Role reversal

Edwina Ingrouille learns some lessons when she becomes a student.

Learning Greek has given me the opportunity to experience first hand what it is like to be a foreign language student. It has shown me that challenging my own assumptions is a crucial part of developing my skills as an English teacher.

My class mirrors an ESL teaching and learning environment, in that we are a small group of ten adults (aged 30 plus), who are all learning Greek in order to live and work in Greece. I am Australian, and the other students are from Albania, Algeria and the Ukraine.

We are taught Greek in Greek, and can only communicate using Greek, as the other students don't speak a word of English. I am more fortunate than the others in that my L1 is popular in Greece, so my teacher can offer the occasional English translation.

My experience as a learner has taught me three very important lessons.

Lesson 1: Learning a language takes time and practice.

At first, I did what most people do when they decide to learn a language: I bought a book. It was written for English speakers, and I thought that, being a language teacher myself, I would be able to get to a conversational level faster than the average person. Wrong.

One of the biggest and hardest lessons I have had to learn is that learning a language takes time and lots of practice. I was desperate to learn Greek and extremely frustrated with my (perceived) lack of progress. I only calmed down when I realised that after many years of daily English usage, there is still a lot that I don't know about my own language.

Language learning is a taxing physical and mental activity. It is a bit like mountain climbing. You need a guide. You may have bought some of the equipment that you need to climb the language mountain, maybe you have even seen mountains before, but you do not know these conditions or this particular terrain. Even teachers need teachers!

Lesson 2: Guessing is a good tactic.

After struggling with my book for several months, I moved to Greece and decided to try immersion. Over time, my transactional Greek slowly improved and, while it was sometimes difficult to be understood, I could generally get what I wanted. (You can't imagine how delightful it was to order cheese successfully from the deli counter!)

However, despite all my hard work, when I took a level test at a language school, I did not understand the questions. I mainly guessed what I had to do.

You may find it hard to believe, but guessing is a fairly accurate technique – you use what limited vocabulary you have, combine it in various ways, say it confidently and hope it makes sense. When you don't understand the other person, you paraphrase what you think they might be saying, and use visual and audio clues (body language and intonation) to convince them that you understand more than you actually do.

I know guessing is effective because they started me in an A2 class.

Lesson 3: You can be strong in one skill and weak in another.

At first, I thought I was in the wrong class. At times I recognised one word in every four, at others none at all. People started moving around and some left the room (OK, I thought, break time). Using my best Greek, I said to some of the other students *'I thought + I am + wrong + class'*.

I nodded along to what they said (their words appeared to be encouraging) until they said something I understood. Why did I do this? Because sometimes there is no opportunity to say *I don't understand*. Also because it is disheartening to say *I don't understand* all the time, and because people stop talking to you. As a result, you lose the opportunity to practise and, therefore, the opportunity to improve. I also do it because sometimes, under pressure, I forget the words for *I don't understand*, and by the time I have remembered them, the conversation has moved on.

The other students then asked me how many years I had been in Greece. Without thinking, I blurted out *'Years? Months!'* Then they said something that encouraged *me* and discouraged *them* – they told me they had been living in Greece for between 12 to 15 years.

I decided to stay in the A2 class. Over the next few lessons, I learnt that, while the other students were stronger in speaking and listening, I was stronger in reading and writing. Relatively new to teaching English, I had heard stories of people who could write but not speak, but I didn't believe them. I had observed during my short teaching experience that some of my students were a little stronger in some skills than others, but I had assumed they were about the same level in all four skills. I had no idea how dramatic that difference could be, until I began learning Greek.

When teaching, I had always made a special effort to speak slowly and clearly. I thought my students understood the instructions I gave because they were clear and simple. Instead of questioning whether they understood what they had to do, I judged their inability to do the task as due to a lack of knowledge. I now know this is not always true.

One day, my Greek teacher saw I didn't know how to do an activity. She translated one word for me and that was enough: not only did I complete the task, but I did it accurately, and before many of the other students.

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My husband (a native Greek speaker who knows what it is like to learn English) gave me the best piece of advice when I started teaching. He said: *'You know you are not teaching English people English, right?'* Staffroom conversations make me think that even really experienced teachers forget this sometimes!

Edwina Ingrouille thoroughly enjoys both teaching and learning languages. Prior to moving to Greece, she taught groups of foreign language students in Oxford, UK. She currently teaches EFL online to students from around the world.

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