Resurrecting "Old" Language Learning Methods to Reduce Anxiety for New Language Learners: Community Language Learning to the Rescue

Eileen N. Ariza
Florida Atlantic University

Abstract

Traditional methods of language teaching include drills and repetitions with little emphasis on communication. Students who are anxious about their listening and speaking abilities tend to maintain an affective barrier that can make language acquisition almost impossible. This paper shares a teacher's dilemma and eventual success as she tries to teach Spanish to four monolingual English-speaking Puerto Rican boys who have recently, and reluctantly, relocated to Puerto Rico. The youngsters are unapproachable until the teacher begins to implement strategies from the older language teaching methodology, Charles Curran's Community Language Learning (CLL), which focuses on strategies that reduce anxiety, as the teacher plays the role of understanding and empathetic counselor. The uses and implications of this method are also discussed.

Foreign language teachers in training are inundated with information about the history of language learning methodologies and approaches. As typical enthusiastic students of language teaching and learning, they anguish over the benefits and drawbacks of each methodology and approach. In theory, all methods may offer their renditions of sound theoretical frameworks, but some are more traditional than others. One of the earliest, the Audio-Lingual Method, (ALM) was developed in World War II for rapid language learning. Grounded in "old school" drill and skill behavioral techniques, interactions were primarily linear transactions between the teacher and the student (Samimy, 1989).

Later methods, such as the Communicative Approach (Larsen-Freeman, 2001), were more focused on producing communicative competency by using meaningful, authentic language. Students learn to utilize the new language in environments that reflect natural settings throughout a wide variety of social contexts, while receiving directive feedback from the listener. Meaning is

negotiated by adjusting and reiterating the utterance in the target language, leading to successful communication.

Further studies (Price, 1991) found that language learner performance may be undermined by anxiety (Scovel, 1991) as the expectations of listening comprehension and extemporaneous speaking (Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1991) in the new language can produce serious discomfort in the form of an "affective filter" (Krashen, 1983). This filter inhibits students from receiving comprehensible language input, thus impeding the process of language acquisition (Horwitz et al., 1991).

The following narrative describes the author's experience in coping with anxiety-ridden, non-Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican children who recently (albeit reluctantly) relocated to Puerto Rico. Learning conditions were not optimal as the children were unhappy about their situations and had no desire to learn Spanish. In searching for a way to connect with students, promote successful instruction, and lower language learning anxiety, I implemented strategies from the Community Language Learning Approach. The uniqueness of this approach dictates that the target language teacher assumes the role of "counselor" in support of the student's personal comfort. The "counselor" demonstrates understanding of the learner's anxiety and shows empathy for the supposed emotional threat of a new language situation (Curran, 1976; Curran & Tirone, 1984; Samimy & Rardin, 1994).

Narrative

The thought of teaching Spanish as a second language in Puerto Rico, "La Isla de Encanto" intrigued and excited me as I pictured lush, tropical foliage, warm breezes and hot salsa rhythm. I relished the idea of leaving the cold slush of Boston winter behind and quickly accepted the mid-year job offer at the bilingual K–12 *colegio* in Mayaguez, located in the luxuriant, verdant hills on the western side of the island. Thus began my thoughts for implementing appropriate instructional and behavioral strategies. I erroneously assumed my biggest problem would be the classic case of gaining control of a previously established class suffering from the chaos of multiple substitute teachers.

My assignment was to teach non-Spanish-speaking Puerto Rican children raised in the mainland United States who were virtual strangers to Spanish and the Puerto Rican culture. Although considered a bilingual school (*colegio*), academic content-area classes were conducted primarily in Spanish. Students with at least an intermediate grasp of the target language were included in these immersion classes. However, due to their total lack of Spanish proficiency, my newly assigned students were unable to join these mainstream immersion classes. The school board administrators (parents, teachers, and prominent community members) were convinced that teaching academic content in the target language would produce maximum

