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Skills

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Reflections of an L2 Learner

Introduction

It's hard to individuate a single language learning experience from my 58 years. I weave through memories of the language learning experiences I've had, and they all are inextricably tied to memories of time and place. Each language represents a phase in my life: born in Paris, moved to Milan, moved to DC, sang in German, married a Dusseldorfer, then married a 'Flamenca.' This is, of course, a very compressed timeline of my life. Language acquisition was always accompanied by significant changes in my life. I learned English because we moved to the States. I spoke Italian because we moved to Italy. Schooling was never going to be a primary path for learning languages. I might even say that I've 'picked up' languages more than I've learned them. I've never learned a language by just studying it in the classroom. A broader and circuitous process was always involved.

German

I am not a fluent German speaker. I know German in three ways. First, I can negotiate complicated texts, (e.g., Goethe or Schiller, Platen or Daumer) but always with a big fat dictionary by my side, and often with some prior help in translating (e.g., translations of libretti and poetry by Glass, Phillips and Castel) (see note 1). Second, drop me off anywhere in Germany and I will 'get around' competently, ordering food, making friends, and function both

transactionally and interpersonally. Third, because singing is my 'metier,' I can pronounce, recite and sing/act German song or operatic repertoire fairly idiomatically (e.g., I have sung German Lieder and Opera for German audiences with critical acclaim and minimal CF).

German Course

I took a German language course at the Goethe Institute in the late 80's, but I learned little. Or, I should say, I remember learning little. I have no memory of the teacher in the classroom. I don't even remember the gender of this said teacher. If you asked me an hour ago whether I learned anything from this class I would have definitively said, "I learned very little." I remember the green cover of the course book. I remember a jumble of chapters with lots of different kinds of pictures. I remember thinking that somebody had designed a course book that was supposed to be friendly and fun, but that it had the opposite effect on me. Instead, the course book seemed compressed and confusing, stuffed with charts, illustrations, photos, fake casual conversations, lexical sets of german charcuterie, subsections labeled B1/2 GR, an accompanying glossary, an another accompanying Arbeitsbuch, and very strict time limits stipulated for studying each Lexion (chapter). I should say here that many people loved this class. My description might even thrill many learners and motivate them to take such a course. Not I! I would not want to repeat the experience.

Remembering

But upon more reflection I'm not sure how much I really learned. Did I learn very little, a lot, or somewhere in between? It's hard to quantify what I learned. In the hour since scouring my memory for thoughts and recollections about this course, I managed to find the textbooks (see note 2) that were used to teach the course. I discover they abound with notes and completed exercises in my handwriting. I did not remember any of this work I did for this course before. It

seems I did more work for this course than I recall. Upon perusing the textbooks again after not seeing them for many years, I am surprised to find myself easily rereading chapters, and I find that most of the material is still familiar to me.

So did I learn very little or not? I can't answer the question definitively. Did I learn most of my German from the course, or did I learn much of the material later on in another setting? I probably learned more than I think from the course, and I also learned many other things later on, due to exposure of German both in family and work. At this point, both ways of learning are inseparable. Obviously, many things I learned from the course were reinforced in the real world. In this exercise of remembering how and what I learned, where and when I learned, remembering itself seems to be the most problematic theme. I think the way I remember how I learned a language might reveal more than the memories themselves. This is particularly relevant to my history of learning languages. I was exposed to languages outside the classroom much more than in the classroom. Whatever the answer may be, in whatever way I learned German, I can say that if it had not been for the work and family exposure to German to reinforce the rules, vocabulary and pronunciation, I would never have remembered the things I learned from the course book. Instead of weeks, I needed months to absorb the materials. Instead of a single classroom environment, I needed multiple contexts. And instead of fixed and regimented timelines, I needed asymmetric "expanding schedules of repetitions." (Gerbier, Toppino and Koenig 2014)

Exposure

For me, 'Picking up' a language was always the first step to learning. I wanted to pronounce accurately, learn some key vocabulary (lexical sets) and hang out with native speakers to absorb and mimic, mimic and absorb. School was never the primary pedagogical paradigm for acquiring languages. I didn't learn a language because I had studied it in high school. High school might

have reinforced etiquette grammar. School also provided some peer pressure, and, at the very least, some exposure. These reasons for learning had benefits. They were useful as extrinsic motivating factors. But I took language classes because they were required to get through school. Not for intrinsic reasons. I didn't learn how to speak English because of a class in English, or French, or Italian, or German. I learned because I wanted to. I was motivated to learn these languages extracurricularly. My study of German, for instance, was a function of two things; my involvement in music and my marriage to my first wife Gudrun. Language and life changing events have always been linked. Language was linked not only to events but also to central people. Though my level of competency in all these languages (Italian, French, Spanish, German) I've learned varies, they all continue to play an important role in my life. Whether thinking about French as my mother tongue, Italian as my father tongue, German as the language of my 'Lieblingsmusik' or Spanish as the language of my wife and her art, (Flamenco, Clasico, Escuela Bolero, etc) a discussion of language learning is a biographical rendering.

Note 1

various 'Complete Song Texts' by Beaumont Glass, Leyerle Publications (various dates from the 90's-00's)

various 'The Libretti of' by Nico Castel, Leyerle Publications (various dates from the 90's-00's)

'Lieder Line by Line' by Lois Phillips, Oxford University Press (1996)

Note 2

Themen 1 (Hueber 1984)

Kursbuch, Arbeitsbuch and Glossar