

Instructors' Perspectives

Reflecting on the 'It's just like learning to swim' Analogy

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Language is a skill that is best learned by doing. As a methods instructor, language teacher, and director of a lower division Spanish language program, I have always been a strong advocate of using only the target language in the classroom and of getting learners to use the language from the first day. Learners should be encouraged to focus on *doing* as opposed to *reading about* the language. In my Foreign Language Methods course, I have long used the analogy of learning to swim in order to get this point across to new and future teachers. That is, you cannot learn to swim by reading about it or by only watching others do it. Rather, you have to get in the water and try to swim.

Saying that learning a language is like learning to swim is not an original analogy. Worse yet, as someone who did not learn to swim in childhood, I wasn't qualified to make such an analogy until I learned to swim. Several years ago, I realized that although I enjoyed being in the pool with my kids, I wasn't really a good enough swimmer to swim laps for exercise or, heaven forbid, to help anyone if they got into trouble. Thinking it wasn't too late to learn, I enrolled in a beginning swim class at my university. Like a typical basic language class, it was filled with a wide range of abilities, from true beginners to students on the swim team who just needed the hours in their schedule. In the middle there were folks like me, who probably had taken some swim lessons as children, but weren't good swimmers and didn't know any strokes beyond the dog paddle.

I learned two important things from my swim lesson. First, I learned that swimming just doesn't come easily to me. As much as I love being in the water, it takes a lot of concentration and intentionality if I am going to swim specific strokes. The finished product is not very smooth, and I need to breathe too often. However, I can get to the end of the lane and back and that is very satisfying. Second, I realized I should never make light of the challenges students face when learning a second language. Spanish seems to have come easily to me, but it's been so long since I was in an intro language course that I have surely lost sight of the fact that it required considerable effort and trial and error in the beginning. And, perhaps, there are those for whom, like swimming for me, learning a second language just doesn't come easily.

It took the whole semester, but I did learn enough for my goal to swim laps. I also learned a lot about the life of today's students. The swimming pool is somewhat of a social equalizer, and my classmates mistook me for just another older student. They were exceedingly polite to me, and they did not hesitate to talk in front of me about their classes, teachers, and lives in general. Listening to students talk about their language classes was eye opening. Ironically, it was during the first week of swim class, when we were already in the water, that I overheard someone saying how ridiculous it was that they had been required to speak Spanish the first week of class.

That said, I did learn some things about the teaching and learning of swimming that is transferable to the foreign language classroom. Here are some takeaways from my experience in swim class:

Warm ups are essential. It is important for learners to be given the opportunity to get their mind and body ready for the experience. In swim class, we bounced like frogs to one end of the pool and back. It seemed silly at first, but after while it was easy to see that both the activity and routine got us ready physically and mentally and set the tone for the class. In the same way, I warm up my language classes with short, low impact activities that hopefully help them transition mentally and linguistically into my Spanish-only class.

Stay in the target language. The swim instructor was in the pool the whole time and expected us to remain so as well. Providing a consistent structure and familiar activities will help learners feel comfortable staying in the water and in the target language. Moreover, if you can make the class challenging yet enjoyable, as the swim instructor did, students will not want to leave.

Model more, talk about less. The swim instructor spent more time showing us how to swim rather than lecturing us about swimming. When we explicitly talk about language forms in class, too often, we give the impression that such metalinguistic knowledge is valued over the ability to use the language. When we use the language – especially for classroom management and creating relationships in the classroom – we are making clear that the real value to language is in using it.

Scaffold. It was hard to put everything together when working on a new stroke, and we often practiced things separately or with the use of an aid, such as a float. In the language class, instructors need to break activities down into steps and then build them up again as well as provide the necessary resources. It is important to understand that learners may be able to complete one task in isolation, but not when asked to do several at a time. When we scaffold, we step back and become more of a mentor or a guide, thus allowing students to take more responsibility for their learning.

Don't be afraid to show them what's beyond them. Expose learners to advanced linguistic features, like advanced strokes, without expecting them to master them or even recognize them initially. Observing the collegiate athletes who practiced alongside us didn't turn me into a master swimmer, but I did learn to recognize and appreciate their strokes. In the same way, exposing learners to authentic or even just advanced materials in context can lead to gains in comprehension and perhaps even appreciation.

