

Informing Language Teaching through Language Learning

Informando la enseñanza de lenguas a través del aprendizaje de lenguas

Shelley A. Spencer*

shelley.spencer@postgrads.unisa.edu.au

University of South Australia

Teacher development texts generally work from the assumption that teachers have a number of colleagues and mentors available to share ideas with and seek guidance from. While this might be so in the ESL context, EFL teachers working outside of their culture can be very isolated. This reflective article looks at some of the problem scenarios faced by one EFL teacher in pursuit of professional development and the dilemma over assumed contemporary teaching practices until finding a solution close at hand: using one's own concurrent language learning experiences to inform others of one's beliefs about teaching and learning. In the process, the relationship between teacher and learners changed dramatically. The practice of attending more consciously to one's own language learning experiences may help other teachers in making certain decisions in their practice.

Key words: EFL, isolated, language learner, fun, activities, adult learner, high school, university, teacher development, TESOL

Los textos de desarrollo docente generalmente parten del supuesto que los profesores tienen a su disposición varios colegas y mentores para compartir ideas y buscar consejo. Mientras esto podría ocurrir en el contexto de inglés como segunda lengua (ESL), los profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera (EFL) que trabajan fuera de su cultura, pueden estar muy aislados. Este artículo de reflexión da una mirada a algunos de los escenarios de este problema, observados por un profesor de EFL, en la búsqueda del desarrollo profesional y el dilema sobre supuestas prácticas contemporáneas de enseñanza, hasta hallar una solución más a la mano: el uso de sus experiencias personales de aprendizaje para explicar sus creencias sobre la enseñanza y aprendizaje. En el proceso, la relación profesor-estudiantes cambió dramáticamente. El prestar atención más conscientemente a nuestras experiencias personales de aprendizaje de la lengua puede ayudar a otros profesores a sustentar ciertas decisiones durante su práctica.

Palabras claves: Inglés como lengua extranjera, desolación, aprendiz de inglés, diversión, actividades, aprendiz adulto, escuela secundaria, universidad, desarrollo docente, TESOL

* **Shelley A. Spencer**, an Australian, commenced her EFL teaching career in Japan, teaching all ages in a variety of institutions. She has also taught in a university in China and an English centre in the Czech Republic. She is currently undertaking doctoral research on language learning and teaching.

During the process of my 'becoming' an EFL teacher in unfamiliar cultures, one frequent concern was the lack of opportunity to dialogue within my professional field. Without a sympathetic mentor or forum for discussion, I relied on constant experimentation, abandoning lesson ideas and implementing new initiatives until after a few years I acknowledged my own language learning experiences as a means of informing my teaching practice. In this article, I reflect on some of the contexts I have worked with to highlight the problems of isolation and follow through with the application of my approach.

As a mature university graduate in adult education with some teaching experience in business and the community, my first TESOL training was a one week course in the particular method of my conversation school in Japan (1998). (The emphasis was on providing 'fun' lessons and teachers were admonished if students weren't laughing enough.) I then completed a masters in TESOL by correspondence whilst in Japan (2001), gratefully receiving packets of readings in the post. During my studies, I changed companies, towns and student-base several times due to extremely difficult working conditions. Continuity of research themes, access to academic books and to the Internet were problematic. I generally lived alone, being perhaps the only 'foreigner' in my area, worked long hours and travelled up to two hours to reach some of the branch schools. Rarely or never did the paths of any teachers cross.

My first high school experience was particularly traumatic. In 2000, an English school assigned me twice weekly to a private boys' high school situated in isolated rice paddies. (I travelled there by bicycle, bus and on foot.) I had no prior training or experience in the formal educational system. Only one teacher there was able to communicate with me in English and my Japanese was not yet at conversational level. The boys had serious behavioural problems that were infiltrating many Japanese schools during this period, identified as 'gakkyu hokkai' ('collapse of the classroom'). For

the most part, they were unresponsive, sitting in comatose states with glazed-over eyes. I was advised where to find help if any of the boys turned violent. The former teacher, who gave notice shortly after his tie was cut off, gave me a handover of sorts. He introduced me to the boys and then produced a pack of cards displaying amusing pictures. "Watch this!" he said, with a grin. As he held up each card, the boys looked up, laughed uproariously, then lapsed back into their sombre states. The humorous cards were the only thing he had found that animated the boys, if only briefly.