instructional success if the students possessed at least intermediate language proficiency. To help mitigate anticipated language-learning anxiety, the new students' language proficiency skills were fortified with pullout Spanish-as-a-second-language classes before they were thrust into the conventional classroom. My job was to implement second language learning strategies so that the listening and speaking skills of this particular group of newcomers to Puerto Rico would be enhanced to at least an advanced beginner level of proficiency. The administrators believed that the students would have no trouble transferring native language literacy knowledge to their second language once conversational or social language proficiency was developed to a perceptible level of communicative competency (Cummins, 1981; 1982; 1996; 2000; in press). My newfound bliss about teaching Spanish in Puerto Rico was short-lived, however, when I met four of my culture-shocked students. What I encountered was a group of terrified children, angry at the prospect of being forced to learn Spanish and about being in Puerto Rico, with affective filters like walls of steel (Krashen, 1983.)

As a consequence of my personal experience as a second language learner at the age of 30, I was uncomfortably familiar with culture shock (Lewis & Jungman, 1986; Nolan, 1985; Oberg, 1960; Samovar & Porter, 1991; Taft, 1979; and Winkelman, 1994). However, I willingly sought my own pain of immersion in a foreign culture, and I possessed strong intrinsic motivation to become bilingual. I was an adventurous non-traditional student making my own decisions when I began to live in Spanish-speaking countries. These youngsters, on the other hand, had different histories, and were victims of unfortunate sociological and personal circumstances beyond their control that brought them to Puerto Rico. The children assigned to me were plunged into their situations due to heartbreaking circumstances. The common denominator for relocation to Puerto Rico was a crisis, such as a breakup of the family, remarriage of a parent, separation of siblings, fatal motor vehicle accident, or all of the above. All had at least one parent of Puerto Rican descent. Compounding family crisis, the children were relocated to a "foreign" place, and suddenly the custodial parent was speaking Spanish, a language not previously used on the mainland United States where they had all been raised during their formative years. Their feelings of loss were overwhelming; the children associated learning Spanish with loss of home, family, and stability. Finally, for some the "new" Spanish-speaking parent represented a virtual "loss" of a familiar parental identity.

Initially I approached my class as I did for every new class I taught, a fact-finding mission to discover the personalities of my students, evaluate what they knew, and decide what steps I would take to arrive at our linguistic destination. It did not take very long to learn that my students thoroughly rejected the idea of learning Spanish, and denied knowing any Spanish words at all. When the reality of my situation struck me, I began to worry in earnest. I did not think I would be able to teach these children and I suspected they would be better served with crisis counseling instead of language teaching.

To determine where I would begin to help these children learn Spanish, I conferred with their parents and the guidance counselor to arm myself with as much background information as possible. After much analysis of these apparently insurmountable obstacles, the only conclusion I could draw was the idea that I would have to focus on lowering their affective filter (Krashen, 1983). If I could eliminate some of the discomfort the learners felt about this new culture and language, maybe I could create a minimally threatening environment so seductive that some Spanish learning could penetrate their barriers.

Nico, Angel, Juan, and Josua (psendonyms), my principal group of students, were my initial focus. In the classroom they were playful with each other in English, and were charming individuals when no foreign language was expected of them. When pressed to perform in Spanish, however, the stress level rose to a noticeable degree. A simple vocabulary list would almost make the boys cry. In fact, when presented with a short list of simple words to learn, one boy became so distressed that he would actually cry and protest that he could not do it.

Drawing on the memory of an older language learning methodology I practiced in graduate school, Community Language Learning Method, or CLL (Curran, 1976; Larsen-Freeman, 2001), I recalled that the method borrowed concepts from the field of psychological counseling and applied them to language learning. I could not think of a more classic case where psychology was needed as a strategy to induce learning. Perhaps this method would mitigate the boys' fear, give them confidence and build their self-esteem during the process.

CLL is not a new language learning method by any means, but the idea of teaching and learning languages non-defensively appealed to my "teacher perception," or inner sense of "the right thing" to do. I wanted and needed to build a relationship of trust with these youngsters before they would engage in a teaching/learning relationship with me. While my young students were so emotionally fragile, and this frailty was intertwined with all aspects of learning Spanish, I could not continue trying to teach without addressing the most significant issue of negativity associated with learning this target language.

