
The Knowledge Base of a Language Instructor: A Former Department Chair's Perspective

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I would like to begin by thanking the entire BLC for the many different ways that they have shown support for me and for other instructors in Berkeley language departments. And I would like to thank Claire particularly for the questions posed to the panel, which have been incisive and thought-provoking. I hope to live up to the expectations.

My academic field is Medieval and Early Modern Spanish literature, and for eight years I was chair of a so-called 'foreign' language department (Spanish and Portuguese) at UC Berkeley. I was born in Cuba and my first language was Spanish, but I moved to the US as a child and almost all my education, from kindergarten through my PhD, was in English. I learned French and at one time thought I was fluent in it; and I have had an up-and-down relationship with Italian, Portuguese, and German. I want to talk about three phases of my life and career that have been particularly intense in terms of a relationship with language learning and teaching, and then from those, draw some conclusions that address the questions that Claire posed about language learning and teaching in an age of globalization. The three phases are 1) learning French; 2) teaching Spanish; and 3) being a department chair.

When I came to the United States at the age of six in 1960, I didn't know any English, and there were no programs for English learners or bilinguals, but my parents put me in the local public school and within a few years I had caught up with my age group and acquired English. But how did I learn French? While some of my contemporaries received cool music lessons or participated in organized sports activities, my parents decided I should learn French, thus inadvertently launching me in my future career as a philologist. I really don't know what they were thinking, except perhaps that prior knowledge of English had been a great advantage to them as immigrants, and that one never knows when one may need to move again. My first lessons were administered by a family friend, Mme Boulanger. Her lessons were based on a little textbook we purchased at the Librairie Française on Fifth Avenue in New York, *Le Français par la méthode directe* (Robin & Bergeaud, 1951). I still have the second volume; I wish I hadn't lost the first. The books had beautiful illustrations (Figure 1), and while there was no explicit teaching of French as a foreign culture, the entire book was imbued with nostalgia for what I now recognize as the Third Republic. The reading passage in lesson one consisted, in its entirety, of the sentences "*Levez-vous. Asseyez-vous*": clearly, those were the key concepts for a child's successful inculturation in a French school. Mme Boulanger's teaching methods likewise indirectly echoed the culture of French education. They included dictations, and copying the complete conjugations of irregular verbs into specially purchased graph-paper *cahiers*. What were the *plus-que-parfait* and the *conditionnel* and, for that matter, the *article partitif*? When were they used? Understanding this did not seem to matter as much as knowing the correct form.