During that semester, my boys remained a sea of faces. I did not get to know them. I was still finding myself as an English teacher. In an attempt to be professional, I decided to plan lessons using the prefectural textbook and thus support the efforts of the Japanese teachers. I simply taught as though the boys were responding, partly because I did not know what else to do, partly for my own sanity and partly to develop my knowledge of teaching materials. My masters degree, with topics such as linguistic functional analysis, hardly seemed relevant.

In one particular lesson, after an attempt to reach the boys, one spoke up and haltingly apologised on behalf of his peers, announcing that they were bad and that I was a good teacher and would I please continue. He promptly lapsed into the zombie-like state. Problems were compounded by the Japanese practice of doctoring grades and passing all students regardless, perhaps out of fear of losing face or provoking suicide by either teacher or student. My modus operandi was consolidated: plan a busy and structured lesson and teach as though the situation was 'perfect' with everyone attentive and responsive. This way, I preserved my sanity, put the onus on the learners to either join me or ignore me and continued to 'find' and 'define' myself as an English teacher. Allowing my personality and nature to also guide who I was becoming as a teacher, I noticed a big drift from the fun and entertainment approach that I had been encountering in the field. Students

described me as 'earnest'. I took my teaching seriously, according to my natural inclination and I could really do nothing else. 'To thine own self be true' was my motto.

Besides the lessons at this school, I was also assigned an incongruous mix of classes throughout the prefecture: toddler's classes, elementary-age classes, night school for children, private adult lessons, community classes for youths preparing for the prefectural English exam and weekend lessons in a family home. Again, I had no prior experience or training for many of these assignments and relied purely on experimentation. Compared with my later approach, I was fairly remote from the learners and felt no particular attachment to them, except the family where we all sat intimately on the lounge floor.

Contributing to my isolation were the working conditions; I often did not get home until 10 pm, which left no time for socialising. I had no office and no Internet access. In my spare time, I worked on my masters and attended Japanese lessons taught by a monk at the local temple. There was not much time to reflect on such a wide variety of teaching situations or put thought into lesson plans. The company brought all its foreign teachers together once a month at a noisy inn, which was not conducive to discussing professional matters, but merely an opportunity to socialise within similar cultures. Many teachers were just passing through on their way to other careers. Therefore, in life and in work, I was operating in survival mode: alert, watchful, experimenting and coping moment by moment, but wishing for more direction.

Fortunately, I stumbled across a national teachers' association and attended its occasional seminars and subscribed to its magazine, which introduced me to the dialogue in the TESOL field (however, tracking my changes of address proved problematic). My concerns at this time were with learning what constituted a good teacher, learning about the four language areas, getting acquainted with teaching materials, developing my own approach and philosophies and learning English

grammar (which we were never required to teach because it was a given that foreigners did not know their own grammar).

I also stumbled upon some publishers' seminars which were packed with teachers thirsty for ideas. They were rather like evangelical meetings where the charismatic speakers would get everyone enthused about their activities and games (in the hope of classroom sales for their textbooks). The fundamentals underlying these programmes, which were directed also at adult learners, seemed to be communicative approach, games, activities, fun, minimum teacher talk time and no LI. By now, I had developed an aversion to the words 'games, activities, fun', particularly in relation to the application with adult learners because the approach seemed too childish and a 'dumbing down' of potential.

As fun was not high on my list of priorities, I felt at odds with the philosophies around me, until noting a resonance with a mature-age teacher who dared speak up at one such event, saying: "As a child, I hated games. I was the studious type. I became a teacher because I liked learning and wanted to teach, not play games." For me, also, the joy of learning was sufficient. I also hated the competitive element of games, whether at school or in management training classes and felt otherwise disgusted by the overwhelming personalities and extroverts who asserted their egos over others.

