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Exceptional learners I have known

There is, by now, a large literature on different learning styles (Skehan* provides a good overview). Here, I just want to say a bit about some of the more conspicuously unusual ways of learning English *that I have actually observed myself*. (You will see from what follows that I have worked almost exclusively with learners aged 17 and up.)

Andrea

This was the person who finally made me realize unforgettably that not everybody learns the same way. I had of course heard and read about different learning styles before, but none of this input had made much difference to how I actually taught.

Andrea was a middle-aged entrepreneur and I had him, one-to-one, five mornings a week for just under a month. He was at low elementary level when he came to the school in Canterbury that I was working at then. I can't remember what we did the first Monday morning, but it became clear that it hadn't been his cup of tea. On Tuesday morning, as I approached the front door of the school (then in a narrow side lane), I noticed him waiting for me. He said good morning and then, with predominate use of Italian words changed somewhat in the direction of English, he explained to me that in Milan he did all his important business *outside* of his office—in cafes and parks or while walking or standing in the street. *That*, he said, was where he wanted to learn English. Furthermore, he did not want me to teach him any grammar, *ever*. Or correct him. And would I like to go with him now to a café?

By means of a gentle but utterly consistent refusal to let me tell him any-

thing about English—except in response to a specific question from him—he introduced me to the practice of the 'natural approach'. Specifically, what we did was just converse. Since I am not the greatest conversationalist in the world, things tended to proceed by means of him asking more questions than I did; and his questions touched on many things—but never on grammar.

By the end of the four weeks, Andrea could hardly say one sentence in ten without multiple grammatical errors. But, mainly through use of the vast Latinate vocabulary of English—he could speak comprehensibly *and interestingly* about almost anything he wanted. And he had become able to understand a great deal of what someone said to him personally. In short, he could converse, and do face to face business, in English—which was all that he had come to England to achieve. I have now had many other learners who prefer to learn like Andrea—and I doubtless had had others before Andrea but just didn't know it. I hope I am a little better at giving them what they need without having to be forced. It has to be said, though, that this way of trying to learn a language is problematic for late teens and adults whose mother tongue is quite different from the target language. For instance, a high proportion of my Arabic students have adopted Andrea's approach (more or less), but with far less success.

Jan

It was pure coincidence that my next memorable learner wanted to learn in a way that was pretty much the opposite of Andrea's. This man was a 35ish ethnic German who had been raised in

Poland and had, not long before, managed to get into western Germany. (This was before the Wall came down.) I didn't have him for the first morning of his course, but apparently he was unsatisfied. What he wanted was a teacher who could either speak Polish or, failing that, German—things that his first teacher couldn't do. Somehow, he found out that I could speak German and so he told me that he wanted *me* to take over as his teacher—something I eventually managed to arrange the change with the director of studies. In German, he told me also more or less the following—

“When I made it into West Germany, I could not speak German. I went to the Goethe Institute. As a result, I have German grammar in this notebook.” At this point, he held up a small, floppy yellow spiral-bound note pad and showed me a few pages. They were covered with very small, very neat notation—his own—that looked rather like chemical formulae. He then held up a slightly smaller, but new and empty note pad that was about the size and shape of a thin paperback book and said, “For the first two weeks you will explain English to me in German and I will put that information in here. On the third Monday I will begin to speak English.” And that is what happened. At the end of four weeks he couldn't say nearly as much as Andrea. But he could say quite a bit, and with *very* few errors. My recollection is, in fact, that he rarely—*if ever*—made the same mistake twice. I imagine that, given the right circumstances, he could have become virtually bilingual after less than a year of study.

In the heyday of the so-called 'grammar-translation' approach to teaching, this kind of student was often well-catered for. Of course, these brainy analytic individuals are still

out there. I wonder if communicative learning environments don't actually tend to hinder them.

Hoon

Hoon had just gotten out of the South Korean army and radiated with the impatient desire to make up for lost time. He came to class less and less. When he did, his main purpose seemed to be to deliver various pieces of long, unassigned writing. I corrected and otherwise responded to these and after a while he began to come mainly when lessons were ending just in order to collect his corrected papers and deliver new ones. Once when he was in class, I showed part of the film *The Third Man*. Could he borrow the video, he asked. I said yes and also offered to loan him a copy of the complete script which I had gotten off the internet. He went away happy. Thereafter, he came around a bit more often—to borrow more videos and scripts and to ask questions about wordings he had come across when reading the scripts prior to viewing the videos. Meanwhile, his writing got better and, when he attended class (still a rare thing), his English was better and better. After he left the College, a new Korean student gave me a bottle of wine. “From Hoon”, he said. The first two students I have described had enough money to study one-to-



Albert H. Krehbiel, *Waiting at the Church*, 1922, tempera.

one. They also knew exactly how they wanted to learn, a major factor in their progress. One thing that interests me about Hoon is that he didn't seem to want classes at all, not of any kind... just occasional editorial and library services. It seemed to work for him. In any case, he was the only one from the class who gave me a bottle of wine. I have met others who don't need classes. I recall that in 1970, when I did a lot of hitch-hiking, I met a French-Canadian and a Bavarian both of whom had a particularly impressive command of spoken English even though neither had spent time abroad. They both said they learned English by trying hard to understand Bob Dylan songs and then memorizing them by the dozen. At any rate, they didn't mention their English teachers—if any. Here is one final example

Roy

Roy and I went to the same high school. A typical feat: In his year, he got the top score out of all the thousands of American and foreign candidates who took the qualifying exam (the ‘graduate record examination’) for post-graduate studies in economics. Among the other things Roy can do is learn a language with a grammar book and a desire to *use* the language. For instance, he wanted to read the *New Testament* in Greek; and so he learned Greek and read it. From there, he moved on to Jewish scripture, and to come to grips with this he learned to read, and speak, Hebrew. As an American who never had a course in a modern language until he was 18 (though we sat together in terrible Latin classes for a few years), he speaks German, French, Russian and probably one or two others I don't know about.

What would I do if I had someone like Roy in a class? How could I be a help rather than a hindrance? Basically, these questions apply whenever one has a learner who can learn well but

prefers to do so in their own, possibly not very social fashion. Possibly, they are more numerous than we ever know. Perhaps we overlook them. They do not, after all, wear signs saying ‘Exceptional learner, help me do my own thing’. One thing is for sure, we teachers need to be prepared to be flexible if we want to do these learners justice. Just to close, as I wrote this it dawned on me that none of learners I recall as being exceptional learners, or rather eccentric ones, were girls or women. But of course males are definitely *not* better at learning languages than females. But for me at least, none stands out in my memory as being eccentric. Rather, my experience seems to be that girls and women, if they are motivated to learn at all, are more likely to go about language learning in a socially connected fashion and are less likely to have the marked disinterest in grammatical accuracy that characterizes someone like Andrea. Perhaps I have overlooked cases that were right under my nose. Perhaps my experience has been untypical. Among the readers of this journal there are bound to be some who know a lot about this kind of thing. Perhaps one of them will supply a letter or article on gender differences in language learning that goes far beyond my speculations.

Note

SKEHAN, P. (1998): *A cognitive approach to language learning*. OUP.

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