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Experiencing Another Language

by

Mary McDonnell Harris

As a first assignment in a class on first and second language development, I asked students to spend two hours listening to a language they did not know and then to write a paper detailing their reactions to the experience. Students responded to this challenge in different ways. Some visited students or friends whose home languages were not English. Some attended language classes. Some watched foreign language videos. And some listened to audiotapes in another language.

Their experiences were remarkably similar in some ways. All reported initial excitement and enthusiasm later replaced by frustration, boredom, self-doubt, and alienation. All left this experience with new sympathy for persons who find themselves in a new culture or language setting.

Reactions among the observers differed, however, with the visual cues available and the familiarity of the rituals or activities being performed. Audiotape listeners gained almost no meaning from this experience unless there were accompanying picture books. Videotape watchers found themselves thrilled by an occasional English phrase or a scene that offered cues that seemed culturally familiar, although often they were misled. Observers of language classes came to appreciate the potential of this approach if the class were developmentally appropriate and provided for student involvement. Home visitors had the easiest time, but even this experience offered peaks and valleys as family activities changed and conversations were refocused.

The four brief papers that follow offer a comparison of student reactions to the experiences of visiting a family whose language and original culture was unfamiliar and of visiting a class in an unknown language. In the first paper, Keith Radke, an ESL tutor in the Fargo, ND, public schools and teacher of German, visits the family of a Kurdish friend. In the second, Alicia D. Y. Bata, a Spanish teacher in Cavalier, ND, visits a Pakistani family. The third paper focuses on the visit of Fargo ESL teacher, Lisa Gruber, to a French class at North Dakota State University in Fargo. The fourth paper recounts the Lakota learning experiences of Alan Beaudrie while living and teaching in Ft. Yates, ND. Each paper describes an experience and offers reflections on implications of the experience for teachers and learners.