In 2002, I finally succeeded in gaining a university position in Japan in a new university, and therefore a new English department. There were only two other native English speakers, neither of whom was TESOL trained. With a big challenge before me, I again sought out the nearest branch of the national teachers' association. The nature of the seminars did not help with my specific issues, but they kept me in contact with contemporary dialogue. Now having Internet access, I also found a teachers' chat line and could read about things other teachers were concerning themselves with. Being in a university environment brought some relief to the isolation and meant more stability and

continuity for research about teaching and learning as well as access to literature in English. At last I could specialise in one age group instead of being a jack-of-all-trades and could also specialise in particular portfolios (which there changed each semester, from computer-based learning and public speaking to listening and academic writing).

With my frequent relocating, however, my Japanese language studies had suffered. Always missing the next intake of learners in the council-run classes, I had resorted to private study and language exchanges, which were time-consuming and not structured. Where I could join a class, I was always assigned to begin again with basic greetings and introductions. My goal was to sit national and regional exams, so I bought all the accompanying textbooks and tapes and taught myself. After passing the lowest level, but then failing the same regional exam three times in succession, I abandoned my Japanese studies. For all my years of studying, in a real-life situation, I was still limited to broken sentences of pronouns, nouns and verbs. Dishearteningly, my Japanese acquaintances persisted in practising their English on me. It was all too much of a struggle. I had run out of incentive to continue. Nevertheless, I felt uneasy that a language teacher could not learn a language.

Then came the major turning point in my language learning and teaching: I decided to resurrect my high school German, which gave me another opportunity to become a classroom learner. Whilst browsing in a bookshop for class material, I came across a series of radio language programs, one of which was German, the language I had studied in high school. I recalled doing well at school, although that was the era of text memorisation and recitation, which I was good at since I possessed a photographic memory at that time. (The class would laugh as I stood out front reciting pages of text, my eyes scanning back and forth reading the text I visualised in my mind.)

Twelve years later, I tried to resurrect my German, undertaking two years of weekend courses and passing two international exams. I found that I

could not relate to my high school knowledge at all because teaching methods had changed. (The teacher now spoke totally in the L2 and required us to speak, converse and debate in the L2.) My photographic memory was at a disadvantage because it was trying to associate the new learning with the visual pages of my high school learning. I could not make the connection. I could not see in my mind the learning I had done before. I had to begin again to create new images. But I also noticed something new: As an adult learner, I was spending more time analysing the language and working harder at depositing the learning into my mind. After the two years, my speaking was still mostly rehearsed speeches. I had not really made the leap to generating my own language – there was too much of a vocabulary and grammar gap for me to say what I wanted. At the end of the course, my link to German ended too.

Now ten years on, as I leafed through the text in the Japanese bookshop, to my dismay I could recall nothing, neither the pronunciation nor even the alphabet. I assumed that if I could see the pages of my former textbooks, it would trigger some memories, but without them, I would have to start again. (Puzzled by this state of affairs, I have since reasoned that as a visual learner, I need to see reminders of former learning to trigger associations and build upon that learning. Without these props, I have to learn afresh and create new images. Conversation-based learning gives me no images to recall later. I also reasoned that, as a younger person, I mostly 'absorbed' the language, but did not really 'own' it. As a mature adult, I am a different person with a different way of learning: I am more proactive. I analyse, compartmentalise, internalise and plan my learning. I hope my adult learning will remain with me far longer than previously.) This time I made a resolution to 'master' German, meaning to speak like a native. Would it be possible? So in Japan in 2002, I commenced the study of German via radio in Japanese and German.

I became so enthused by my progress with the radio course that I bought dictionaries, vocabulary

books, textbooks and grammar books. I leapt out of bed each morning to tune into the radio program. I taped it and replayed it whilst doing house chores. Studying German became the highlight of my day and every spare moment was filled with advancing my vocabulary, reading grammar passages over and over, discovering new patterns of speech and reading aloud. This was an exciting time.

However, I soon came to grief with the grammar, which the radio explained in Japanese rather than German. My own textbooks just did not give enough examples with enough explanations to help me understand and apply topics. To address this problem, I decided to attend a one-month intensive course in Germany as a learner. After learning German for only four months, I was placed in the high-intermediate class. It came as a great shock to be at the receiving end of a classroom teacher's instruction, greatly impacting on my notions of teaching and learning.