You can always swim one more stroke. In the pool, motivation and encouragement from the instructor and classmates were constant and made it possible to get to the end of the lane. Each extra yard swam helped reinforce the stroke and build endurance. Challenging learners to go beyond their perceived capabilities and to be comprehensible to others and not just the instructor is essential in helping them further develop their language skills. Low intermediate level students in particular need to be challenged, for example, to add one more detail or expand their answer.

And finally, *remember to breathe.* Breathing and staying calm is life-saving in swimming. Learners need to breathe, too, and regroup. Structuring class so that learners move from easier to harder and then back to easier assignments can also help lower their anxiety and give them time to recover and breathe before moving on to the next task. It is also helpful for instructors to remember to breathe and to take a moment to assess the effectiveness of the lesson in real time.

My experience in swim class was immensely valuable not because I ultimately learned to swim, but because I was unexpectedly given the opportunity to re-examine long-held beliefs about language teaching and learning from a very different perspective. Learning a new skill

with the guidance of a master teacher, I was able to experience firsthand the importance of pedagogical practices such as modeling and scaffolding that had become almost rote in my teaching. This has caused me to go back and be more intentional and mindful in my own teaching in order to make sure that I am providing the same kind of support for my students. Finally, I gained deeper insight into the challenges faced by our students on any given day, and I thus saw the importance of creating a challenging yet encouraging space for all of us.

Response to Roebuck's Reflection

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Roebuck has presented a wonderful extended metaphor of the language learning experience as one that is akin to learning to swim. “Challenging, yet encouraging and enjoyable” are indeed the key ingredients found in any successful language classroom. Let’s extend the swim class metaphor even further. At times the swim instructor will seek to refresh the teaching of a technique by collaborating with other instructors or will approach the teaching of a new stroke based on latest practices. I hesitate to use the phrase “best practices” given the brilliant critique of this term, which, in the words of Per Urlaub of Middlebury College during a recent [Symposium](#) at Columbia University, is simplistic and ignorant of local particularities. Indeed, lessons – swim or language – need to be carefully tailored to the students who are in front of us, not an ideal student or a student imagined in the eyes of textbook writers. Learning by doing has made strides (or strokes, if you will) in the last few years with approaches that can build on the strengths of the student, faculty or institution. Service-learning, community-based, project-based, task-based, and place-based language learning; Languages Across the Curriculum; Languages for Specific Purposes; and Multiliteracies are engaging pedagogies that approach “doing” with languages and *linguaging* in novel ways. Some of these approaches and others are captured nicely in the Yale University project [ProM](#) (Project Modules for Language and Cultural Learning).

To extend the many parallels between the learning experiences of swim and language students, the assessment of language proficiency also fits neatly within the swimming lessons metaphor. The NCSSFL-ACTFL “Can-Do” statements and other assessment tools such as the Oral Proficiency Interview emphasize what students can do with the language. The swimmer is evaluated on her proficiency in any given stroke such as the precision of the stroke while swimming the pool length. Likewise, for the language learner, the accuracy and comprehensibility of an utterance is measured in relationship to the “length” of the text – at the sentence or paragraph level.

Perhaps one feature missing from the otherwise very appropriate swimming lessons metaphor is the role of creativity, spontaneity, and individuality in the classroom. How can we tap into students’ deeply held interests and beliefs to invite them to connect in a more meaningful way with the target language? How can we as instructors connect in a meaningful way with the students before us?

With the adage “connection before correction” in mind, I have started to invite students to answer questions in writing on the first day of class regarding what other classes they are taking, what hobbies they pursue, and if they would like to see a particular topic treated in class. Other questions I ask are how can I support their language learning in class? Where do they see themselves in relationship to the target language in 5 years? In 10 years? Do they speak other languages? Are they taking the class for a requirement or for another reason? And what hopes and fears do they bring to the class regarding learning Spanish? Finally, I ask them if there is something else that they’d like me to know about them in order to better support their in-class participation. These questions open a window to the myriad (and often hidden) ways that students may be approaching the language and the language classroom. All of this to say that, while learning by doing is paramount, an overriding ontological question lingers. That is, what does it mean to *be* in a new language? To what extent does the swim student, upon completing swim lessons, come to identify as a swimmer? To what extent does the intermediate-low language student, upon completing a college foreign language requirement, identify as a Spanish speaker? As language instructors we extend the invitation to our students with love and compassion: Come to the pool. Jump in. The water is fine.

