

FOREIGN LANGUAGE: PART 1

When I was a preschooler there was a nice woman who was a war bride from France who was a neighbor and a good friend of my mother. She taught French to woman's groups and in the schools and had the reputation of being a great teacher of the romance language. On occasion I would accompany my mother to lunch, or some other activity with her friend and she (her friend) would attempt to teach me a French word or phrase. I would reply with gobbligook and she would look frustrated. My mother would attempt to get me to at least try, but I never did. Although I don't remember why I didn't I'm guessing my problems with phonemic awareness due to my dyslexia and difficulty hearing consonant sounds due to my hearing impairment made it impossible to comply. She was saying baby talk to me so I returned the favor.

Move the clock forward to elementary school...I went to a private Catholic school run by the Benedictine nuns. Occasionally they would teach us phrases in French, but I do not remember any of them.

From seventh through twelfth grade I went to a then all boys' private Catholic Augustinian school. In seventh, or eighth grade I took a mini-mester course in Spanish. Mini-mester was a one month period in January where students could take special course that may interest them. The high school students could get experiences in career related fields. So one year in middle school I took Spanish taught by a Mexican American priest. All I remember about the course is that I did not draw enough attention to get in trouble, and I didn't learn any Spanish.

In high school I was required to take a language. There were two options: 1. Spanish, which was taught by the aforementioned taskmaster priest; and, 2. Latin, which was "easy and taught by a kindly middle aged priest. I took the latter. I soon realized The Latin course I enrolled in could have been called, "Latin for Alter boys". Most of the classwork was translating Latin versions of prayers into English. This was easy, because one could translate the first two or three words and immediately know which prayer it was and just start writing the remainder of the prayer from memory in English. "Our...Father who art in heaven..." I took two years of this course and learned nothing. I did not learn how to study a foreign language, nor did I learn study to learn the spoken part of a foreign language.

Move the clock forward again a few years and now I am a freshman at Notre Dame. Being an Arts and Letters student I was required to take 3 semesters of foreign language. Friends counseled me to take Spanish since it was easy to learn. So that is what I did. The introductory course was taught by a seminarian who was a few years older than use freshmen. He was an excellent teacher, energetic and a lot of fun. There were 25 students in the course and at the end of the first semester there were 24 As and on C (this is **NO**

exaggeration). The writer of this paper got the sole C. I noticed in class when the instructor would give a list of endings for verbs I would catch the first two, or three of the eight he recited. My fellow students seem to catch them all. Then the teacher would prove eight endings of another verb, and I would be back on the last one trying to learn and catch up. I always seemed to be several area codes behind my peers. Pronouncing words properly aloud was a nightmare. Whole parts were auditorally invisible to me. If I could not hear/process the sounds when I heard them I could not reproduce them aloud when I tried to speak them. It always seemed my memory did not have enough space to hold all the words, sounds, endings, grammar, syntax, etc. at once. How could everyone else do this so easily, I thought. I realize it was not easy for the other students now, it was really it was much harder for me than for them.

We had to take a Spanish lab, too. This was quite high tech at the time. We would go to a room where there were numerous study carols with headphones. One would don the headphones and a recording of someone speaking Spanish would play. We would have to repeat what the person said on the recording. Graduate students would monitor our responses. I never seemed to catch the phrase. In fact I was lucky if I could remember any of it let alone repeat it.

Soon I also realized I had no idea how to study a foreign language. One reason was due to my experience (or should I say lack of experience learning a language) in my high school Latin for Alter boys class. Latin being a “dead language” also contributed to the problem because the course had no spoken component. Since I had no real experience learning how to speak a foreign language in high school no wonder I was having trouble in college. Then there was the undiagnosed dyslexia and hearing impairment. The dyslexia put me at great disadvantage when trying to hear, process, and pronounce the phonemes of Spanish and the associated problems with phonological working memory reduced my online memory space for sound dramatically. At the time I relied I was not remembering things as good as the others. My hearing impairment complicated things by making it very difficult to learn the soft consonant sounds of Spanish. No wonder I was behind.

The seminarian who taught the course took pity on me and volunteered to tutor me two hours a night four days a week after dinner in the seminary’s dining room. He was an excellent instructor and puzzled about why I was having so much trouble.

The next semester was a carbon copy of the first. I did not seem to learn, fell more and more behind, and the kind seminarian again donated 8 hours a week of tutoring. Again, there were 24 As and one C. You know who got the C.