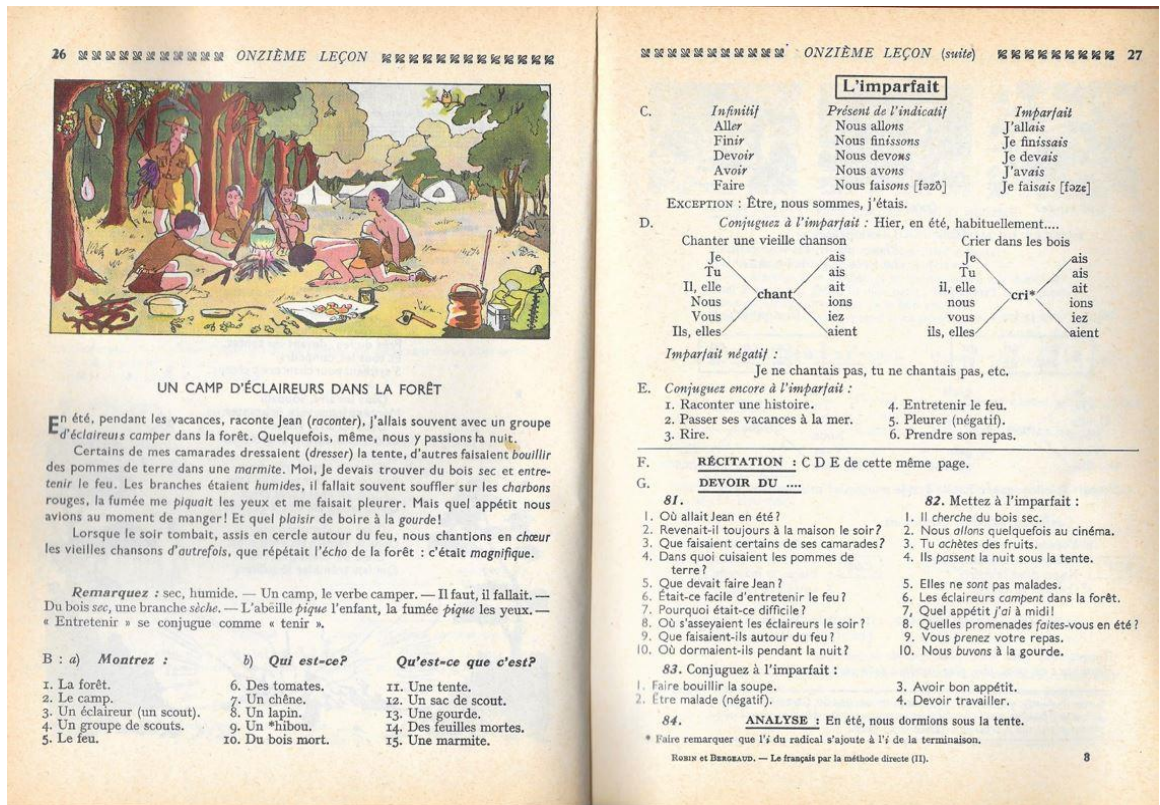


Figure 1. Illustration from *Le Français par la méthode directe*

In junior high school, French became a part of my curriculum. At my school we used the ALM (Audio-lingual Method) textbook series. Comparing the dialogues in the textbook with those of my classmates who were taking Spanish or German, we discovered that they all contained the same conversation, something about whether sausages or meatballs were being served in the school cafeteria for lunch. I suppose that the lunch menu could actually be considered a universal transcultural preoccupation, but it made us dubious about whether there was any specific cultural content in these textbooks at all, anything particularly French. We continued to learn grammar, and our teacher continued to give us the despised *dictées*. Still, the ALM curriculum did have some rather ambitious goals, and I will come back to those goals later in this presentation.

Then came high school. No more *dictées*, in fact, no writing at all. This may have been a side effect of late sixties educational experimentation. Our textbook was called *Voix et images de France* (Centre de recherche et d'étude pour la diffusion du français [CREDIF], 1964), and it contained nothing but pictures of the Thibaud family, and their children Paul and Catherine, who lived in Paris on the Place d'Italie (Figure 2). While looking at the pictures, we would sit in class with headphones on, and listen to dialogues over and over, repeating them. I suppose that this was meant to duplicate an aural immersion experience. The teacher had his own headphones on, and would sit at a console, listening in, in order to catch anyone who was not dutifully repeating the dialogues. You did wind up memorizing them, and I still remember some of the exchanges. Later, when it became clear that we weren't learning enough active French to get us through an anticipated immersion experience, we got Barnes and Nobles review grammars to supplement the picture books, and our teacher, Father McCann, would

give us culture lesson lessons on essential topics for our immersion experience, such as local French cheeses and ordering beer mixed with *limonade*.

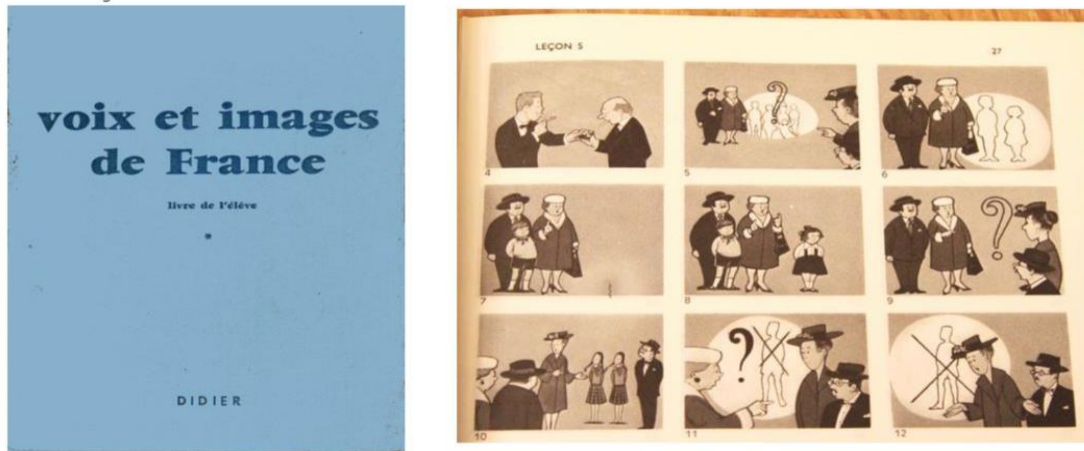


Figure 2. Cover and sample page from *Voix et images de France*

The immersion experience was how I really learned French: living with the Collomb family near Annecy, and particularly the informal but persistent tutoring of their ten-year-old daughter Sylvie, who delighted in nothing more than correcting me whenever I said something wrong. But I did learn much more French than most of my cohorts because of the solid grammatical foundation laid down by Mme Boulanger and her successors.

In college I was a comparative literature major with French as my major literature; I then went to Indiana University for my PhD, also in comp. lit., and there a mentor suggested I shift my focus to Spanish. Despite the cultural conservatism of the Midwest, many of the Big Ten universities have excellent language programs, and Indiana is where my career as a language teacher began, in their Spanish department, in the early 1980s.