Response to Roebuck’s Reflection

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I read Roebuck’s reflection on language learning and found her perspectives on the ‘learning to swim’ analogy both creative and practical. As a university language educator, methods instructor, and recent director of a center for teaching excellence at a liberal arts institution, I have worked with many educators to support teaching and learning, and have come to intimately understand the needs of many dedicated instructors seeking tried and true strategies to help them become more successful in the classroom. While offering useful advice that serves novice and seasoned practitioners alike, the author’s reflection successfully translates several key aspects of theories of language acquisition into an informal and easy to understand narrative describing a life experience to which many can relate. The narrative contains seven useful teaching tips that, if applied to classroom teaching practices, offer support and scaffolding for students during their classroom acquisition experience. The author suggests pedagogically sound advice regarding teaching and learning in general, mirroring some of the research found in books such as *How Learning Works: Seven Research-Based Principles for Smart Teaching*, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success* and *Practice Makes Perfect*. She also includes strategies that compare teaching to good coaching, by offering warm-ups, modeling, encouragement, opportunities to learn by doing, and pushing students to stretch themselves beyond their current level of performance.

I recognized in the reflection several essential elements of every lesson that I emphasize to pre-service teachers, particularly elements related to target language use. These include replacing class time dedicated to metalinguistic explanations with consistent target language

use for conducting challenging and enjoyable activities, facilitating classroom management, and building relationships with learners. However, there is one element not fully developed in the author's reflection. That element is interaction, mentioned briefly in the explanation of modeling and using the language in the swimming analogy. Because communication and human interaction are the basis for the existence of language itself, I find interaction to be paramount to the language acquisition process and to the classroom language learning experience. I believe it is our role as world language educators to provide authentic contexts for interaction, whether they be in the classroom with other learners, with native speakers in the community, or through virtual exchange sessions. Scaffolding to ensure successful interaction motivates students to continue to build on their successes and to explore new cultures and perspectives.

We often forget what the experience of learning a new language is like for our students. By presenting the analogy of learning a complex physical task that can be challenging for some, the author allows us to vicariously experience this learning, and thus we can more easily imagine ourselves as students in our own classroom, dealing with the complexities of acquiring a new language. I applaud the author's clever approach in reminding us just how daunting the task can be, and in nudging us to view our students and their challenges through a new lens, in order that we can provide the necessary support for them to experience successful interactions in the target language.

Response to Roebuck's Reflection

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I read Roebuck's article with great pleasure and interest. As she says in her article, the analogy of learning to swim is not a new one; it's an analogy that I have also used. Swimming, in fact, was very important to me in my childhood and teenage years. In response to Roebuck, I would like to add some additional lessons that language educators can draw from the swimming analogy.

Unlike in Roebuck's case, I am a seasoned swimmer. I learned to swim when I was two years old and spent my childhood in summer camps where swimming was a central activity. I often competed and outswam children older than me. The pool was a place where I felt comfortable and at home. I felt graceful. Here are some additional takeaways that I have learned from my particular experience with swimming:

Don't teach to your former self as a student. What is obvious and evident to you isn't necessarily obvious and evident to your students. For example, I tend to be very analytical, and consequently, I think that if something makes sense to me, it should make sense to everybody. I applied that thinking when I tried to teach my husband how to swim, and, let's just say, I wasn't very successful. Similarly, when I first started teaching Spanish, I used to explain grammar as a set of logical rules, which was the way I had learned foreign languages. The method worked for some students but caused others intense frustration. It was only when I

switched to an integrated approach that conceptualized grammar as a tool for meaning-making that I saw successful outcomes in the majority of my students.

Sometimes, short explicit grammar instructions are very helpful. I remember trying to learn to swim butterfly. With this stroke, coordination is essential to keep pace and not become exhausted quickly. Watching and repeating after others wasn't enough for me; while I was able to swim butterfly, I was out of breath after just one lap. My instructor told me explicitly how and when to breathe, which made all the difference. I have seen the same result in my language classes, where a ten-minute presentation and review on the day's verb tense (following the flipped classroom method) made the difference.