Now many would say there was no problem here I got a passing grade a C both semesters, however, it was obvious I received a “gentleman’s C for trying. The instructor made it obvious

he thought I had some unknown difficulty in acquiring a second language. I knew I was lucky to have him as a teacher. If not I could have been relegated to eventually flunking out after numerous attempts to reattempt to take Spanish to hopefully raise my grade, thus lowering my already low G.P.A. to levels where I would be asked to leave the university. I was truly lucky and I owe that young seminarian a lot.

That “enlightened” instructor did not teach the third semester of required Spanish, “conversation and literature”. Given my lack of literacy in Spanish after two semesters I know inside I had no chance to get through the third course. When I started the fall semester of my sophomore year I was enrolled with a full load of course. This included the toughest course r psychology majors, experimental psychology, taught by the toughest professor in the psychology department. It seemed my world revolved around that course. This course was the Notre Dame psychology major’s version of the law courses depicted in the movie “The Paper Chase”. I soon found myself almost flunking every course. I decided I needed to drop a course or two. I went in desperation to my advisor, a kindly psychology professor who knew nothing about academic advising, and with his help I decided to drop Spanish and another course. I dropped Spanish thinking I could take it the next semester and get a tutor. Little did I know the third semester of Spanish was only offered once a year, in the fall semester, and I would have to wait a year to take it. I finished the semester with a C in experimental psychology and an overall 2.20 G.P.A. (Below a 2.0 G.P.A. was being on academic probation). It did not look like I was graduate school material at the time, but that story is for another day.

When I went to enroll for the spring sophomore year course I was informed that the third semester of Spanish would not be offered again until the following fall. I was dumbfounded, and panicked. I thought I would never graduate and my parents would kill me. If I didn’t have the skills in Spanish now to pass the third semester I definitely would not have them next fall. So, I did the “appropriate” thing, nothing. Perhaps in the next semester or two I would figure a way out. My fourth semester I did a bit better and built up a little cushion between me and academic probation.

Fall semester quickly overtook me and I found the specter of Spanish ruining my plans of graduation. In a panic I went to see my kindly advisor. He listened to my dilemma halfheartedly and said if I could convince the head of the modern languages department to allow me to take a substitute course he would not get in my way. He gave me a form for the department head to sign and gave me his name.

I learned the professor in question had office hours during the early hours of Wednesday mornings. An appointment was made, and in the wee hours of the next Wednesday I went across campus to meet my fate.

I knocked on the professor's office door and I hear a male with a British accent say, "come in." Upon opening the door I was immediately beamed to a Scottish tutor office adorned in everything Scotland. The professor, a plump white bearded gentleman was brewing tea, he offered me some, I declined to which he said, "have a seat young man and tell me your story of woe." I commenced to tell him as precisely and concisely as I could my problem trying to appear as mature as I could. My story finished, there was an awkward silence where he just stared at me with slightly suspicious, but thoughtful eye. Finally he said, "Are you an athlete?" At the time I was 6 feet tall and 145 pounds, not exactly a middle linebacker on a national championship football team. Something came over me and I responded in a completely out of character somewhat sarcastic but deep voice, "Do I look like one?" He examined me for several seconds and said, "You can substitute classical archeology", and reached into his desk to pull out a form. He scribbled directions on it and sent me on my way. I really did not know what had happened for several minutes. To this day I do not know if he thought I was an athlete.

It turned out classical archeology was a perfect match for me. At the time I could not make up my mind whether I wanted to be a psychologist, or anthropologist so I was taking all the requirements for both majors. I knew a bit about archeology techniques, cultural diversity, and pottery shards. When I arrived in the class there were about 8 classics majors; experts on classical literature. And, then there was me; the "illiterate". The professor, another older British gentleman was overjoyed to have an anthropology student in the class, because I understood archeology techniques and could give some insights to digs, etc. All the other students and the professor caught me up in class with short verbal descriptions of the classics I had not read. It was great fun! And, I got the "foreign languages" requirement behind me.

The summer between Junior and senior year I attended Tulsa University to make up for the 6 hours I had dropped sophomore year so I could graduate on time.

It was about that time I learned that many psychology graduate school programs had a foreign language requirement, and some schools required you to pass a comprehensive examination in the foreign language to graduate. I heard most school required German, because there was much science and history of psychology written in German. Shortly thereafter I learned that some programs would allow statistics and/or a computer language to fulfill the requirement. So part of my criterion for picking graduate schools was would they take statistics and/or a computer language instead of a foreign language. Most of the other part of my criterion was would that take a student with a lousy overall G.P.A. (about 2.7) and G.R.E. scores so low a rock in a chair could get similar scores, but that is a story for a different time.