I was fortunate to have a superb teacher in my pedagogy course, Dorothy Rissel, who also became my supervisor when I taught first-year Spanish. The pedagogy course was very indebted to William Bull: We used *Spanish for Teachers: Applied Linguistics* (Bull, 1965) as a textbook, which was particularly helpful to those in the class who had grown up with Spanish as a first language and had to learn to look at it from the outside. We also used his study of time and the tense system, and his *Visual Grammar of Spanish* (Bull, 1961). In addition, we had a number of readers that exposed us to some then-modish language pedagogy methods that, while we might not use, our pedagogy teacher thought we should know about (Oller & Richard-Amato, 1983). These included, most notoriously, the Rassias Method, which had recently been featured in the Sunday *New York Times* (Figure 3 [Price, 1978]); Total Physical Response, or TPR, in which students would induce vocabulary and grammar from a teacher issuing commands for physical actions (shades of “*Levez-vous, asseyez-vous*”); and Suggestopedia, in which students would be centered and relaxed by lying down and listening to Vivaldi.

There is nothing wrong with centering and relaxation as part of language pedagogy, but at the heart of Dorothy's method were the principles of communication and cultural competence. I've gone back and looked at another one of our textbooks, *Teaching for Communication in the Foreign Language Classroom* (Schultz, 1976). The preface describes “three major trends” in language teaching: “developing communication skills in the language learning experience”; “the concern for the individual student's attitudes, values, and needs in developing interpersonal relationships and communication in the classroom”; and “the

interest in intercultural and ethnic communication.” In the introduction Schulz contrasts linguistic competence, which may be acquired even through grammar drills and audiolingual



Figure 3. A New York Times piece on the Rassias Method

repetition of dialogues, and communicative competence. Dorothy did not totally reject drills or even occasional memorization, but she believed that good instruction capitalizes on the students' predilections, and that includes an innate desire among college-age students to communicate with their peers. And, she also subscribed to another principle noteworthy in the preface to *Teaching for Communication in the Foreign Language Classroom*, the importance of teaching culture as part of a communication-centered approach. We learned to do this by making up culture capsules. Communication and culture: I am going to suggest, as a thought experiment, a critique of these principles in the conclusion to my talk.

I think I was a reasonably successful language teacher both at Indiana University, and at my first professorial job, at Kansas State University, where an elementary language course was always part of every faculty member's assignment, along with more advanced courses in language, literature, and culture. Then I came to Berkeley, and elementary language teaching was no longer part of my portfolio. I say this even though I am ever conscious that every class is a language class, in which the students need opportunities to develop the four fundamental skills; and that the classroom management skills learned in Indiana are very close to the ones I use in upper division literature classes at Berkeley. I always enjoyed interacting with language instructors, attending events at the BLC, and being an informed supporter of language instruction on various Senate committees and task forces; and I appreciated the moral and

technical support of the BLC in some of my outlandish ideas, such as Baseball Spanish. I do believe that language instruction, the study of literature, and cultural analysis are all one big project, in which we all collaborate.

But it wasn't until I became a Department chair that language instruction once again became one of my primary concerns. I'm not sure I have enough distance on that experience to reflect on it adequately. Being a Department chair is an impossible job, where the rubber of administration hits the potholed pavement of everything the Department does, including language teaching. I certainly did not view this as an opportunity to impose c. 1980 ideas about pedagogy on the instructors, although it does seem that communication and culture continue to be the dominant principles in language instruction. Overall, I tried to hire the best lecturers I could, who would be excellent teachers, knowledgeable about pedagogy but not doctrinaire, enthusiastic, and even-keeled. I then tried to be totally supportive of them, staying out of their way while trying to run interference to any obstacles. After I observed a lecturer teaching, I might offer a few suggestions or observations, but I am sure that I learned much more from that process than did the lecturer. I wish Berkeley had more resources, in particular more lecturers, so that supervisory roles could be rotated. I do worry about course supervisor exhaustion.