For one thing, personal control of my learning was taken away. I could no longer follow my own path and address the issues that were arising for me. I had to fit in with a teacher's plans, do their assigned homework and have all my learning structured by them. I had come with a list of my own grammar topics, but they were not on the teacher's agenda, so I tried to keep my own programme going in the school's resource centre. The teacher's programme generated other learning issues for me, so that I added these to my own learning programme (eg researching vocabulary, unclear grammar and unclear exercises). Having my own agenda meant I did not always do the assigned homework, which required hours to complete and did not always add value. My classmates also complained that they had their own learning agendas to follow and that the teacher's assignments did not always add value. As a learner, sitting in the library in a study circle collaborating with classmates, I was surprised at how quickly the hours went by in discussing, analysing, debating and answering some assignments. As a teacher, I had no idea of this time and effort as reviewing homework answers in class

took only a few minutes. I, therefore, think twice now about any homework I might set and also give more time for discussing answers rather than flying through them in a round robin.

From this and subsequent classroom learning experiences (in Germany, Japan and Australia), I found that my learner persona did not always agree with the beliefs of my teacher persona (Spencer, 2003). Furthermore, the emotional highs and lows of being a classroom learner greatly disturbed me. I also had to learn to become a classroom learner, which meant being in cahoots with others against the all-powerful teacher (eg furtively consulting dictionaries under the desk, following the teacher's directives but complaining about them outside of class, restraining one's personality and comment for outside class and suffering the teacher's rebukes and grimaces wordlessly, etc.).

The experience served as a platform to shape my own teaching. From then on, my students became language learning peers and our mutual endeavours to learn a language brought us to a greater level of intimacy, understanding and concern for one another. For me, there has been more of a humanising effect, with a focus on 'being' together, of sharing our experiences of learning and in cherishing the time given to us. This is greatly different from my former remote approach and infers much more than just being 'friends' or being 'friendly'. I am still the teacher with the responsibility of helping students reach their potential. All the minute detail I have observed and felt as a learner goes into my decisions and relations with learners as a teacher. It is perhaps at the detailed level that my learner experience is the most informative for my teacher persona.

As a learner, I found it difficult to adjust to a teacher's power. Not yet in control of my language output, I felt my personality so restricted that I could not convey to others who I really was and what I was capable of. I felt dumb and also felt treated as the 'dumb student'. (It seemed inappropriate to offer that I was a visiting professor at a university, but when my classmates queried, I

admitted to being 'a teacher'.) I felt even less significant if the teacher did not even glance in my direction during the lesson. As a teacher, I know that a lot is going on in a teacher's mind in attempting to get through a lesson plan, but I had not realised the impact on the learners. As a teacher, I now make more effort to look each learner in the eye, to make them all feel noticed and respected for whoever they are and to encourage their personalities and talents to be expressed. As a learner, I have felt the indignity of a teacher's rebukes or grimaces and, as a teacher, make more effort to treat each student with dignity and to restrain my responses to their incorrect answers or blunders. Some of these points seem obvious, but from the learner's desk, the ramifications are magnified a million-fold.

As for fun, games and activities, my learner persona dreaded many of them. As an adult who had invested a lot of time and money (flights, accommodations, tuition) in some of these courses, games and conversation tasks were not value for money. I hated listening to the bumbling, error-filled attempts of other learners with their atrocious accents. I wanted an opportunity to hear the rhythm, intonation, musicality and choice of words of a native speaker. Moreover, in the time taken to get through a game or activity, I could have read a long text and absorbed lots of vocabulary in context and grammar in use as well as gained knowledge about a variety of topics. What struck me as a learner was the sheer amount of vocabulary to learn, not to mention the culture, history, literature, politics, etc. of my L2 countries. (These latter topics were barely acknowledged by my teacher persona.) The communicative and activities approach was just too slow, too childish, avoided much intellectual stimulation and did not acquaint me with the society of the L2. Many activities took too long to explain, resulting in different interpretations by students as well as confusion, frustration and bad tempers.

