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Less Teacher Talking, More Student Learning

Kathy K. Clayton

Kathy K. Clayton is a seminary and institute teacher in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where she is serving with her husband, Elder L. Whitney Clayton of the Seventy.

Responding to a whim that I should have recognized as inspiration, I studied Spanish intermittently at the Missionary Training Center for several leisurely months in 2002. Because of an assignment my husband received in the spring of that year, he and I and our fifteen-year-old son moved to Argentina in August. Many of the English-speaking expatriates living and working in Buenos Aires had left because of a recent economic crisis, leaving our new post with only occasional North Americans scattered around the seventeen-million-person metropolis. I immediately wished I had paid better attention in the Spanish classes.

I quickly found an able language tutor and began the arduous trek toward linguistic proficiency, this time engaging in my studies with anxious motivation. My humble but still daunting goal was simple survival in the marketplace and some remote possibility of connection with the non-English-speaking people surrounding me. A few days after we arrived, with my husband away on assignment, our teenaged son and I navigated the several blocks through our big-city neighborhood to the local chapel to attend Sunday meetings, which happened to be stake conference. Surrounded by handsome locals, we struggled to make sense of even a single phrase in the fast-paced discourse. Seeking to find something of fun in our predicament, I handed our displaced son a paper and pencil and offered to pay him a peso for every ten words he could write and define from the mostly unintelligible Spanish talks and

prayers. At the end of two hours and with some desperate teamwork, I owed him five pesos. We were in trouble.

In spite of my best effort and eager pleas for a quick dose of the gift of tongues, the Spanish came too slowly to my stubborn, half-century-old brain tissue. I watched the more agile language acquisition of our teenaged son with admiration and envy. Ah, to be fifteen again. Armed with a deep desire to render myself a more useful contributor than I could be without the ability to communicate more fluently, I continued to plead for heavenly help. In January, after we had been in Argentina for only five months, I received my answer.

When the local Church Education director, Brother Curbelo, telephoned to ask if he could stop by to speak with me, I thought little of it. We often received visitors from the Church. I greeted him with the Spanish pleasantries I had dutifully memorized and then sat down to do my best to manage something of an appropriate conversation that didn't require much language production from me. A busy man, he didn't expect long chitchat but rather promptly got to the point. "Hermana Clayton," he said, "after prayerful consideration, we would like to extend to you the call to serve as the early-morning seminary teacher for the ten youth residing in our Belgrano Ward. The class meets every morning at 6 a.m. beginning on the first day of school in March and continues until summer vacation in November. Will you accept the calling?" My Spanish was limited, but I nonetheless knew enough to offer an honest and spontaneous response: "¡No me diga!" which essentially means, "You've got to be kidding!" He wasn't.

Resisting reason, I accepted. I had taught early-morning seminary for seven years in California before moving to Argentina, so I was familiar with the curriculum. I knew I had relied on discussing scriptures, telling stories, sharing personal experiences, and other language-dependent activities to engage students and promote learning. My skimpy Spanish would certainly preclude the possibility of a comparable style of teaching, but I believe in miracles and I don't believe in refusing callings, so I responded with a trusting but bewildered "yes." A full year later, I learned that even the bishop had felt uneasy about having the calling extended. In bishopric meeting, he had asked all three members of the bishopric to write the names of three people they thought might be legitimate to teach the seminary class. The next week, the three men shared their names. All three had written my name as number one. Bewildered, the bishop hesitated, saying, "But she doesn't speak Spanish!" The men continued the quest another week, only to return with the same impression, so they

extended the call. I'm sure they were fearful for me and undoubtedly at least a little worried about the spiritual growth of those ten youth, but they were eager to follow the prompting they had received.

During the next month, I memorized Spanish phrases, studied interminable verb conjugations, clumsily read Spanish scriptures aloud, and prayed mightily that this leap of faith would qualify me for the heavenly help I so desperately sought. I pled that those faithful students would have by March a teacher whose own deficiencies wouldn't compromise their right to learn. I didn't want my barely emerging Spanish to become the focus of our hour. I desired to be a useful tool, not a language-learning service project for them.

I have learned again and again that nothing we make available to the Lord goes to waste. Whatever measure of competence or learning we offer for His glory will surely be well employed. Before moving to Argentina, I had completed a master's degree in California in educational linguistic development. The degree was designed to enable teachers to work more successfully with non-English-speaking students. I had mistakenly assumed I would use that learning to teach the multilanguage students who comprised our California classrooms. Ironically, the material from that class became the stuff of my preparation as I taught seminary in my own second language. I was not employing the techniques to assist English-language learners; rather, I was employing those techniques to enable myself as a Spanish-language learner to work with my own limited language proficiency.

The strategies included techniques that reinforced learning without depending on sophisticated language fluency. In other words, I avoided extensive teacher presentation and depended instead on student-centered activities. My original motivation had been to eliminate my own need to offer something I couldn't—namely, a coherent lecture. In the process of avoiding my own glaring weakness, however, I observed students rising to the occasion to take more responsibility for their own learning as they made greater contributions in class. I learned to prepare lessons that required more participation and presentation by the students and much less teacher-focused instruction.