The second part of my swim education was as a teenager when I was on the high school swim team. Unlike my childhood years, I was very mediocre by competitive swimming standards and we weren't a good team to begin with. And that was okay. I still enjoyed practicing and being in the pool and swimming, even if I never won a race. I had learned a skill and was able to use it and enjoy it. I didn't have to be the best. And this is my final takeaway, one I try to communicate my students:

Students don't have to be perfect nor do they have to be the best student to enjoy being in the Spanish classroom. For the most part, I think I am succeeding in communicating this message. When several years ago we introduced TalkAbroad, a program that allows students to have conversations with native Spanish speakers via Skype, as a requirement for language classes, it was amazing to see the joy students felt when they realized they could maintain a 30-minute conversation with a native speaker, despite their Spanish being far from perfect. In conclusion, I think these three additional takeaways allows us to be flexible and adapt to the differences and variations we will always encounter among students.

Response to Roebuck's Reflection

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When I was a freshman in college, all incoming students were required to pass a "swim test," which consisted of swimming four laps without interruption. Those students unable to pass the test were required to enroll in Swimming as their first-semester physical education course. As legend has it, the requirement to demonstrate this skill was instituted after a student had drowned in a lake on campus. In all likelihood, it is an apocryphal legend, given how widespread this "swim test" requirement had been in colleges across the U.S., and the fact that I could find no evidence through an online search. However, my cursory research also revealed that the requirement has since been abandoned at most institutions of higher learning. While it was merely a nuisance to most students and a cause for embarrassment to some, the utility of the skill was self-evident: Ensuring that all students could swim would likely save lives.

Sadly, for university administrators and the publics they serve, the utility of learning a foreign language is often less evident. We are all aware of the disheartening statistics regarding declining student enrollment in language classes, and that many of the "efficiency" measures

taken at institutions to lower costs have come at our expense. For this reason, the premise of this essay—that the author’s experience learning to swim is analogous to the experience of the foreign language learner—runs the risk of reducing our work as language instructors to that of treating our subject matter as yet another “skill” whose instruction is valued in terms of its efficiency. While the analogy is also compelling in many ways (especially as an example of the “active learning” model now privileged in a variety of disciplines in higher education), its treatment of foreign language as a “skill” poses problems for both psycholinguistic and sociocultural theories of second language acquisition. Chief among these problems is the fact that while the skill of swimming can be practiced in isolation, learning to make meaning and create new identities in a second language is an inherently social enterprise that depends on active communication and engagement with others.

Beyond this concern for the social dimension of language learning, many of the pedagogical recommendations highlighted in the essay are sound and worthwhile reminders for language instructors. Roebuck’s positive experience as a learner of swimming reflects the importance of approaching teaching and learning with clearly articulated goals, of structuring student efforts to systematically achieve those goals, and of making the value of each step of that structure evident. Most importantly, the author reminds us of the importance of taking into account the perspectives and experiences of our students as we create productive learning environments. While she was able to see the purpose of frog-jumping across the pool as a warm-up to more complex tasks, the most successful instructors that I have observed make this progression transparent to students so that they are not left to follow the instructor blindly.

But most importantly is that the learners understand where they are being led and why. Like Roebuck, I understood the goal of my college “swim test” and the remedial swim class for students who were not water-safe. But after recently returning to the first-semester Spanish classroom for the first time in 14 years, I worry that many students today do not understand the purpose of a language requirement. There are many reasons why this may be the case, but most of them point to the fundamental problem that a skills-based, credentialing-focused approach to higher education has taken the place of the “liberal education” model, the latter of which focused more on learning to think rigorously and creatively across a variety of contexts. For our work as foreign language instructors, this problem translates into a diminished value assigned to understanding the perspectives of others and to developing the ability to share experiences with a more diverse array of people. For me, then, the takeaway of this essay is that we do essential work by ensuring that our students understand that the day-to-day active learning they are doing is far more than the development of an individual skill; it is the means to experiencing new perspectives and engaging with new cultures (and their communities). This requires a more explicit approach to explaining, exploring, and contextualizing the goal of learning another language as learning another way of understanding and participating in the broader world around us. With a greater appreciation of language and (inter)cultural learning as a social value, I anticipate students to be far more likely to swim than to sink in their foundational language courses and beyond.