For example, in one activity, which I still encounter with TESOL trained teachers, we had

to throw a ball to each other and ask or answer a question. As a learner, it was agony sitting there doing very little and having to endure the struggling attempts of the speakers over trivial topics. (Outside of class, we were conversing in the L2 about a classmate's marital break-up, the impending Iraq war and other news headlines from our individual countries.) Similarly, in conversation board games, my partner and I ignored the given questions and began a normal adult discussion to get better acquainted with each other and strengthen our friendship, but the teacher kept admonishing us and ordering us back to the given questions ('What animal do you want to be?' 'Describe your most embarrassing moment'.). As an adult learner, I had absolutely no interest in such questions, yet as a teacher was guilty of forcing my students to answer similar ones.

I also found that as a learner, I did not like being forced to rotate seating. Once I found someone I liked, I wanted to stay with them, consolidate the friendship and reciprocate support in our learning endeavours. I also found we appreciated a few extra moments in class between segments to chat and check our learning. In other words, we did not need forced exercises to make us speak.

I also found that, as a learner, I had little interest in the content of some given texts, regarding them instead as an invaluable tool for furthering vocabulary and grammatical understanding. Therefore I had no interest in comprehension questions, particularly in fictional texts, because my brain was not at all bothered in memorising the story line. 'Why did Hans hit Fritz?' – I did not even notice the story was about Hans and Fritz, but I did notice many unfamiliar words, new shades of meaning, useful patterns of speech, another example of the passive in context, a colloquial expression and an idiom, etc. My brain was totally engrossed in analysing the text and extracting its learning value, not with the story line, unless the content was non-fictional and taught me something about the culture, history, politics, etc. of L2 countries. As a learner, I hungered for short reading

texts for these reasons. In my Japanese study, I could locate very few short reading texts for my level and felt my growth thwarted for lack of them.

In Germany, outside of class, I encountered my first graded reader as a learner and it was with great nervousness that I read my first book, checking every other word in a dictionary. I felt quite afraid of all the new words. However, the sense of achievement upon finishing was overwhelming and I hungered for more graded readers, which helped me become more and more fluent. I loved how they showed me patterns of language, grammar in usage and examples of conversation and interaction.

For all these reasons, I was not yet ready for a lot of conversation practice and hated being forced to speak. I was quite content to go through a silent period, even two years or more, as I built up my vocabulary and made sense of the grammar. Conversation was too fleeting and did not enable me to do the analysis my brain was instinctively performing. Conversation called upon any and every grammatical pattern at random times. Therefore, I learnt very little from conversation activities at this stage. (Not until reaching the 'advanced' level did I really feel the desire to get conversation practice; prior to that, I wanted to focus on other foundational work.)

I also rediscovered that I was a visual learner and needed to see texts and have time to digest them. Any activity that did not give me the thinking and digesting space before, during or after was fruitless. (Hence, as a teacher I sprinkle my lessons with 'thinking time'.) For example, in activities requiring the matching of slips of paper (matching terms to definitions, matching opposites, etc.), I found that no time was given to digest the preparatory learning and that students were then so competitive to finish that there was no time for my brain to analyse and store the answers before we moved on to the next segment. Then the emotional upset would begin, with a lump welling up in the throat. ('I hate this. I do not know the work. The teacher did not give us time to digest our notes before starting the activity or after it.

This is a waste of my time. I'm no good. I'll never learn.') I was shocked that I could experience such thoughts and all in the name of learning a language. As a teacher, I had no inkling students could sink to such lows – their faces did not show it. As a learner, I was privy to such emotional outbursts from fellow learners outside of the class, including from other teacher-learners. We vented our frustrations at some of the events in the classroom. In class, as a learner, I was able to sense the feeling of the other learners and to notice and read their signals and, furtively, to convey mine. As a teacher, I was engrossed in getting through my programme and did not notice these messages; everything seemed purely innocent and in order. I was totally oblivious to the double life of the learner. My learner persona was thus giving my teacher persona access to the world of the learner and triggering changes in belief and practice.

