

Learning Spanish, Teaching English: Transferable Insights

By JOANNE MASON

The man turned around in his seat and asked me, “*Hablas Español?*” I was full of regret, as I used to speak Spanish reasonably well. But that was years ago and now I was faced with this kind soul who was on the wrong train, heading to a city nowhere near where he needed to be. We tried to converse in our rudimentary English and Spanish, but I could not make it clear to him that he needed to get off the train, reverse his direction, and start again. Fortunately, another Spanish speaker overheard our dilemma and translated. That moment was an epiphany—I need to brush up on my Spanish!

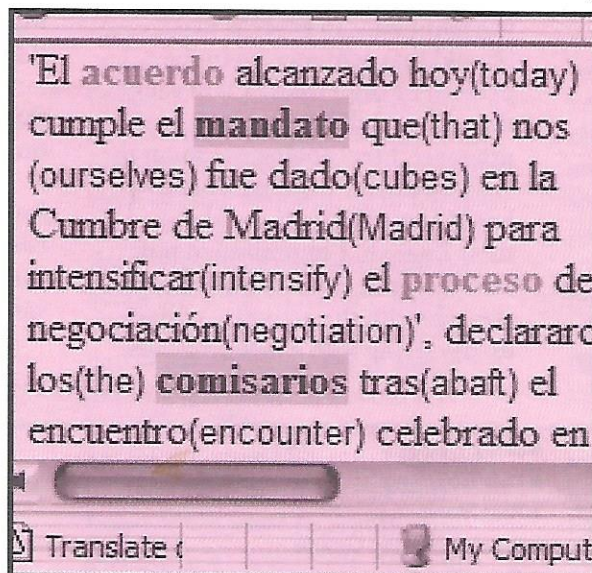
I studied Spanish for five years as a teenager and took to it immediately. I loved the sound of it and the challenge of the grammar. My friends and I often incorporated Spanish into our conversations, just for fun.

Wanting to explore something new, I took German in college. Aside from briefly dating a guy who was a fluent Spanish speaker, my Spanish started to fall apart. I always intended to get it back, but until recently, I hadn’t made a concerted effort.

Now I’m trying. It’s challenging fitting language study into a full life of work and family responsibilities. As I have researched classes and materials and tried to practice, I have a greater understanding and respect for the adult ESOL students I have known over the years.

Of course, I cannot claim my experiences in learning Spanish to be the same as my students’ learning

English. The two are not nearly the same. My survival in this region does not depend on my learning Spanish. I am not adjusting to a new culture, alphabet, or sound system. I do not need to worry so much about communicating with a child’s school or making an effective complaint to my landlord. I am not



working additional jobs to make ends meet, like so many of my students did. I don’t have children to care for. Still, there are similarities worth examining. It’s no easy task being an adult language learner.

Formal Study

When I get home from work at the end of a long day, it’s tempting just to relax in the confines of my native language. It’s sometimes a struggle to find the energy to get out workbooks and tapes or try reading passages. I think of a Chinese woman I once tutored, who worked 11-hour days, 7 days a week, and still managed to study. She’s an inspiration! Unfortunately, my

energy level doesn’t nearly compare, but I’m working on it.

Like many adult students, I have had some difficulty scheduling classes around my work hours and other commitments. When I did find a class, the results were disappointing. The teacher assumed we knew certain features of Spanish, but when we didn’t, she did not provide much supplemental explanation. She asked us open-ended questions, but then told us what to say without giving us any opportunity for creativity or experimentation. I dropped the class after a few weeks, empathizing with some ESOL students who didn’t click with their classes. Finding the right class and the right teacher takes time and while I know both are out there, I haven’t had a chance to try again.

Since then, I’ve been using the study-at-home method. Like many students, I have software and workbooks full of vocabulary lists, dialogues, fill-in-the-blank exercises, and matching activities. I know that these might not necessarily be the best tools, but I use them anyway, hoping that the few words or grammar points I studied over grapefruit in the morning will still be there at night. If I get sidetracked or busy for a few weeks, I’ll need to review again and again to get back up to speed.

Language in Action

My “workbooking” will only take me so far. I need to use

Continued on page 10

Learning Spanish...

Continued from page 9

Spanish regularly, in a real context, and discover its nuances. I eavesdrop on the subway, concentrating to catch a word or two, wondering what particular variety I'm hearing and how many slang expressions are mixed in. I try watching Spanish-language television. Like my students who have watched American TV, I am struck by how overwhelming the rapid speech can be. I can sometimes get through the news if there are accompanying visual cues. I've also watched the movie *Airplane!* in Spanish. I better understand the importance of context—knowing how a newscast works or the background of a classic comedy made it easier for me to comprehend the language.

