

Personal Statement

By Galadriel Friese

I know from personal experience that learning a new language is a challenging endeavor. It took an enthusiastic attitude and hard work, but I learned Spanish and am now fluent. However, when I tried to learn Japanese, I wasn't so successful. While I dedicated myself to teaching students how to speak English while living in Tokyo, I floundered in my own efforts to learn Japanese. It made me think about what had worked when I studied Spanish. So I began to contemplate the differences in language acquisition because I knew that through my reflections as a learner I could become a better teacher. I believe that a teacher's compassion for students and creating a safe, welcoming environment play an important role in language acquisition.

As an ESOL teacher, I see firsthand the challenges my students face as they enter an unfamiliar public school system. They feel the pressure to assimilate into a strange, foreign society. They are disconnected from their family and are uprooted from their native cultures and homes. Most of them live in poverty.

Every day I witness and celebrate my students' victories, like the first time they finish reading an English language book or chat with a native English-speaking classmate in the hallways. When I hear my students sing along to their favorite English song, use slang like, "That's dope," or say, "It's raining cats and dogs," to describe a rainy day, I know they are growing more comfortable and more proficient in their new tongue.

As teachers we have the power within us to motivate, nurture and inspire our students. Teaching is about sparking a student's desire to become a lifelong learner and to believe that their most unique attributes are what will help them achieve. Teachers must convey to each student that they have a gift, whether it is an artistic talent or a brilliant mind. Students need to hear it from their teachers so that they can believe in themselves.

Last year, a young Congolese boy joined my class toward the end of the school year, and I soon discovered that he was illiterate in French and had been sent to a "reform" school in Gabon. We practiced the alphabet every day, read stories, worked with the My Reading Coach program, learned new vocabulary words and communicated through gestures and with the help of a French-English dictionary. Despite his blinding smile, his confidence waned with every attempt to write the alphabet or spell a new word.

I could see his frustration building. This determined young boy attended class every day, but he would often storm out, exasperated by his inability to ask for help or communicate with a classmate.

But he and I persisted. And when he started the next school year, he exhibited a newfound comfort in the daily agenda of academics. He volunteered to be my scribe even though he had to be coached as he spelled each word. He was the first to greet any new students and always started by asking, "What's your name?" He showed his classmates how to log on to the computer and how to respond to the quizzes in My Reading Coach. He was the first to volunteer to perform a skit he had practiced and perfected with his classmate. He was the loudest voice heard in choral responses. He came from an injured past to triumph in a new world and taught me that success is a gradual transformation of one's communication skills into a comfortable cultural ambassador of dialect and community. He went from speaking French and using gestures to communicating in English. Although he has yet to reach a proficient level of fluency he now demonstrates a level of comfort in his expressions. In essence he is one of my greatest success stories and the reason I am proud to be an ESOL teacher.