My first strategy was to orchestrate activities to get to know my students and to build a sense of community. For example, I brought in cookies and juice so they could pretend they were at a party and they had to interview each other with a list of questions. Aside from the traditional, "What is your name?" and, "Where do you live?" questions, they asked each other for more probing information, such as: Describe favorite things to do, hobbies, what life was like before moving to Puerto Rico, and other conversation starters. Students could take notes to remember the answers because they were going to share their interviews with the class. They loved this activity because it was in English, involved eating cookies, and no studying was required.

While they were interviewing each other, I had the opportunity to eavesdrop and assess the boys' personalities individually. I liked what I learned about them and they appeared to be delightful children. Afterward we continued with other activities including simple getting-to-know-you "ice breakers" such as the old stand-by using the alphabet game, in which participants repeat and have to remember what the speakers before them have listed (e.g., "I went to a picnic and I brought an apple"; "I went to a picnic and I brought an apple, and a banana"; "I went to a picnic and I brought an apple, a banana, and a carrot"; and so on until the alphabet is finished and all items are remembered). These community-building exercises were fun, and non-threatening. Since the boys already knew each other well, their camaraderie was a strong point upon which I tried to build.

In CLL, the teacher's initial role is as a counselor that orchestrates the scene for the students. The threat that learning Spanish implied for these boys would have to be mitigated and I hoped to be successful in disarming them by taking one step at a time. After they began to like and trust me, I planned to introduce metalinguistic strategies so they could help themselves learn language. I reasoned that they were old enough to think about the best ways for them to study.

Following the premise of CLL, Curran (1976) maintained there were five learning stages that students pass through as they learn a foreign language. The process starts with a language beginner who is dependent upon the teacher for everything (Stage One); Stage Two occurs when the beginner starts to use the second language, but with frequent support from the teacher, who "counsels" the learner by offering support, understanding, and a non-threatening group environment. Stage Three involves the advanced student who becomes an independent language learner, and may even resist teacher correction. Stage Four is characterized by role reversal, as the student is very fluent and the teacher attempts understanding. The teacher may be hesitant to correct the student at this point. At Stage Five, the student has complete metalinguistic competence and is capable of learning independently. I was not sure if I would ever see the second stage while they were with me, because my job as a teacher replacement would only last for the rest of the school term. However, I was aiming to conquer the first stage at the very least.

Because they were children, I imagined that my students would enjoy the technique Curran called the "Human Computer," which Samimy (1989) described as "an excellent combination of the depersonalized quality of a machine with the sensitivity of a human and a native speaker's linguistic competence" (p. 171). The theory behind this technique is that student-generated conversation gives the participants a choice in what they want to say in their native language. The teacher translates their words into the target language, and the students repeat what the teacher says. The teacher records their words into a microphone as they repeat manageable chunks of language. When the recording is finished, it is played back to the students and they hear

themselves speaking the target language in a conversation. The participants should understand the meaning of the words because they chose what to say, which might motivate them to speak more Spanish. Thinking they were going to have more fun and games, the boys were happy to comply with my request for them to sit in a circle. I gathered my tape-recorder and began the role of the "Human Computer." They made their circle and I prepared the scene for learning by explaining the instructions to them. I told them to say whatever they wanted in English (but to be nice) and I would stand in back of them, pretend to be a talking computer, and translate the dialogue. They could repeat the words as often as necessary and I would not correct mistakes. I modeled the correct pronunciation and they repeated my words. When they approximated the sound so that it was understandable, I taped the utterance. After they finished their dialogue, I played it back for them. The following conversation was our first attempt.

Nico:	My name is Nico.
Teacher:	*Mi nombre . . .*
Nico:	*Mi nombre . . .* (Recorded.)
Teacher:	*. . . es Nico.*
Nico:	*. . . es Nico.* (Recorded.)
Angel:	Nico is a dog. (All children laugh.)
Teacher:	*Nico es . . .*
Angel:	*Nico es . . .* (Recorded.)
Teacher:	*. . . un perro.*
Angel:	*. . . un perro.* (Recorded.) (Children titter.)
Ivan:	Josua is a duck. (Children laugh explosively.)
Teacher:	*Josua es . . .*
Ivan:	*Josua es . . .* (Recorded.)
Teacher:	*. . . un pato.*
Ivan:	*. . . un pato.* (Recorded.)

