



Interview

with ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year

Edward Zarrow



On behalf of the more than 12,500 ACTFL members, the ACTFL Officers, and the ACTFL Board of Directors, we offer you sincere congratulations, Ted, on being named the ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year for 2016!

Q&A

Q: Since you were chosen as our profession's National Language Teacher of the Year at the 2015 ACTFL Annual Convention, you have been representing language educators and ACTFL as an ambassador for our profession throughout the United States. You will be visiting a number of small and large events, including state and regional conferences, to promote the importance of language learning. What message are you focusing on in these interactions?

A: It is my honor to receive this award from ACTFL, and I hope to serve the language community this year and in the years to come with distinction. This award is a powerful testament to the fact that what teachers of Latin and the classics do in the classroom is being taken seriously on the national level and, while differences still exist in our practice, we should no longer see ourselves as standing outside of the broader language community.

When I began preparing to present a session at the 2016 regional conferences, I thought about how my own practice in teaching Latin can apply to modern languages. In my presentations, I share many samples of student work as well as strategies and activities that can be applied across all languages and for all levels. However, many of the big ideas and essential questions on which the presentations are based have to do with keeping students motivated and how, once empowered as language learners, our students empower a language program within a school. How can we make our language programs a core feature and an indelible part of our school community? How can we strengthen our programs across

all languages by allowing our students to engage the school community and the community at large? How can individual language teachers be better advocates for the profession?

Our programs are only as strong as the support that we receive from our community, and our students are the best conduits for the message that *language matters*. It doesn't matter what that language is—*language matters*. Language advocacy in the United States has never been more important than right now, especially given how the study of languages and the humanities is often criticized by individuals who challenge its benefits (or see none at all), or equate those who do not speak English as people to be feared and mistrusted.

The classroom teacher is the linchpin to successful language advocacy in this country. What do I mean by that? The most powerful advocacy anyone can do for language begins with what we do in the classroom. I want all language teachers in the United States to believe in what they are doing, as well as to believe in their ability to effect positive change with their craft. Real language advocacy begins with what we teach and show our students every day.

Q: When you were named the ACTFL National Language Teacher of the Year in November, you provided an eloquent statement of advocacy for all languages, saying that "the study of language should never be viewed as an elective." What commonalities across all languages would you identify as essential to the education of all learners?

A: Students today should be able to choose the language they wish to study but the study of language itself should not be a choice. Bilingualism, biliteracy, and their byproducts span all

languages, even the ancient ones, and are fundamental for the success of all children in this country. To my mind, we cannot say as a nation that we value critical thinking, we cannot say that we value diversity, we cannot say that we want our students to be ready for the challenges of a multicultural and multilingual world unless we support and promote language education beginning at the elementary level. To put it another way, to value language education is to value education itself. America's future success is tied to language learning.

Every day in the language classroom, we read, we write, we listen, we speak, we cultivate imagination. Doing these things in a language not our own—whether ancient or modern—asks much of our students. It allows them to have the tools for meaningful communication and meaningful interaction with world cultures, to have intercultural competence. A place is set at the new global table, if you will—but communication is only the beginning. The study of languages requires care and teaches perseverance. The study of languages engenders humility in our students in that there is often more than one solution to a problem and we need tolerance for others who might look different and see the world differently than we do. The study of languages promotes knowledge and critical thinking skills. In short, building language learners builds better learners who will be ready not only to communicate with an increasingly diverse world but who will possess the skills necessary to face the challenges of the future, whatever they may be.

A colleague of mine, Kathleen Turner, a French teacher who was named the Massachusetts Teacher of the Year for 2013, was particularly eloquent on this topic at a recent meeting of the Massachusetts Foreign Language Association (MaFLA). She argued that global collaboration, based on a foundation of respect among people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs, is the key for combating hunger, disease, climate change, terrorism, and economic instability. This trust, however, can only come from widening our cultural perspectives to erase our fear of what we do not understand. The key to this is language learning.

As a Latin teacher, I ask my students to engage with the ancient world so that they can begin to think about their own modern world in a new way. This experience is the same across all languages. Every day in our classrooms, we show our students that by immersing themselves in languages and cultures they will be compelled to examine their own values and beliefs. As a result, our students come to be scholars and lifelong learners, to lead informed lives, to respect knowledge for its own sake, to build the capacity for a world view full of nuance, to go beyond a shallow understanding of the problems we face in today's society, and to seek the truth. Only then can we come to recognize what is good and beautiful when we see it, and even fight for it when we have to.

Q: As a teacher of Latin, how do you implement the World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages with your learners? What advice would you have for teachers of ANY language for making language learning effective?

