

With Literacy and Justice for All

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Teaching Methods Have Changed

When I was a little girl, I lived on Solano Street near Carlisle and Candelaria in Albuquerque. Most of my friends at that age spoke Spanish in their homes. So the first day of first grade, when offered Spanish class, I jumped at the chance. It was beautiful and mysterious. I then took Spanish in middle and high school and some in college. So, why am I still not fluent?

We've had a major shift in the way we teach languages in the last 40+ years. I wanted to know Spanish to go down the street and speak to people like Mrs. Silva. Mrs. Silva used to make her daughter and me a hot mini-tortilla in the toaster each morning to eat on the way to school. (Hot tortilla, spread with butter, in my mittens walking to school on a cold winter morning—Mmmm!)

What I learned in Spanish class, however, was mostly grammar. I can fill in a blank on a worksheet like nobody's business. Now, I'm not knocking grammar. It's the

traffic lights and markings on the road. It's a mutual agreement about what things mean that makes order out of chaos. The problem was that we weren't actually speaking or listening to Spanish much.

How has language teaching changed today? For one thing, we now often distinguish between "learning a language" (knowing its rules) and "acquiring a language" (being able to use it fully). In the sixties, in rebellion to grammar-based language teaching and to help learners acquire language skills, researchers developed what was called the Audiolingual Approach. This was very popular for a time. In classrooms, teachers gave learners dialogues and sentences on tape to listen to and memorize by heart. Problem? Students could say the sentences they'd learned accurately but were not able to say other things they wanted to say. So it goes with all or nothing approaches, don't you think?

Language is a very complex activity. It's often described as a four-legged stool: Reading, Writing, Speaking, and Listening. So, eventually, to get more balance and develop fluency, teachers developed the Communicative Approach.

Today, at Valencia County Literacy Council (VCLC), we generally use a modified Communicative Approach to tutor English. The basic principle is that we find out what learners want to say and teach them that. Through dialogues, role plays, reading, writing, computer assisted learning, games, and physical activities, we try to help learners move rapidly into actually being able to say something that has meaning for them—to communicate. Rather than drill on dialogues, we teach the students how to use them flexibly. We tend to focus on things like going to the doctor, buying things in a store, understanding maps and directions, etc.—things learners have told us they need to

know.

We also teach grammar in conjunction with this, but we set priorities. For instance, in my English study group, I'm not worried too much if the beginning learners say, "He go to the store" instead of "he goes" because research shows they probably won't say that "s" right until they are advanced anyway. (And by the way, VCLC does not prohibit speaking of other languages in tutoring groups. Some use of home language has been shown by researchers to help develop a comfortable setting.)

Want to learn more? VCLC is having a new Tutor training January 31st and February 21st (orientations offered Jan. 23 or 29). Both days and an orientation are required to become certified. We need Tutors who are willing to start English conversation groups in Valencia County. Conversation groups are a lot of fun! English tutoring is a terrific way to have an international experience without ever leaving the county. Call Susan Howard at 925-8935 for more information.

By the way, did you know that a number of studies have indicated that gray matter in the brain is increased and senility is delayed in adults who know more than one language? I'm all for that! And, I keep working on my Spanish. My next goal is to watch a *telenovela* all the way through and understand everything (*La Fea Mas Bella* on DVD perhaps!).