At this point, children waved their arms in the air, clamoring for a turn to "insult" one another. Now it was Josua's turn to retaliate.

Josua:	My dog is smarter than Ivan. (Children are laughing uproariously.)
Teacher:	*Mi perro. . .*
Josua:	*Mi perro . . .* (Recorded.)
Teacher:	*. . . es mas inteligente . . .*
Josua:	*. . . es mas inteligente . . .* (Recorded.)
Teacher:	*. . . que Ivan.*

Josua: . . . *que Ivan.* (Recorded.)

By then the children were rolling around laughing hysterically, each trying to best the other with a funny insult. They continued with a few more sentences so that everyone had two turns.

When I asked the boys if they were ready to hear what they said, they were dying to listen. This precious, painfully extracted conversation, silly to outsiders, but hysterically funny to these middle school students sounded like this:

Mi nombre es Nico. Nico es un perro.

Josua es un pato. Mi perro es mas inteligente que Ivan . . .

[My name is Nico. Nico is a dog. Josua is a duck. My dog is smarter than Ivan.]

Such "silly" conversation, however, was loaded with grammar, vocabulary, and semantics that I would be able to parlay into further learning of this new language.

As they listened to their own conversation in Spanish, they boys were delighted. They asked to hear it again and again, and tried to repeat what they had said. It was evident that they understood everything they had recorded and I was silently blessing the fact that the translation was direct so that I could manipulate the sentences into reading, writing, listening, and speaking practice. Although the literacy component was not required by my job description, I could not resist seizing such a wonderful opportunity to integrate reading and writing practice with authentic student-generated language.

Seizing this teachable moment, I began to transcribe the conversation on the board. As luck would have it, the verb structure was similar to English, which meant I could use what the boys had produced and did not have to worry about explaining the differences in the infinitive "to be" (*ser* and *estar*). I asked the boys to go up to the board and write the translation of their sentences, and then write the sentences in Spanish on their paper. This turned into an exercise that included using different vocabulary words when I asked if they could think of other nouns. They started to list other animals, fruits, and vegetables to "insult" each other. I exploited the situation to take advantage of every moment they were involved in their own learning. To prolong their interest, as homework I asked them to write a short, funny story about each other, which we translated in class. I felt like I had discovered gold, and since I finally had my chance, I was going to seize the fortuitous moment.

From the boys' utterances, I could also later extrapolate to formulaic speech by changing the verbs; creating sentence extensions; making questions and negatives; filling in the blank with different nouns; teaching the comparison and superlative structures (i.e., *Mas inteligente que . . .*); writing humorous stories about each other, with illustrations; and finding self-generated vocabulary words in the dictionary independently.

Later assignments included writing silly sentences, essays, and stories, labeling cartoons, and creating comics. During the first stage, I translated their stories, but when they became more accustomed to the language, I asked them to try translating simple structures independently, or collaboratively, by using the dictionary and each other.

As a consequence of this initial breakthrough, my mind raced with creative ideas to expound upon the new enthusiasm the boys showed. The fun these youngsters were having at the expense of one another was surpassed only by my elation at their levity. For a time, they forgot their panic about speaking Spanish as they lost themselves in the pure, simple pleasure of playing with the language.

For these children, this was not the end of the social and psychological traumas. However, the time I spent using CLL to try to teach them was a period in my teaching career when I felt distinct personal success because of my students' success. This older method of language methodology, presumably created with adults in mind, proved to be just what was needed to break the ice with this young group of children.

It was unfortunate for me that I was unable to stay on at the school, but this experience would be invaluable to me as I continued my doctoral work in language education. When my job was finished at the end of the year, it appeared that the students had reached what Curran (1976) described as the second stage (beginning to use the language with frequent support) and I felt they were well on their way to recovering their equilibrium. In terms of professional fulfillment, I would rate this experience as equivalent to the first time I taught a child to read.