A: I remember attending a presentation by ACTFL Director of Education Paul Sandrock about 6 or 7 years ago when the World-Readiness Standards were in development. At the time, I had never really considered how I would be able to use comprehensible input to help my students read and internalize unfamiliar texts, how I could design activities to encourage my students' spontaneous use of language, or how I could build with them a fluency over time in anything other than reading. As I watched my modern language colleagues implement the Standards, I saw firsthand the improvements that their students were making in terms of their speaking and especially writing ability. When I made an effort to incorporate more active and spoken Latin into my classes about 5 years ago, at which time I made presentational and creative writing a principal goal for my students rather than reading, I saw how the Standards supported one another. I then came to the realization that to deny preference to any Goal Area or Standard does our students a disservice. Once I focused on having my students do more than just read, their reading ability improved exponentially.

The new Standards for Classical Languages which even include interpersonal speaking are quite inspiring. Where in the past, I would have students merely read Cicero and translate passages on traditional assessments, now my students use Latin to summarize Cicero's arguments or even take the role of an ancient listener and react to Cicero's rhetoric. Where I used to quiz students on pre-read passages of Ovid, now in groups, they discuss whether the metamorphoses or punishments which Ovid describes in his myths are just or not and why they think so. These are things that I would never have attempted without the Standards in place.

It goes without saying that the World-Readiness Standards steer students towards proficiency. That is the ultimate goal: to have our students communicate and immerse themselves in the target language. For so long in language education, we have been aiming at the wrong target. With the World-Readiness Standards firmly in place, I would like to think that in another decade or two we will no longer hear people saying, "I studied a foreign language for 4 years and I can't say a word!"—especially if we advocate and push for longer, well-articulated sequences of language learning, including ones that begin at the elementary level.

It's not enough for students only to work towards proficiency; they must have ownership of the proficiency itself. We can tell them all the things they can do with the language as a result of learning new vocabulary or adding more complex grammatical constructions to their repertoire of skills, but what they can do with a language needs to matter to them.

While for many years I made my classes student-centered, I now make my students an integral part of the process. This requires patience and flexibility, but in the end, my students are far more motivated as a result. For example, in the past, I used to design end-of-term projects for certain classes in which the students would have to use the target language either to read something that I had chosen in advance or write about a prescribed topic. These projects went well, and my students did what I had assigned, but I couldn't help feeling that they were not really motivated. I had not given them ownership of the language until I asked them to direct their own projects, choose what the projects were going to look like, and even help determine how they would be evaluated. By giving them the ability to make these kinds of creative decisions about how they wanted to use the language, we built better relationships based on trust and mutual respect. In addition, I found out just how much they wanted space to create—they were desperate for it. The language classroom is one of the places where our students can truly be creative. My students are a testament to that.

Q: You are known for teaching oral Latin in your classroom. Can you tell us more about why you find this to be an effective approach? What are your students gaining by learning to speak a language that is no longer spoken in any countries or cultures?

A: All Latinists at some point have had to justify what it is we choose to do. We teach Latin for many reasons, but we all share a number of common goals. As I have already stated, we want our students to learn how to think critically, write fluidly, argue thoughtfully, and we engage them with the ancient world so that they can think about their own in a new way. However, if we do not begin to embrace more of the lessons of modern second language acquisition, we will be left behind. Latin has often been differentiated from other languages as a result of our traditional practice. This is an unfortunate trend. If we reverse this, however, it will only strengthen Latin programs across the United States and allow us to advocate for ourselves as teachers and for our programs more effectively. The use of more spoken Latin is a tool both for our students in terms of their progress across

all the standards and for ourselves as advocates for what we do as Latinists and language teachers in general.

There are plenty of people out there who are better than I am at using spoken Latin in the classroom—I hold these colleagues like Bob Patrick, SCOLT 2013 Teacher of the Year, in the highest regard—but with practice I am always getting better. Some Latin teachers I know made the transition from a grammar-translation method to a more active and oral approach abruptly. I have made it slowly over the course of about 5 or 6 years. I would not describe my classes as immersion classes. However, when I can do something entirely in Latin (and think that I should), I do. For example, instead of explaining the accusative case, my students and I read, write, and discuss pictures with basic vocabulary in Latin. We do similar activities for grammatical concepts like the indirect statement, periphrastic constructions, or the passive voice, all of which I once did in a more traditional way but which I now allow my students to figure out intuitively. We are no longer learning a grammatical concept and then reading to reinforce it. Instead, we are reading, writing, speaking, and making meaning with the words that we either used or encountered. It seems simple, but in reality it is a fundamental shift in terms of what we do in class, how I structure an individual lesson, or even how I plan long-term goals. For example, when one student in first year Latin was asked by her grandfather to decline *agricola*, *agricolae* and she could not, he asked what in fact she was learning in Latin class. She then narrated for him in Latin the story of the chapter that we had just read without looking at any notes or vocabulary. He responded, “Oh, you're actually learning the language!”