I would now like to turn to the questions that Claire posed, about how globalization may have affected our approaches to language pedagogy, and about the desirable knowledge base of a language instructor, in particular a supervisor. My first comment has to do with the old but ambitious goals of the ALM curriculum. After only four years of instruction in an American high school, students should be able to participate, with grammatical accuracy and acceptably correct pronunciation, in a conversation or group discussion, or even hold their own at some length; they should be able to read newspapers and literature, including that from earlier periods; they should be able to write anything that they can say, in multiple registers, up to three pages' worth in a style acceptable to a native speaker; and they should be sensitive to the values and behavior of the target culture, and given the opportunity, participate with empathy and understanding. There is nothing wrong with these goals *per se*, and while they exude a post-Sputnik optimism, I wonder how many high school seniors achieved them in the late 1960s. Yet these ambitious goals resemble those that we might articulate for our own language programs at Berkeley, after only two years of instruction. As students go into upper division, we too expect them to participate in discussions, to write three-page essays, to read medieval and early modern literature, to be empathetic. Of course, we flatter ourselves, thinking that both our instructors and our teaching methods are superior and that Berkeley students are the best. But while I am glad that we have such elevated goals that put students in my classes on medieval and early modern literature, I do find myself wondering whether these are the appropriate ends for language study 60 years later. Sure, these goals are well-meaning, as students move from L1 to L2, from origin to target, but in a globalized age, is such differentiation between L1 and L2 as appropriate? Having taught at institutions in other parts of the United States, I can say that what seems very much "foreign" there, does not seem so foreign in California. Yet the cosmopolitanism of California is itself an example of a global process, and so we need to remind ourselves that both L1 and L2 cultures are imagined constructs, and to beware of excessive essentializing of their characteristics.

Thus, my little critique of the concepts of communication and culture. You need to remember that I began my language teaching in the early 1980s at large public universities situated in small towns in the rural Midwest. Yes, students had an innate desire to communicate, but if you believe that speaking a language has a distinct cultural component and is more than using a linguistic code, then one had to conclude what they wanted to

communicate did not translate them to a target culture, but rather resulted in a bizarre interlanguage. They would ask, “How do you say *sorority* in Spanish? *Rush?* *Pledge?* *Beer pong?*” Even assuming I was able to provide them with linguistic workarounds, are they really speaking Spanish, when the cultural content of the conversation is so relentlessly American? For them it was just a linguistic code, devoid of any transcultural content.

Yet it's not as if their Spanish counterparts were really sitting in a café having *tertulias* about Unamuno, as the cultural information in an old textbook might have it. The problem with the culture capsules is that they frequently reified generalizations about cultural practices, overlooking the plurality and variety of culture. This was already evident in Indiana in the early 80s, when we were assigned a culture capsule on the subject of dating, to replace the textbook's antiquated description of young townspeople walking around a plaza in opposite directions in the early evening. Not only were the “native speakers” in the class unable to agree on a description of pairing-up practices that could apply across the Spanish-speaking world; even the Americans objected to the normative heterosexual representations. No one, it turned out, could answer the assigned question about “typical practices.” And perhaps this was Dorothy's intention, to illustrate the difficulties of cultural generalizations on a topic that would ostensibly interest our target college-student audience.

This brings me to the final question, about the knowledge base of language instructors, particularly language supervisors. To me, as a department chair, it was very different to hire a lecturer and a supervisor. In both, I would seek a solid foundation in applied linguistics and familiarity with pedagogical theories. Firsthand knowledge of the so-called target culture, both high and low, is also important, but it needs to come with a broad awareness of how cultures vary in their expression. Especially at Berkeley, students and GSIs have a great awareness of diversity, and I have seen lecturers fail because they tried to impose, sometimes unknowingly, something that the students perceived as an overly normative cultural representation. Being an accomplished “master teacher” is not enough.

These concerns multiplied when I was hiring a supervisor. A good supervisor is like a vice-chair, running a subsection of the department with a large economic footprint and almost no oversight. Again, a good supervisor needs to be thoroughly grounded in applied linguistics and pedagogical theory, including teaching an audience that may include a significant representation of heritage speakers. A good supervisor can explain her decisions in a way that allows instructors some degree of individuality but ensures that the chosen pedagogical approach is respected. It would be wonderful if the pedagogy course could be decoupled from the initial teaching experience and be a prerequisite instead. Then subsequent actions, such as (for example) the selection of textbooks, could be done in a way that is participatory but also engages the teaching staff about why, on pedagogical principles, a particular choice is being made. A good supervisor works well with others, including instructors and department staff, but also with their fellow supervisors and the BLC. Chairs want a supervisor who can advise them on issues that come up that the chair knows very little about: for example, workloads; articulating with community colleges; introducing asynchronous or computer-assisted instruction; designing a profitable summer session. Chairs want to be supportive of their supervisors and never to micromanage, but they are also aware that if things go wrong, it is the chair who will have to deal with the repercussions.

Teaching in California is both an advantage and a disadvantage. It's a disadvantage because our heterogeneous population makes everything so much more complicated. The very dichotomy of native speakers and second-language learners is thoroughly undermined by many if not most of our students. But it is an advantage because the challenges of interculturalization are more on the surface, they are part of everyday life. Cultural conversations are

more particularized, more nuanced, more interesting. Instead of the false realism of generalizations, as if the target culture was something radically different from your own, you get cultural calques, metaphors, allegories. Whether or not one accepts globalization as an economic principle, more than ever, empathy and familiarity with alterity are ethical imperatives, and nothing develops these interpersonal skills as well as learning and teaching another language.

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