As a result of my learning experiences, both in the classroom and privately, my patience with my own students was improving until the university recognised that I had an affinity with struggling learners and assigned all low level classes to me. We had a special relationship in these classes. The learners were originally quite demoralised at their public loss of face, but together we reasoned that the mighty could fall, whereas we could only stand still or go upwards. We sat around a table together studying and chatting about feelings and other things between segments. The learners said it was like being with their mother and they felt cosy and content. My teacher persona underwent another transformation that semester, growing closer to the learners. The learners loved the fact that I was also learning a language, that some of my struggles were the same as theirs and that I made study plans and worked hard to progress.

Because of my learner experiences, the desire to shift the focus from entertaining to educating grew stronger, particularly with adult learners. I tried to express my objection at one teachers' seminar which was structured on 'fun activities' and frequent 'high fives' (based on the magnanimous philosophy

of spreading peace and happiness in the world) by refusing to join in a game. Being *forced* to 'play' in group games really stressed and traumatised me – I just wanted to get on with the learning (independently) and at a faster pace. My group asked the internationally-renown presenter what to do with students like me who refused to 'play'. The response: "Don't worry! Fortunately, most of them are in jail." By inference then, my teaching concepts and practices were fostering groups of criminals and deviants. How should I proceed?

Most foreign adult educators I met seemed dogmatic in their opinions and subscribed unquestioningly to the beliefs disseminated at the time: punishing students for using their LI (fine them), no dictionaries, emphasis on conversation and activities and minimal grammar, etc. Curiously, I was hearing different views from the Japanese English teachers, who were of course long-time language learners themselves. My opinions struck a chord with them for the same reason – our teacher persona was shaped by our learner persona.

In the process of associating the benefits of my language learning with teaching, I have come to feel more strongly that I 'am' a teacher, rather than I am 'becoming' a teacher. Through my language learning experiences, I have found a means of feeling guided in my teaching. Since I am also a learner, I play both roles with my students. My teacher persona tends to grow more serious and strict with the passage of time, knowing that learning a language is a long, complex process and the time available to attend classes is relatively short and precious. My learner persona adds the humanizing effect and maintains intimacy with learners' needs.

At the end of the university contract, the board changed policies and decided to employ only part-time teachers. I moved on to my most isolated post yet: a university in rural, mountainous China. On my arrival, I found that instead of the planned posting to a campus with other foreigners, I was being sent to a new English department in a very remote region and was to be the only foreign

teacher. Most of the citizens in town (mainly peasants) had never seen a foreigner before. Conditions were dirty and primitive, with local women still washing clothes and vegetables in the local river and meat being sold unwrapped on dirty, fly-blown trestle tables.

The students (undergraduates, whom I first met in military uniform and carrying guns as they underwent their compulsory national service on campus) had no showers, but washed in buckets. The water pumps to my apartment regularly failed so that I had no water at all. There were regular power failures. The students and I were often sick from food poisoning and diarrhoea. We raced each other to the bathroom. Classrooms were so cold in the winter snow that we all wore gloves, hats and scarves and held bottles of hot water. I was not allowed to leave the campus for longer than 24 hours without getting written permission and informing the police of my whereabouts. Despite the hardships, it was one of the happiest years of my life, mainly due to the way the students and I merged our lives and learning and supported one another.

There were only a few foreigners in the entire region. I questioned why fate had it that I was constantly assigned to isolated and challenging posts. By now, I was well into a PhD in language learning and teaching and the predicaments I found myself in added more than a little frustration to the research program. However, with my new-found confidence in relating my language learning to my language teaching, I felt I could cope. From my Japanese experience, I had also been forced to confront myself and everything I believed in (ethics, morals, values and philosophies of life) so that I was at peace with who I was and content to be on my own in another unfamiliar culture. With teaching, studying German, working on the PhD and music practice (cornet), I had enough to occupy my time.

Some students admitted that they hated English, but they were enjoying the presence of a foreigner and now wanted to know how to improve. Together

we brainstormed in class all the things a learner could do to improve her/his language skills and those interested students made their own agendas: Some found email pen-pals, some became English tutors to local school children (and then discussed their teaching problems with me) and others began diaries or English circles, etc. I took a train to Shanghai (56 hours return trip) and brought back a load of graded readers to start a reading program.