In my first few years of teaching at Westwood, before I began making the transition to more active methods which emphasized writing and speaking, there were always a few students who graduated from Latin IV but did not perform well on college placement examinations for Latin (despite being inspired to continue their study of classics) and they would be asked to retake Latin I. Since that time, even students who would recognize themselves as good but not great at the language have routinely placed out of their college language requirement, regardless of where they land. This means that the active methods have had a direct impact on my students' ability to read and comprehend unfamiliar passages. By making fluency with Latin writing, rather than exclusively reading, one my principal goals for my students, they now demonstrate greater aptitude with interpretive reading long after they leave our program, as well as greater retention of linguistic structures.

The students I have taught with active methods are on the whole far better at Latin than my students who were not, and more of these students are continuing to study

Latin, Greek, and the classical world in higher education as a result. Over the course of my career, I've met hundreds, possibly thousands, of people who have told me about their own experience at learning Latin. If the person loved Latin, it was because of his or her teacher; if the person hated Latin, it was because of his or her teacher. There is no single formula for good Latin instruction. I respect the opinions of others who believe that active and spoken Latin is not the best method. Indeed, I do not think that my class will ever be an immersion one like that of my modern language colleagues. Even I sometimes struggle with why I might teach Latin words for shirt, dress, tie, or modern food words like blueberry or tomato. But when I do, it's because my students have asked about it. What does that tell me? That they want to speak!

Ever since I've tried to speak more and develop ways in which my students manipulate Latin using Latin, I do less reteaching of grammar, and my students and I have more time to talk about the good stuff—because they comprehend the Latin behind it. More importantly, whenever cornered by someone who challenges the value of language education, especially Latin, on the grounds that the language is not spoken, I can say, “As a matter of fact, I speak Latin with my students every day.”

I have dedicated my professional life to learning and teaching everything that I can about a language that is no longer commonly spoken and one that has no living native population of speakers. I do this because I am passionate not only about the ancient Mediterranean world, Latin, and Greek—but I am also passionate about the study of language itself for all of the unexpected benefits that it can give our students. Language is not merely part of culture. Language is culture. Intercultural competency is not just for the modern languages. If we really want to be able to understand the ancient world from the perspective of someone living in it, language is the key to that understanding.

Q: We all hear of language programs being cut due to enrollment or the need to add a new languages important for the economy or defense. What challenges do you see as programs struggle to provide a diversity of languages in institutions at all levels—and what advice would you offer in the face of such challenges?

A: As language teachers, we need to be as passionate about advocating for what we do as we are passionate about our teaching itself. We know that language programs are being threatened not just by low enrollment but by the low value that many people place on learning languages to begin with. At what point are we, as classroom teachers, going to do

what we can not only to build strong programs but also to build school environments in which the absence of language learning is unthinkable? To anyone who states that language education is not worth the cost that it bears, I ask that person to think about the much higher cost that we will pay in the future for not knowing multiple languages. Bilingualism is not merely a 21st century skill, it is **the** 21st century skill.

What frustrates me most about our struggle to sustain and grow language programming across the United States is the fact that students want more opportunities to learn languages and yet districts are hesitant to offer them in the face of overwhelming need. Moreover, we know that we are facing a critical gap in language learning, and on the national level—despite the fact that support for language education tends to be bipartisan—change is happening too slowly. Some important statistics came out of a 2015 joint study from ACTFL and MyCollegeOptions®. Almost 70,000 high school students were questioned on the value of language learning. Eighty-nine percent believed that they will use the languages they are learning in some capacity after high school, and 82% believed that language study would be important for their job prospects in the future. The numbers are remarkable. Moreover, of the same group surveyed, 80% indicated that they wished they had begun language learning earlier.

When we think about the 21st century workplace, multilingualism will be an exponentially more valuable skill in the next generation than it has been in the past. According to Career Builder, 46% of U.S. businesses said bilingualism was a desirable qualification in the hiring process in 2014, up 10% from 2011. Less than 10% of DoD (Department of Defense) military service personnel speak a language other than English, a quarter of the State Department's language designated positions were not adequately staffed in 2012 and, as of 2009, only 13% of the CIA's personnel knew a language other than English. This is unacceptable. We know about the need for increased language programming; we now need to find the will within individual communities to bring about this change.

Our collective voices can be powerful. We all have stories about how our own students have gone on to use languages beyond the classroom—these are stories that we need to share, we need to share them now, even with people who may at first be reluctant to listen. We, as individual language teachers, need to build and guide a movement about bringing the value of learning languages to the forefront of the educational discourse in this country. And if we have to change the minds and perceptions of what we do and teach one student at a time, one class at a time, one district at a time, then I believe we are up to the task.