

CHAPTER 1



How Would a Vacuum Cleaner Salesman Introduce a Book on Language Teaching Insights?

Christopher Stillwell

On a summer evening several years ago I watched a young teacher in my language teaching practicum assign exercises to one of his first language classes in New York. Standing with one hand holding his textbook open to the class, he used his free hand to gesture to that evening's assignment. There was something strikingly familiar to me about this stance, but I couldn't quite work out what it was. And then it hit me: I had stood and gestured in the very same fashion when I addressed potential buyers in a part-time job selling vacuum cleaners many summers before, holding open a binder and pointing to images of household cleaning products that would no longer be necessary after the purchase of my useful machine. In those parallel moments, both the teacher and I were selling something, attempting to persuade our listeners to give something up and make a significant investment in what we had to offer.

One thing I had learned in my old summer job was that it is very difficult, if not impossible, to sell a vacuum cleaner when you feel compelled to apologize for the price. Twenty-eight times I tried my best in spite of that setback, and 28 times I failed. But the 29th time was different. I had come to understand my product better and appreciate that for those who could afford it, it was more than worth the investment, considering its many functions and the money it would save by eliminating other household expenses. With this new understanding came the confidence and conviction to reveal the price tag without apology, to realize that in a sense I was doing my listeners a favor by providing them with an opportunity they would not otherwise have. On that 29th evening, I made my first sale.

Back at the practicum in New York, many of the teachers I observed were having difficulty getting students to invest in classroom content and complete homework. When these teachers approached material they found unpalatable, they, too, apologized for it, expressing solidarity with the students. “I’m sorry, guys, this is really boring. Let’s just do our best and try to get it over with,” said one. “I know you’re all quite busy and it’s kind of a pain, but do you think you could do the rest of page 17 for homework?” requested another in a soft, pleading tone. It was almost the same way I had presented the price in those first 28 vacuum cleaner demonstrations. I empathized with my audience, and though I did not specifically put it in words, my voice and demeanor telegraphed my feelings: “I know it is a high price, and I am sorry for asking you to pay it. I wish it were much more reasonable.” In my mind’s eye I can still see my listeners breathing a sigh of relief as they realized I never really thought they were going to buy it anyway.

Viewing the teachers’ behavior through the lens of my prior sales experience, I realized that there were two suggestions I could share:

1. Do not make impositions on students lightly. Put yourself in their shoes. Compare the assignment’s likely benefits with the cost in time and effort. If you are not entirely sure that the assignment is worthwhile, change it.
2. Once you have confirmed that an assignment is worthwhile, sell it. Communicate your confidence and make plain the value. Give the students reason to invest in the task and give it their best effort.

For some time, I was tickled by the thought that my limited experience in a field as distant as vacuum cleaner sales could prove useful to my work as a language teacher and teacher educator. However, I soon came to realize that such crossovers happen between disparate fields all the time. Veterinarians and physicians consult one another for advice, mathematicians provide insights to historians and futurists, and the techniques of exotic animal trainers are shared as means of modifying spouses’ behavior (the gist, as Sutherland [2006] notes, is to reward the desirable behavior and ignore the undesirable). In the introduction to the first book in this series, *Language Teaching Insights From Other Fields: Sports, Arts, Design, and More*, I similarly noted occurrences of insights from one field being used to inform another, such as when “Navy SEALs train Olympians, Disney experts mentor hospital managers, ballet professionals give football players pointers, and brain scientists advise everyone from architects to astronomers” (Stillwell, 2013, p. 3). It would be nice if language teachers could afford such exotic consultation.

Of course, since language teachers often come to a career in the classroom after having worked or studied in other fields, as I did, many will themselves have a diversity of personal experience, experience that it is natural for them to draw from no matter how distinct the field. What is less common is for teachers to benefit from the prior experiences of their colleagues. The volume now in your

hands is intended to offer just such an opportunity to tap into those insights that other language teachers naturally apply from outside the world of language teaching. Within these pages 14 colleagues from four continents share what they have learned from other fields, offering coaching on how to use concepts and techniques from positive psychology, economics, neuroscience, anthropology, and more to teach language effectively.

