

Second Language Learning

Everybody can learn a second language. It requires a lot of time and effort, but Dr. Kevin Krogh, or Kevin as he prefers, knows that anybody can do it. Kevin believes that having positive early experiences with language learning is crucial to successfully mastering a language, and he does his best to make sure every student leaves his courses with a positive experience.

It's always gratifying when students reach the point in learning a language that they stop reaching for words in their native language. When they don't know how to express something and start thinking of different words or ways to explain it in the new language, there's a realization that true mastery is possible. This happens a lot faster than most students think it will, but convincing students that they are capable of achieving their language goals is the first battle. Many students enroll in Kevin's Spanish classes without knowing how to study grammar and literature in Spanish because they have only experienced learning the language outside the structured environment of a classroom. This has advantages because students start out with a practical knowledge of why they want to learn the language, but is also difficult because it is possible that they have been repeating the same mistakes and now have bad habits.

The first challenge students face in learning how to improve their second-language skills through academic study is that it requires effort, but the rewards are well worth it. Kevin's first exposure to Spanish came as a young child when his family took a two-month road trip through Mexico. He didn't learn Spanish through memorizing grammar rules but by playing with local Mexican children. After noticing his aptitude for the language, his parents encouraged him to continue studying Spanish through middle and high school where he learned the rules that he had not picked up on while playing with his friends.

Learning a language is not a process that happens overnight, and even after years of experience students continue to make mistakes. On this topic Kevin said, "I don't want people to be afraid or intimidated to speak the language because of a bad experience in a language class. ... I don't want them to throw up their arms and say 'I quit' as soon as the semester ends." Kevin is trying to give students a return on their investment of time and energy and wants them to leave his courses thinking, "I can do this; maybe I'll keep

learning.” The way that students decide to pursue their future learning is up to them, but Kevin hopes that they will look back fondly on their experiences in his classes and continue learning.

Some students have commented that learning new languages opens many doors and that after mastering a new language it becomes hard to remember what it was like to speak only one. It becomes equally difficult to imagine stopping at just one. Kevin has experience with both Portuguese and Italian in addition to Spanish, and while he may be out of practice, he feels confident that, if he were to return to diligent study and practice, he could soon have the level of skill that he once had.

Kevin isn't only a Spanish professor, but also a published novelist. He said, “Writing is similar to language learning. Once you've had some success with it, you want more.” In spite of Kevin's love of Spanish literature, especially poetry, and even though when he writes literary analysis, he writes mostly in Spanish, he prefers to do his creative writing in English. He says that the words flow more naturally and comfortably in one's native language.

Kevin has published a collection of poetry and five novels, and he is working on his sixth. He observed that “Some people play golf, some people build models ... People have their hobbies, and writing is mine.” Kevin has drawn inspiration from both English and Spanish writers and he has combined their influence into his own personal style. He doesn't expect that his students will read his novels—most don't even know he writes creatively—or hope to be rich or famous someday. He writes mostly because he likes to write, but he also hopes those who read his novels and poems enjoy them and, more importantly, learn something from them.

Kevin tells his students that someday in their life they will have a little more time on their hands and hopefully they'll remember something that they liked from his class, and they'll go back and read more. Speaking two languages doubles the quantity of material available to read, and Kevin hopes that students can find something that speaks to them. Kevin said, “If the poem doesn't speak much to YOU, and YOUR life experience, it really isn't worth much to you.” He also is not a fan of researching the personal life of the writer. “The story or poem is yours as soon as you begin reading it, so why tarnish what it means to you by learning about the writer and his problems? When I

read a poem or a novel I don't really care who wrote it. ... I don't associate the text with the author, and I don't expect people to do that with my writing either." In his courses, Kevin doesn't spend much time reviewing facts about authors, but prefers to let the literary texts speak for themselves.

Kevin wasn't always a Spanish teacher. "When I graduated with my masters degree in Spanish literature and had completed everything for my first try at a Ph.D. except the dissertation, there weren't many jobs available," he said. "For every job that came up there were 100 applicants. I thought I was pretty good, but I couldn't compete with 100 applicants. So I asked myself what else could I do. What else did I enjoy?" He decided on landscape architecture and worked as a landscape architect for several years before returning to school to complete his Ph.D. in Spanish poetry. When Kevin returned to graduate study, he had a family to provide for, so he had to work full time and go to school at the same time. It took 6 years of full-time teaching and part-time study for him to finish his PhD, but he loves teaching and he says that it has all been well worth the effort.

From start to finish it took Kevin 17 years to finally finish school, and he was working full-time most of that time. Kevin understands that his students may be in the middle of this juggling act as well, and some students are hesitant to study a foreign language because of their commitment to their major. But students are not required to declare a major or minor to study languages. Many students take language classes for fun every couple of semesters to keep themselves from forgetting the language they worked so hard to learn.

Whatever their background, language learners at all levels are welcome to take language courses, which teach everything from beginning language to advanced grammar, literature, and culture. Most upper-division language courses are taught completely in the foreign language, which allows students to learn about the culture of countries where the language is spoken while simultaneously improving their vocabulary and grammar skills. Helping students to enjoy learning languages is a goal that Kevin strives for, and he enjoys instilling a passion for culture and literature, and especially for poetry, in his students.

By Joshua Bryan

