Linguistic Autobiography

For the first three years of my life I lived ten months out of the year in Israel and spent summers in California. Hebrew was my first language, and I spoke it with the same development of any toddler. For a long time after we finally settled in the United States, I confused words in both English and Hebrew and did not know to whom I was supposed to speak which language. I have always felt that this exposure to multilingualism in my early years has helped me with a critical awareness of language that I might not have otherwise grasped.

In the United States, however, Hebrew had very little prominence or use outside of the home. Slowly it became more of an interior language, only spoken with my mother at bedtime, and much to my regret, I lost it altogether. Today I do not consider myself a speaker of Hebrew - I can understand a bit when it is spoken, but I can only produce a few conversational sentences, and my family laughs at my foreign accent in what was once my mother tongue. I consider myself a native speaker of only English.

Now I am learning Hebrew in a class at Yale, like any other student. The professor uses a mostly communicative method, trying to engage us in conversation with certain words before telling us what they mean. Since I am already somewhat familiar with the words, I feel that I can follow the class fairly easily, though true beginners in the class have told me they find it frustrating to have to guess at the words. Heritage speakers have our own frustrations, though, as we are constantly filling in the gaps of a language that most people think we should pick up effortlessly.

FamilyEssay

Once I effectively forgot all my Hebrew, the next language I learned was Spanish, which I chose for its prominence in the US and the great number of countries where it is spoken. We began with formal classes in the seventh grade, each day for forty-five minutes, working mostly from a textbook and doing both oral and written exercises to practice vocabulary and grammar. This was the typical language-learning environment that I feel most classroom settings use. I finished high school knowing a lot of Spanish in the way of verbs and vocabulary, but I could not speak very much and my production was still based on translating locutions from English. It was not until I studied abroad in Spain for eight months that I felt like I achieved real fluency and could actually express myself in Spanish. Since grad school, I have also studied Latin (good old GrammarTranslation method), French, and Portuguese.

My experience with all these languages has emphasized to me the importance of diverse and current language instruction, so that students see the rich applications of their language acquisition in their daily lives and are inspired to continue learning autonomously. I remember the awkwardness of the first time that I had to buy a metro ticket in Montréal, not trusting that the words I had learned at school would actually work. As a teacher now I try to breach the divide between the classroom and the "realworld" by taking my classes outside to local museums and galleries as well as by inviting guests to visit. The more up-to-date I stay as an educator, the more my own learning stays relevant and active in return.