One suggestion: Before you read the following chapters, and perhaps even before you finish this chapter, have a bit of fun trying to guess the ideas that will be discussed. Grab a pen and brainstorm a list of possibilities that you can imagine for each chapter (Figure 1). For instance, before reading about a television commercial producer's techniques for language teaching, jot down a list of possible insights that come to mind. You will probably make some accurate guesses, while other aspects of the chapter will surprise you. More important, you are sure to come up with more than a few original and useful ideas and metaphors of your own.

INVITATION TO A PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATION

We might imagine this volume as a professional gathering to which the 14 contributors are the invited guests. At this particular gathering, we will explore insights from such fields as psychology, business, and neuroscience. As we shall see, these fields are in many ways complementary to one another and hold a great deal of potential for helping language teachers be more effective in the classroom.

The book is organized into four sections, though chapters typically share insights that extend across a broad range of classroom applications. In addition, though many of the contributors suggest practices that may be most readily employed in the context of intermediate- to advanced-level language classes, virtually all of their suggestions can be adapted to suit language learners of any level.

In the first section, we explore techniques for Getting Students Invested in Learning. Wendy Hendrickson looks at ways that producers of television commercials hold viewers' attention and create lasting memories, and how these same techniques might be adapted for the purpose of engaging learners in classroom content. Robert Murphy provides a neuroscientist's perspective, making the case for such teaching practices as personalizing material, giving students choices, and harnessing the power of prediction. And Steven Quasha offers a marketer's take on language instruction, in which the customer is king and the four Ps of the marketing mix (product, price, promotion, and placement) are adapted to the classroom context. Parallels among these chapters include techniques for use of stories, surprise, and emotions to maintain learners' interest.

The second section provides insights that can prove especially useful in Planning an Effective Course. Andrea Leone invites us to envision ourselves as ethnographers gathering information about the unique culture of our classrooms through participant observation, and notes the importance of viewing this culture

Prereading Brainstorming Exercise

List three insights a language teacher might learn from each of the following professions.

TV Commercial Producer

Neuroscientist

Marketing Manager

Anthropologist

Economist

Learning Disabilities Specialist

Project Manager

Organizational Behaviorist

Positive Psychologist

Psychotherapist

Psychiatrist

Business Professor

Creative Director

Counselor

Figure 1. Brainstorming Tips From the 14 Professions Featured in This Book

in terms of its own yardstick, borne of this culture itself. Clarice Chan shows how basic concepts of economics can cast our daily teaching decisions in a new light, by considering our lesson planning in terms of such economic principles as opportunity costs, thinking on the margin, and the law of diminishing marginal utility. Susan Matson shares the views of an academic therapist for students with learning disabilities, showing how techniques for working with populations with particular needs often simply amount to good pedagogy. And Gladys Focho offers the perspective of a project manager in Cameroon, showing how the project management cycle can be used by language teachers to plan, set objectives, address complications, and reflect for the purpose of facilitating further success in the future.

In the third section we focus on Expanding the Teacher's Toolbox, acquiring useful language learning activities inspired by other fields. Emily Austin Thrush shares tips drawn from the field of organizational behavior for managing group work and motivating students. Marc Helgesen looks at positive psychology practices that are "similar to things we are already doing in many ESL/EFL classes" and asks, "Why not do them in a way that focuses on and elicits positive emotion?" Meanwhile, Luke Carson focuses on the tools a psychotherapist practicing cognitive behavioural therapy might use, suggesting application of behavioural experiments and dysfunctional thought records to promoting learner autonomy. Drawing from the field of psychiatry, Esther Boucher-Yip explores practices for showing empathy, paraphrasing, asking questions skillfully, and building rapport. And taking us to a classroom that is different from what most language teachers are familiar with, Amy Nichols shows how a business professor's techniques for instigating fast-paced opinion exchanges can prove useful for developing more advanced language students' discussion skills.

