

Psychodramaturgy for Language Acquisition

Towards a *Pedagogy of Being*

It might have happened to other language trainers to ask themselves, as has happened to me, why is it so arduous to go beyond the threshold of communication when learning a foreign language? Why is it so difficult to use the learned grammar structures studied hardly in order to, well, simply SPEAK?

The main function, if not the sole, of a language is precisely to communicate, to express oneself and to encounter the *other/s*.

And yet sometimes it seems as if L2 students put their hands forward telling us – whether implicitly or specifically – “For heaven’s sake, don’t let me speak!”

In my first years of teaching the Italian language in Germany this attitude surprised me. Above all because I taught to groups of adults who, in most cases, freely chose to join a course and were learning to their liking and outside of a school system. To explain to myself the contradiction of studying a language but not wanting to speak it, I often use the metaphor of music. Imagine yourself wanting to play the piano without touching its keys, but rather just studying the names of the notes and reading the scores. One may be able to read all the notes of Beethoven’s 9th Symphony, but without using an instrument, there is no way of releasing music. Instead the opposite is true... that is to say, even if I do not have a score or am not able to read notes, it is possible to learn to play the piano, at least for a person who somewhat is talented in music. Similarly, learning by heart single words and grammar structures of a language does not involve the ability to speak, whereas it is possible to speak it fluently without being able to explain its rules.

While I was asking myself these questions, as well as teaching with a traditional method and a course book addressed to L2 Italian learners, I discovered the existence of the PDL method about 10 years ago (psychodramaturgie linguistique, in English Psychodramaturgy for language acquisition or PDL). It was created by Bernard Dufeu at the end of the 70s and ever since it is being constantly developed and adapted to several teaching situations. Bernard Dufeu’s definition of his method as a “pedagogy of being” juxtaposed to the traditional one and defined as a “pedagogy of having”, seemed to me to seize the essence of the problem I was having in teaching my mother tongue, Italian.

Indeed traditional language lessons were – in most cases *still* are today, especially in the educational system - focused on providing to L2 trainees educational material such as: lexis and grammar rules backed up by examples that need to be memorized as a database from which to draw back in order to express oneself when speaking. According to this principle, one learns how to speak about oneself, to present oneself, to order a meal at a restaurant or to buy a train ticket at a station. When it comes to speaking, if you are lucky enough, you may already have dealt with the chapter of the course book, where you are provided with a set of examples of *lab-sentences* you can adapt to the appropriate language context. The procedure reminds us of the algorithm principle suitable more to artificial intelligence. However, our brain, natural intelligence, does not work like that. Additionally, time factor must be handled! While we mentally review the learnt lexis trying to put them together in a sentence, we miss our turn at the counter or our speaker has already left.

The definition of “Pedagogy of being” highlights the fact that speaking in a foreign language involves much more than just our cognitive abilities and its verbal functions. Apart from words and grammar structures, language is seen in its global communicative dimension including its prosodic features, such as, intonation, rhythm, melody, as well as non-verbal features: gestures and facial expression. It is by means of these features that emotions move on. All these signals combined to a word play a part in carrying meaning and a precise connotation of what we express. Having said this, it is not surprising anymore that expressing oneself requires a big and important step.

It involves putting aside some characteristics of our *personae* and learning how to take another one which is in accordance with L2 . When speaking another language, we have to somehow “find ourselves in the other language”.

But how does one accomplish *a pedagogy of being* in a teaching context?

In order to answer this question, I will draw back to the history of the PDL method, and then illustrate some of its essential principles.

PDL is deeply rooted in J. L. Moreno’s psychodrama of which it has recalled its philosophy, the structure of its activities, as well as some techniques and its setting. It has been adapted for the sole purpose of teaching and removed from its therapeutic aspects. PDL principles can be summoned as follows:

- **PDL is group- and trainee oriented.** Consequently, when teaching there are no

specific preliminary contents. Instead there are “framework” activities within which the trainees, with the trainer’s guide, develop communicative situations. According to the activities, the impulse may be given by images, poems, sounds, texts, movements. Within this framework, authentic interaction can develop. Therefore, L2 is not the object of learning, but it is the means through which communication is enacted from the very beginning. Dufeu summarizes this principle in the statement: *Wenn es deine Worte sind, dann kann es deine Sprache werden* (If they are your words, then it can become your language).