My attempts at producing Spanish are influenced by emotional factors. When I feel more confident, I hope to find a Spanish conversation group. Until then, my

opportunities to speak are limited. My Spanish comes out slowly and deliberately, even though I know I should just let it fly. I feel shy about

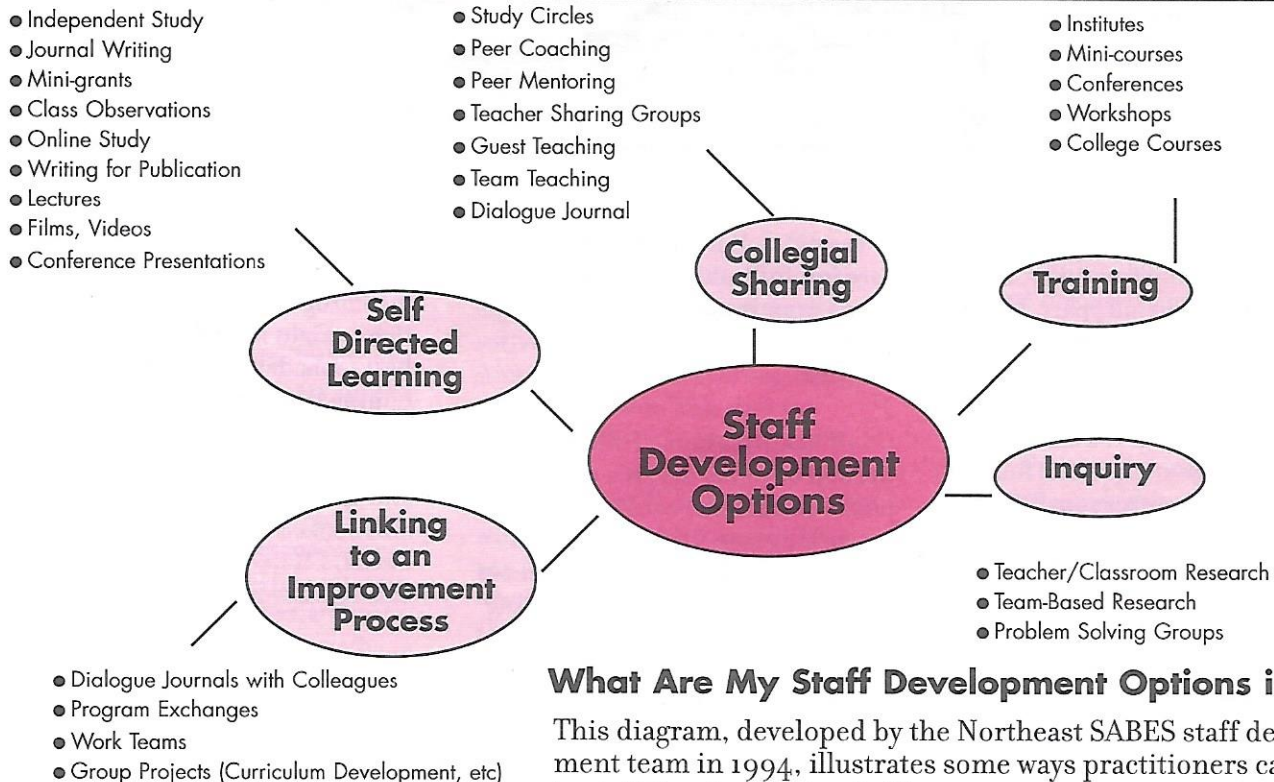
It seems simplistic, but my understanding of what adult students experience in learning a new language has increased a hundred-fold. I appreciate more the necessi-

What was the gender of that noun? Do I use *ser* or *estar* to express that?

making mistakes and nervous about being misunderstood as I quickly try to conjugate verbs in my head or search for vocabulary. What was the gender of that noun? Do I use *ser* or *estar* to express that? Should that sentence be in the preterit or imperfect? I'll never get the accent right. And this is just in practice! I feel apologetic about my "bad Spanish," echoing what I've heard some students say about their English. I'm reminded how anxiety could affect them as they struggle with the activities of day-to-day living with a new language.

ty of patience with students, of giving them as much time as possible and as many ways as possible to make things stick and of accommodating their learning styles. And while I knew all this before, I know it better now. It has been reinforced. It's one thing to know all this in theory; quite another to go through the experience yourself.

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What Are My Staff Development Options in ABE?

This diagram, developed by the Northeast SABES staff development team in 1994, illustrates some ways practitioners can engage in staff development activities.