices in the U.S. and abroad. In fact, it runs the risk of producing generations of English-speaking foreign language learners who have an institutional stamp on their ability to speak for, about, and to (but often lacking the ability to speak *with*) people from other linguistic communities.

Acknowledging, then, how far I have to go as a language instructor, how can we allow the teaching of *communication* to strategically sweep our classrooms? I resist talk of "harnessing" its transformative power because learning is a force beyond the instructor's or the student's control. The easy way out would be to develop a new check list of best teaching practices and curricular suggestions, but this assumes, like our

current neoliberal educational model, that institutions can control and measure student progress and ensure certain skills can be mastered prior to graduation. However, I refuse, to the extent possible, to be or to teach my students to be interpreters for a neo-imperial project. Though we can check the boxes of linguistic transactions, antiracism is not a skill. Decolonization is not a one-and-done process. I might tally the medical or legal vocabulary my students can use appropriately in context, but it is difficult to measure mastery of listening to a person when their health or freedom is at stake, especially if doing so might cost me something. My reflection on my own transformation through learning, not language, but *cross-cultural communication* leads me to conclude first that we must identify our core values and ascertain where our values align with the values of anticolonialism and antiracism, as well as our institution's stated mission and our students' learning needs. Only afterward should we consider our classrooms and then with the mindset of deconstructing our underlying assumptions surrounding best practices and curriculum. We should ask ourselves for whom are these practices best? Do language learners and the native speakers with whom they will interact all benefit? And beyond benefits, what end do they serve (e.g., language learners' value in the workplace, equity between English speakers and speakers of other languages, the ability of U.S. Americans to conduct business abroad, etc.)? In what ways do those underlying assumptions promote and/or undermine my values? My institution's stated values? My students', community's, and society's needs?

A shift in thinking may require certain pedagogical trade-offs at the lower-division level between language acquisition and cultural study, which then would affect student language proficiency in upper-division courses. But, perhaps, even as students graduate, begin careers, and forget their verb tenses, the moments of cultural awareness would continue to spark transformative experiences and interactions. Perhaps their ability to communicate would improve, despite relatively smaller gains in language proficiency.

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