In this context, in the teaching of L2 the attention given to expressive needs and the communicative desires of the trainees are paramount, as well as the trainees’ *feeling* regarding his/her capacity to acquire and re-elaborate. Important is also the ongoing attention towards group dynamics that is at stake in authentic communication and complements the learning process which may support or hinder it.

- **Relational progress replaces grammatical progress.** The structure of a lesson or of an entire course with PDL is not one that follows linguistic and grammar structures - starting with those supposed to be the most simple ones and ending up gradually with the more complex ones. But rather PDL techniques and activities follow a progression that goes from the experimentation of a language of the trainee – with the trainer’s support – to the encounter with another trainee in a dialogue, at first; and to the interaction in a group dramaturgy, then. Essential here is the concept of “encounter” (Begegnung).
- **Development of communicative skills at the basis of acquiring skills.** Viewing a language in all its aspects means including its emotional and non-verbal facet. Thus, PDL techniques are aimed at developing abilities as conscious listening, empathy, spontaneity that aid the trainee in order to create a communicative situation wherein the desire to express oneself has arisen.
At this stage, at the beginning of the process of learning, the trainer interferes and provides the trainee with the appropriate linguistic elements that can be adapted to the situation. They will be given as an *offer* and the trainee is free to adopt them, change them and reject them in case they do not meet the trainee’s communicative desire.

- **A positive relation to L2.** From the start on, the trainee comes in contact with the spoken language, its rhythm, intonation and melody. At this stage the sensorial and emotional dimension are in the foreground. Comprehension is not essential; it is still not the component upon which learning is focused on. This approach plays a role in making the language a little less “foreign” given that the language’s melody, rhythm and some of its sounds become by and by more familiar. Furthermore its acquisition runs through experimentation and through the repetition as faithful as possible of its words and sounds. The educational use of poems plays an important role, too. It establishes a positive emotional relation with L2, and simultaneously it brings about – according to the chosen poem – a proper pronunciation, a linguistic structure or a specific lexis.

The accomplishment of the above-mentioned principles is part of a well-defined structure. PDL activities are borrowed from psychodrama and include the following stages:

- *Warming-up:* a group activity introduces every stage of a lesson and precedes each activity. The type of warm-up activity chosen depends on the attitude and skills demanded by the main activity.
- *Main activity:* In the first stage of a PDL course, the activities are experienced by the single trainees who are guided by the trainer and supported by the group, as for the technique, “the double” borrowed from psychodrama. In the second stage, the activities are in the form of a dialogue between 2 trainees and in an advanced stage the method offers several drama activities within the whole group or in small groups.
- *Integration stage:* after the main activity follows a phase of reflection. All the trainees share with the group what still “re-echoes” in their ear of the preceding stages. It is at this moment that grammar explanation is provided; that is, in the moment in which questions are asked by the trainees. Often written activities are used in this stage to make evident and easy to remember words and sentences.

At the end of a lesson or of a day, in the case of an intensive course where PDL is applied in its “pure” form, the integration stage consists of a feedback and “linguistic resume”. For example, trainees are asked to choose a word or the “sentence of the day” that they wish to make theirs.

Within this structure psychodramaturgy for language acquisition offers a wide range of techniques and exercises. With beginners, these techniques and proceedings are well defined. As the trainees widen their expressive ability, they become increasingly independent, allowing the trainer to experiment with new activities adapting them to the group, situations and the teaching needs. The three stages described above are always maintained and refer to foundation of the method itself. And yet PDL is not a collection of “recipes” to prepare a lesson. It is rather a canvas upon which a trainer can freely move and case by case find the most suitable activity. Always bearing in mind group dynamics and the situation. The resources of a group which works in an atmosphere of cooperation and that promotes creativity are numerous and precious. In addition, the interaction amongst the trainees provides the trainer with new starting points and ideas for efficient and amusing lessons. As claimed by Umberto Eco: “in order to tell, one needs first of all to create a world. Words will, then, come naturally” (mine the translation).

Needless to say, after this long discourse on the method, that ever since I became acquainted with PDL, then attended the PDL Training for language trainers and finally joined the TTT (Train the Trainer), its principles have become my own aptitude in my Italian courses L2 (and German).

In different situations and settings, I adapt techniques and activities, and I complement them with elements taken from other methods and disciplines like psychodrama, drama or improvisational theater. Thus enhancing the repertoire from which I draw.

Starting as a method for teaching in intensive courses, PDL is today also used in extensive courses, at Universities, at schools where its original elements are taken and adapted.

Detailed information and its philosophy are also available in Italian on the following homepage: www.psychodramaturgie.de

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