

Chapeau! A Tribute to FL Teachers

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Teachers are frequently the recipients of so much harsh criticism in our society that I often feel compelled to come to their defense. I taught foreign language (FL) at the secondary school level for the relatively short period of ten years, and since then I have been involved in the teaching of methodology to FL teachers. These experiences have provided me with many lessons and I have seen much that has served as a source of inspiration.

This is no easy task—instilling love and enthusiasm in young minds and hearts for a subject that can literally seem so foreign and so divorced from the students' world. For many, the very Standard English they are expected to communicate in is a foreign language. What is the point of learning Spanish when one can barely write one's name?

In my stint as an FL teacher, I taught French at an assisted, denominational school—one of the so-called “prestige” schools. Those who observe these institutions from outside often feel that the “fortunate” teachers in such schools have an easy task. After all, these students want to learn! However, even there I encountered students who posed a serious challenge because they were unable to identify with the need to learn this “oh so strange” language. In their quest for academic achievement, both students and teachers often overlook the value of understanding other cultures. Students frequently wonder about the future utility of French to them and the society. In this respect I have noted, with a great deal of interest, the government's declaration of its intention to make Trinidad and Tobago a bilingual (Spanish and English) country in the shortest time possible, in order to maximise the country's participation in the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Such policy statements may be useful in reinforcing the importance of FL teaching and learning in our schools.

So when I consider the obstacles I faced in my “prestige” school, my heart goes out and my hat comes off in tribute to the foreign language teachers who strive hard to teach FL in classrooms so much less “ideal” than those I experienced. Many teachers have shared their valuable experiences with me and I realise what wonderful, dedicated people I work among.

Young teachers, the majority of whom are products of institutions where students were genuinely motivated to learn, have related the culture shock they experienced when faced, for example, with children who could neither read nor write at the junior secondary level. “How am I expected to teach them Spanish?” The problems encountered in these schools go far beyond those of functional illiteracy and innumeracy. Many students are often fighting far greater battles—absentee parents or abuse, households where there is little or no supervision—issues far more relevant in their world than the remote aims of being able to converse with speakers of a foreign language! Several teachers with whom I have interacted have expressed misgivings about trying to teach Spanish to these students.

Compounding this already complex situation is the fact that many of these teachers have come through a system where they were motivated to learn, and the methods that were used to teach them simply will not work with their present students. Many of them had little exposure to teaching methodology before entering the profession as beginning teachers, and so often understandably seek refuge in the methods to which they themselves had been exposed as students. But will the focus on grammar, form, and structure reach the students in their classrooms? This is hardly likely when these students cannot even identify with these elements in their own language. These teachers first face far more fundamental obstacles, like their students' lack of both motivation and the necessary tools needed to learn a foreign language in this way.

These are only some of the reasons why I feel compelled to pay tribute to the gallant efforts I have seen displayed by teachers in such challenging contexts. I have heard teachers working in the new sector schools share experiences that imply that they have come to terms with the many limitations with which they work. They have revamped their approach; consciously applying different strategies that they feel will more readily reach their students.

I recently attended a workshop for Spanish teachers, hosted by the Ministry of Education, where several teachers shared their experiences of dealing with such situations. I was very impressed by the hard work and dedication apparent in their narratives. I especially appreciate those who have worked in several different types of schools, and who continue to be motivated to instil love for FL in as many students as possible. I am truly inspired by those who shared their attempts to use innovative methods in creative ways to reach those students who resist and cannot identify with more traditional approaches. They use art, craft, projects, drama, songs and other techniques to promote the capabilities that they have recognised in their students, and praise them for what they can do well rather than penalise them for not being able to apply grammar rules! It appears that these methods contribute greatly to raising the self-esteem of their charges. They are true knights in shining armour.

Perhaps the old cliché about one bad apple tending to spoil the whole barrel may come to mind. However, my experience continues to convince me that there are many shiny, healthy fruit out there that have not been spoilt. I have encountered several teachers who teach in institutions that are not ranked among the most prestigious, and who profess that they would not change schools for the world. They appreciate the talent and creativity they see in their students and this is the focus and orientation of their teaching. They no longer stress the importance of their students being able to conjugate Spanish or French verbs, but allow them to use the FL as a tool to express themselves in a creative way, and eventually to communicate far more authentically than had been the case in many FL classrooms formerly. This often becomes an enriching experience for both student and teacher, and both emerge wealthier (figuratively) as a result.

There are many exemplary teachers who grace our classrooms with their dedication and hard work. They should be recognised and allowed to spread the gospel of their positive experiences. More power to them!

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