In class, I used the only textbook available (300 pages of short, witty text) and made an effort to extract the learning opportunities that my learner persona saw (reading and “meaning-making”; picture description; reading aloud with focus on pronunciation, rhythm, intonation, and accent; vocabulary; grammar; summary writing; verbal retelling in past or reported speech and topic discussion for the advanced students, etc.). I moved around the classroom (average 20 students) and spent time assisting each student, giving her/him the opportunity to ask questions and express any concerns. On fine days we took a blackboard outside onto the roof top or under the trees by the lake and sat in a more intimate setting than the bolted down rows of desks in the classrooms. I also experimented with some team problem-solving activities, which mainly served to show the students they did not yet have enough foundational work and vocabulary, leaving only the very advanced ones to contribute and find enjoyment, so we always gravitated back to our short story routine.

With only two days warning and no instructions other than ‘teach them English’, I was assigned a postgraduate class of 50 students. My initial attempts to provide a controlled/structured program failed. I was learning the hard way that mature students had their own learning agendas and needed me to fit in with their plans, rather than the other way around. After requesting feedback on the directions I was taking with them by trying to address all the elements of speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar and vocabulary, I listened as one student spoke: “To tell you the truth, Miss Shelley, we just want to know and touch

a foreigner.” I extended my arm and the students leaped forward to touch it.

I later found out the students already had a strict diet of grammar lessons, vocabulary building and test taking with the Chinese teachers. They were extremely focused on gaining higher scores on a national test. They already had their own learning agendas, as my learner persona had. Yet they did not want to be forced to speak because they felt inadequate. What could I do? The students told me: “We just want to know you - We want to ‘be’ with you - Speak to us - Tell us about your world - Read us some more stories - We like when you do acting.”

We were too constrained in the classroom with the bolted down pews. I also moved this class outside under the trees so that we could be closer together in a better setting. Students brought their kids and dogs along and we all sat on the grass in a big group in the shade. (The kids got to introduce themselves in English.) We all shared in the sculpting of these lessons, which became creative performances. After my narrations and acting (which were centred on cultural, historical and news items from my country and with the students also interacting to ask about vocabulary, grammar, meaning and cultural issues), students voluntarily took the floor to introduce their act in English. They performed items from their cultural group, e.g. song, dance, poem, instrument recital, martial arts, etc. I discovered that spending time together and performing was a big part of the cultural groups of this area, where many peasant kids did not receive any education at all. (The local philosophy was that any person who could not sing or perform would remain single for a long time and no one batted an eyelid when a passer-by suddenly burst into loud song.)

Outside of class, a spontaneous series of outings with different groups of students began, such as a hike across the hills, ballroom dancing (compulsory for graduate students), karaoke, badminton, jogging, family dinners and family weekend trips. Quite special were the impromptu

moonlight performances on our mountain top under the street lamps (with the kids and dogs), where we gave music recitals, poetry recitations and solo singing, etc. Without TV, people created their own entertainment. In these smaller groups, we also discussed and shared ideas about language learning. I got to know and have conversations with each student. This practice gave me enough evidence for the assessment. In an indirect way, far from my imagined strict academic structure as the distant teacher, our objectives were achieved.

I continued my German studies alone as there were (obviously) no German classes in such a remote area. This strengthened my knowledge of how to advance one's learning in the absence of teachers and courses and how to retain motivation when there is no opportunity or need to speak the language. I discovered that speaking was not the be-all and end-all of language learning. I was deriving great enjoyment from reading German literature and in listening to or reading German news over the Internet. Furthermore, I was corresponding in German with former German teachers and classmates. I relayed these findings to my students.

The knowledge I was acquiring from my learner persona was perhaps not from the broader, distant teacher's perspective, but from the minute, intimate details and feelings that arise daily from the learner's perspective, e.g. the feeling of not being noticed by the teacher during a lesson; the lack of space in the teacher's talk to formulate a sentence and work up courage to utter it; the loathing of being forced to speak, especially if one wants a silent period to make more sense of the language and grammar; the desire to hear the teacher talk and enjoy the rhythm, intonation and word choice; sensitivity to the teacher's moods and students' loss of respect when the teacher shows annoyance or anger; the feeling of loss of personal power by the teacher; the need to have topic introductions and changes repeated; the 'unlearning' when similar grammar points confused prior learning; the desire for more grammar in more contexts with more explanations (and preferably in