In the final section of the book, Enhancing Teacher Effectiveness, two contributors provide concrete techniques teachers can use for developing as professionals. Former creative director Ashlea Green provides inspiration and useful advice, prefaced with a wake-up call: "As creative directors know, branding is crucial to the success of any endeavor. . . . [N]either the teacher nor the company selling sports drinks will reach their potential if they are not aware of their brand." Finally, Julian Edge brings the volume to an appropriate and satisfying close with a focus on how teachers can collaboratively foster their own professional development through the use of the nonjudgmental discourse of a counselor.

A CAVEAT OR TWO

There are implicit (and explicit) values underlying the perspectives associated with any field, naturally, so any application of ideas from one field to another should be handled with great caution. In this text in particular, it is important to note that business practices have been applied to education many times in the past, often with dubious outcomes, and also that neuroscience is still a very

young field with much room to grow. As we consider applying concepts from these fields to our teaching, it is essential that we remain critically aware, weighing the ideas from one field against those that form accepted practice in our own and monitoring the way applied innovations suit the particular goals of our own instructional environments.

Furthermore, armed with basic principles from such fields as psychiatry, counseling, anthropology, psychotherapy, and positive psychology, we might also feel increasingly inclined to engage with students on a deeper level and even provide advice on personal problems. After all, teaching is a helping profession, and the nature of communicative language teaching may make some students more comfortable confiding in language teachers regarding personal issues than they would be with parents, peers, or other teachers. Still, it would be prudent to note the risk of taking on more than we are professionally prepared for, particularly when it comes to such personal matters, as there is great risk that a nonprofessional can actually cause more harm than good (e.g., by crossing the line and advising on mental health and other kinds of personal issues unrelated to language learning). In addition to lacking expertise on these matters, teachers may be insufficiently prepared to fully appreciate the intercultural issues involved. For instance, counselors at a university in Japan warned teachers that even providing troubled students with seemingly safe Japanese advice like *ganbatte* (roughly translated as “do your best”) was risky in this cultural context, as it could inadvertently contribute to the students’ depression by compounding feelings of failure and inadequacy.

THE MIND OF A BEGINNER

The perspectives provided by the contributors to this book should offer a range of new tools to try in class and ample food for thought. It is hoped that the ideas that result when professional worlds collide will lead to useful exploration and a bit of a change from the usual. Such a change can fuel teachers’ motivation to carry on and thrive in the profession. Among other benefits, it can help keep burnout away by encouraging innovation, promoting teacher autonomy, and suggesting avenues for teacher collaboration through exchanges of ideas and experience, which can in turn play a part in fostering supportive communities.

In closing the book, Julian Edge’s chapter draws our attention to a concept that is worth noting from the start: Suzuki’s (1970) conception of *beginner’s mind*, a frame of mind that is for many reasons ideal for the explorations we are about to undertake. As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Howard Gardner agree, creativity borne of childishness and immaturity, “both emotional and mental, can go hand in hand with deepest insights” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 60). Though there is no substitute for research and scholarship conducted by experts in the field of language teaching, as such work can provide context-specific solutions to the particular challenges of language instruction, it is to be hoped that many of the chapters in this volume will create opportunities to experience such a begin-

ner's state of mind, for the period in which one is introduced to a new subject is often an exciting time of discovery. In such a state, even encounters with already familiar concepts can become fresh, as distinct contexts shed new light on old wisdom.

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Christopher Stillwell (cstillwe@uci.edu, StillwellC@aol.com) is a PhD student at University of California Irvine's School of Education, with an MA in TESOL from Teachers College, Columbia University and an MA in Education from UC Irvine. He has taught ESL/EFL for more than 18 years, in such places as Spain, the United States, and Japan, including work at Teachers College as an instructor of an MA practicum in TESOL and at a university language program in Japan as assistant director. He received two 2011 Best of JALT awards for invited presentations on peer observation and on conflict resolution techniques for language learning, and he is listed in the U.S. Department of State's database of English Language Specialists. His previous volume in this series, Language Teaching Insights From Other Fields: Sports, Arts, Design, and More, was nominated for an ELTon Award for Innovation in Teacher Resources.