Among the strategies I found valuable were student journals. My own unmistakable limitation caused me to depend more often and more quickly on the masterfully expressed words of the prophets than I had previously done. To supplement my Spanish, I regularly typed beautiful quotations from the prophets and apostles then created short writing assignments to encourage students to apply the concepts found in the quotations and the scriptures in their own lives. The activities

I prepared in advance and inserted in their journals typically required about ten minutes to complete. They included things like scripture analysis, such as comparing the sacrifice of Abraham with Isaac to the sacrifice of the Father with Jesus, or tracing the fall of David and recording the decisions he had made and the results of each. During a portion of another lesson, the students completed a page in their journals. The activity asked them to do a step-by-step analysis of the solutions Moses found when he felt inadequate in his calling as prophet. I listened to those ten Argentine students share their newfound insights in dealing with feelings of inadequacy and lapses in confidence. As they shared their understanding of Moses's triumph over his deficiencies, I recognized a pattern for myself. We all rejoiced and were edified together.

Additionally, because I had no comfort zone to leave, I was happy to experiment with diverse teaching strategies. We regularly enjoyed student role plays, debates, and interviews. Those imaginative Argentine young people committed themselves with the energetic gusto characteristic of their culture as they played the parts of heroes and villains. The lessons of the scriptures came to life via their dramatic demonstrations of the results of both good and bad choices. I suspect that none of us will forget the immensity of Goliath after having hurled imported North American marshmallows at a life-sized cutout of that fearsome foe. The students expressed spontaneous gratitude for the more manageable size of their personal opponents.

My motivation to find alternatives to my own inability to lecture prompted me to research carefully the audiovisual resources of the Church. For students to discuss and apply, short clips from general conference talks and CES satellite broadcasts provided dependable sources of relevant, eloquent counsel from Church leaders. Occasionally, a simple illustration from the familiar Gospel Art Picture Kit became a beginning point for a student activity wherein each member of the class assumed the role of one of the people shown in the picture. Consistent with their assumed characters, students answered questions about the part they had played in the scene, the reasons for and results of their actions, and the impact their behavior had had on others in the story. By adopting the role of someone other than themselves, they understood the stories more intimately and from different points of view.

Because I teach seminary around the dining-room table in our apartment, I originally had none of the standard classroom equipment in place to use for visual aids. I promptly obtained a white board and easel that became an extension of and supplementation to my own voice. I invested in every color of white-board marker made in

Argentina and then used them all lavishly to prepare what became colorful outlines and activities for each morning's lesson. Those varied diagrams served as prompts for me and visuals for the students. Class members filled in missing words to complete thoughts, drew lines to connect similar concepts, decoded riddles to capture their attention, and answered puzzling questions to make application. I have found that all students, no matter what their age, like to draw on the board; and occasionally, a student who is particularly artistic can achieve recognition he or she would not otherwise receive. Lorenzo, a new member of the Church who had difficulty reading, was a natural artist. His contributions to our white board secured him an important place of respect among his new peers. Additionally, those students who were visual learners learned more comfortably with the help of the written aids. On our walls and furniture, we posted word strips and displayed pictures, including photos of the students themselves, to brighten the environment and supplement the learning.

My language immaturity was a constant reminder of my dependence on the students for help with the instruction. I had no false sense of confidence in my having all the answers or even possessing the ability to express well the ones I did have. In a quest for class participation, I was motivated to prepare the questions with much thought and prayer I hoped would encourage the students' genuine contribution to the learning. As they recognized my honest need for their thoughtful participation, they rose ably to the occasion and offered customized insights I would not have known how to present in any language.

Although I had expected my limited Spanish to minimize my ability to connect with my class, my efforts to learn their language became an unexpected bond between the students and me. Those teenagers, like teenagers anywhere, were regularly amused by my errors, and they delighted in offering corrections that were always a benefit to me. On one occasion, as I sought to initiate a discussion of section 45 in the Doctrine and Covenants, I referred repeatedly and with enthusiasm to "la Segunda Vista," which translates to something nonsensical like "the Second Sight." With a characteristic twinkle in his eye, Gonzalo, or Toti for short, interrupted. "Hermana, I think you mean la Segunda Venida [the Second Coming]." He was right. I may have lost something of the momentum of my presentation, but I gained a connection with those students, who were amused by the obvious imperfections of their North American teacher. I learned much from those young friends about creating a house of learning as I received correction. We were unmistakably all teachers and all learners in that class.

Because of my imperfect Spanish, I had to listen more attentively to the students' questions and comments to be sure I had understood them as they had meant them to be understood. I was less likely to jump to conclusions, put words in their mouths, or listen casually to their comments than I might otherwise have been. As a result, I understood with greater clarity the things they expressed. They accommodated my learning by thinking through what they desired to communicate, thereby clarifying their thoughts even to themselves. I understood concepts more thoroughly and heard more subtleties than I would have had I not been obligated to listen with profound attention.

Most important of all, because of my own unquestionable deficiencies, I learned to depend daily and sincerely on heavenly help. I presumed no ability to succeed without the assistance of the Spirit as my constant companion. I trusted in the certain love of the Lord for those deserving students, and I pled with earnest desire for essential supplementation to my humble efforts that I might be able to reflect the Lord's love and not detract from it. Even as my Spanish has improved and my desperation has subsided, my commitment to the student-centered strategies I employed has persisted. I finished that first year of teaching seminary in Spanish, then completed a second year, and am anticipating with gratitude a third.

Ironically, my inability to speak fluent and voluminous Spanish became the springboard for my learning to teach without depending on long teacher lectures as the default mode of instruction. As I turned more to the students and the Spirit as the essential participants in the class, I became much more "the guide on the side" rather than "the sage on the stage." We were all instructed. **RE**