

My Language Story

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My language journey began when I was a young child, confronted with a television set for the first time and watching an American series called '*Bonanza*'. I had no idea what the characters were talking about, but I remember being completely fascinated and thinking that when I go to school I will learn to speak just like them.

It later transpired that the language was English, and at that time in Mauritius, my country of birth, the medium of education was always French. I was not unfamiliar with a range of other languages or dialects during my formative years. Learning English however, was just learning words, then phrases from books then passages. We could read but we could not communicate in English.

Forward to 1970, now living in the UK and I am still not speaking English. I start secondary school and to my utter joy, I am given a 'buddy' who not only speaks French but she is from the same island. She is well established, with many years behind her as an EAL learner. So culturally, I am matched with a now lifelong friend.

It also turns out that our French teacher is also our form tutor. To this day, I still cannot believe my good fortune for such an amazing start in a new school, in a new country. This teacher is my hero, and I am forever grateful. For it was he, who brought home to me that my ability to speak French was not a barrier to the rest of my education, in this English speaking-country, but an asset. A year later when my family moves from West London to North London, I experience many challenges as I continue to learn English while I explore the curriculum, but conversely, that initial contact with that one amazing English teacher who teaches French, had set my heart on fire about both language learning and teaching.

We are now in 1979, I start my first MFL teaching post in a secondary school in North London, and I find myself in a position to support my students to do exchanges in both France and Spain. It is a dream come true. I am not only doing what I love doing, but my learning of languages continues and so do my intercultural interactions with amazing colleagues.

Joining a language service in one of the London boroughs in the early 90's, to work with refugee pupils predominantly from Kurdistan, becomes another amazing extension from my love affair with languages into another branch of language learning for bilingual, and second, or additional language learners. This leads to me embarking on a masters degree in Applied Linguistics where the concept of language theories blows my mind. Suddenly I can pin my ideas of language learning on a well-researched and legitimate foundation.

By the middle of 2000s, after ten years in a central London primary school, I am at UCL, Institute of Education, at first supervising student teachers on their Spring Placement in Paris. Working in various schools in Paris, I meet a range of colleagues, some of them now dear friends. Then I am engaged in training primary PGCE students to teach French in primary schools. At a particular point during this period, I also embark on an Italian language-learning journey, which remains incomplete due to Covid-19.

My language journey looks deliberate and planned, but far from it. It is the inspiration of language teachers and colleagues I met on the way, which guided my path truly to appreciate the social value of language, and its power to enhance lives.

Unlike the French writer Gustave Flaubert's inspiration, for '*le mot juste*', I am not so much looking for the exact word in any of the languages that I speak. Rather I am in pursuit of the commonality of languages all around me, for I sincerely believe that therein lies the secret of relating to others, in order to create a semblance of peace in the world.