the LI); the need to have ongoing meetings with the same grammar points; the obsession with new words and checking the dictionary even for familiar words because of the possibility of learning a different shade of meaning; the need for the teacher to linger a moment during breaks or at lesson end in case of questions; the joy of having relaxed conversations with the teacher during breaks; the need for thinking time to digest and review a topic before moving to the next and so on. It's the acknowledgement and exploration of all these intimate details that have been slowly adding to my professional knowledge and that have influenced the relationship with my students. There are myriad tiny issues that cohorts would probably not concern themselves with unless they were learners themselves and, therefore, making the conscious connections with their teaching.

At the completion of that tough contract, I could not secure another university posting so I returned to conversation school work, this time in a remote mountainous area in the Czech Republic. There were three other foreign teachers and two native Czech teachers. All had been trained in TESOL programmes with emphasis on 'fun', lots of games and activities. The students were all adults and mostly businessmen. Since each teacher taught a minimum of 30 different classes per week (involving travel to suburbs and towns), there was a lot of stress and time spent in locating, creating, photocopying and cutting out these games and activities as students did not have textbooks.

After observing a few lessons taught by other teachers, I still felt that the games and activity approach seemed childish for adult learners and a 'dumbing down' of their intellect and potential for growth. As they sat behind desks, many seemed to revert to immature school children. The teacher was a distant object holding all the power. I did not see a group of adults engaging in the sharing of knowledge.

In my classes, I avoided such games and activities and did not put priority on having fun. Feeling guilty, I did try some games with a couple

of classes, but found the students resorted to immature behaviour. They expressed a desire to return to my approach (which they said they had gotten used to) of short stories on science, nature, the environment and current affairs, and one even offered to give a talk the following week on global warming and the Gulf Stream. Along with the readings, vocabulary checking and discussion, I also included grammar exercise sheets. I spent time sitting next to each learner and assisting them with grammar.

I was required to alternate one small class of businessmen with another teacher, who used the contemporary activities and fun approach. Concerned about how my approach was being received, I questioned the students. Their response: "We have discussed this point too. You are the teacher, but X is our friend. X's lessons are more fun, but we learn faster in your classes." The consensus was that the two approaches provided a good balance and there was nothing they wanted changed. I was surprised that I conveyed a 'teacher' image, but was perhaps becoming more resolute in my ideas of maximising time and learning opportunities.

My approach failed disastrously in one class and, oddly enough, it was a class of Czech English teachers. They did not want to be 'taught', nor to read or have intelligent discussions, but demanded to play games and have fun. I refused to oblige them and asked to be replaced. Curiously, they complained that they had made no progress with their English in the past three years. Their teacher during this period had followed the fun and activities approach but had finally burnt out from having to devise new activities. He was reinstated.

I myself burnt out with the teaching schedule – the 4 a.m. starts to drive across the mountain ranges in the darkness and fog to deliver 6.30 a.m. classes and the 8 p.m. finishes.

As I look back over these past 7.5 years and my struggles to 'become' an EFL teacher, I sometimes feel saddened by the isolated and adverse conditions I had to endure. In the end, though, I developed a greater self-reliance and ability to tune into my own inner guidance that serves me wherever I may be and in whatever situation I may find myself. Whether my teaching practices are right or wrong, they result from reflective personal experience rather than dictated contemporary practices. From my language-learning studies, I realise the effort that goes into acquiring and maintaining language skills. I know more about the range of options that are available for a learner to advance her/himself autonomously. Through my experience, I have developed greater patience and tolerance towards learners. Speaking is not the only goal or enjoyment, as I have found, and may even be the wrong goal for learners in some situations. As learning a language is a lifetime experience, there is time enough to worry about speaking. One should also enjoy the doors opened by reading L2 literature and exploring events in L2 news, arts, culture, history, etc. More than anything, I have cherished the love, concern and shared experiences of those learners who opened their hearts to me, a lone foreigner in unknown cultures.

REFERENCES

- Spencer, S. A. (2003). Language teacher as language learner: Identity loss and other issues. *The Language Teacher*, 27(1), 9-12.