Implications

Rardin, Tranel, Tirone, and Green (1988) mention that anxiety may be mitigated if learners share tasks and build community together. By having the students work together in pleasant activities, they momentarily forgot their discomfort and uneasiness. With its primary focus being the reduction of language learning induced anxiety, CLL was the key to reaching this group of children, as opposed to the traditional grammar drills and other language teaching strategies. Within an eclectic array of language activities, drills and other such exercises have their place. However, it was clear that these boys were untouchable until their anxiety was reduced to a workable level. CLL was invaluable as an "introduction" to listening and speaking, but it was also an opportunity for use as a natural scaffold to develop reading and writing.

Anyone who has been exposed to "shock language" (being thrust into a foreign language situation) can appreciate the tactics used in CLL. Small conversational circles in a non-competitive atmosphere increase the sensation of

learning within a secure community. The activities within each CLL cycle build a warm relationship with the language teacher, who plays the role of counselor and listens actively and empathetically. As a result of this approach, students develop feelings of security. Mutual trust grows, and the learners are better able to personalize their learning as they invest themselves in the risk-taking process of trying to communicate. The teacher does not control the conversation, rather, it is student-generated and learners are able to speak freely while corrections are made surreptitiously and without reproach. A student may be aware of linguistic and grammatical functions but be unable to perform due to fear of making a mistake (Rardin, et al., 1988); CLL reduces this fear.

By implementing CLL strategies, language learners can conquer their fears of making a mistake, gain greater self-confidence, and bond with the teacher in a non-threatening classroom, thus promoting language acquisition. The typical activities included in this method are: small numbers of students in conversation circle, transcription of student-generated text via the "Human Computer," card games, small group tasks, and reflecting on experience and listening sessions. Consequently, language learning facilitates due to the broad scope and usage of combined modalities. The variety of methods within this approach to teaching can address any number of language learning styles, and calm the most apprehensive learners.

Initially, students only have to listen to internalize the sounds of the language. They listen and repeat what the "counselor" says in the new language, using approximate pronunciation. They tackle as much or as little as they are capable of; the decision is theirs to practice the formation of simple syllables, vocabulary words, phrases, or complete sentences. No stress is involved in trying to invent utterances in the target language. Students express what they want to say, and thus are responsible for their own language production, without suffering the anxiety of finding the words of the target language within their own body of knowledge. The act of depending on the "counselor" to demonstrate the correct utterances removes the onus of creating the foreign language from the students and places it in the hands of the "counselor-teacher." Thus, this comfortable, linear, teacher-student interactive pattern creates a relationship of trust that builds an optimal language learning platform.

The transcription of the students' recorded language acts as a springboard for written language. Within this student-generated text, reading and writing instruction is presented naturally, unlike the unauthentic dialogues found in the typical beginner's foreign language book. It is up to the "counselor-teacher" to exploit the students' written conversation and transform it into valuable lessons in grammar, vocabulary, and other pertinent linguistic functions.

Conclusion

It is clear that anxiety can impede language learning. As a direct result of implementation of the Community Language Learning Method, young Spanish learners plagued by social and psycholinguistic hindrances were able to break through almost impenetrable barriers that threatened their capability of learning a new language. This method is an excellent way to reach any new language learner (including English), especially those who have the least confidence in their language learning skills.

Over a period of five months, these youngsters progressed from total disdain for Spanish, to taking delight in every new utterance because it served their purpose, the intrinsic desire to communicate. This experience demonstrates what every teacher knows; that is, learning cannot occur until students want to learn. If learners are emotionally unwilling, language acquisition will be impeded. It is the responsibility of the teacher to discern what is best for students. In this scenario, traditional language teaching would have been futile. While more traditional language methodology may hold its rightful place in language teaching history, in this circumstance CLL came to the rescue by building a sense of unity (Rardin et al., 1988) that stimulated these youngsters to learn Spanish together, naturally, spontaneously, and fearlessly.

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