Able to Go Deeper

“You can never understand one language until you understand at least two,” said Geoffrey Willans. If I had not learned a second language, I would never have understood this paradoxical statement. The truth is, I really was able to go deeper within my first language—English—as I learned Spanish as a second language in high school under Ms. Hokama, a Japanese woman who grew up in Argentina. Thinking back on my second-language learning experience holistically, that was probably the greatest reward. It was a very successful and enriching experience mainly because my teacher always helped to achieve balance in the classroom, showed a genuine enthusiasm for our learning, and provided an authentic learning environment by using an integrated-skill approach.

A balance of various teaching styles always kept me and my classmates engaged and active in my high school Spanish class of 1999. With immaculate handwriting and an efficient color-coding system, my teacher, Ms. Hokama, provided clear, succinct notes for every new concept. She explained her notes thoroughly and assigned exercises for reinforcement. It was always a huge relief for us because we knew precisely what we had learned and what was expected on our exams. In addition to being a topnotch explainer, she also required a diligent level of participation from us. Activities such as watching short clips and answering questions orally, role-playing, group work, and writing were packed in each class. The level of the material was slightly challenging, but always interesting. I believe that this cultivated a healthy sense of motivation in our learning attitudes, which really served us well throughout the school year. There were also times when she played the enabler role with us. For instance, she would assign each of us a new concept along with her notes, and we would teach the material to the class. It really amazed me as to how much knowledge I was able to retain once I knew I was responsible for educating my classmates. In these ways, Ms.Hokama truly instilled in us a stronger desire to take ownership of our learning.

It was always a pleasure to accomplish anything well in Ms. Hokama’s class because she treasured our moments of enlightenment. A very helpful way in which she did this was providing rewards. She would give us a ticket for every perfect score on a homework assignment, in-class exercise, or to the winning team of the language game of the day. We could accumulate the tickets and acquire extra credit by turning in a specific number of tickets. She would also give tickets for turning in projects early and taking on extra projects. This practice made it so that the students who were enthusiastic about their Spanish learning never really had to worry about their class grade. Thus, their minds were at ease to learn even better. She always made herself very accessible to struggling students, so they freely approached her for extra assistance. In this way, Ms. Hokama made sure that she was meeting all of our class needs. Her sincere interest in her students made Spanish class a period to look forward to.

Ms. Hokama always integrated a variety of listening, reading, writing, and speaking activities in her class instruction. These activities enabled us to think about the language and process information in many different ways. For example, when we watched short clips of casual conversation between Spanish speakers and assigned to create our own, we drew from our previous experiences and prior knowledge of casual conversation in our first language (in addition to what we learned in class, of course). When we listened to various audio passages or songs in Spanish, we also recalled the themes of such materials in our first-language culture to guide our responses as well. Through reading activities and assignments, we were able to develop comprehension skills and summarizing skills. These skills were further stretched during writing activities, in which elements such as grammar and mechanics took the spotlight. The implementation of this approach created an energetic atmosphere in the classroom which we always appreciated.

I feel that a successful experience in second language learning creates a lasting impact in one’s attitude towards new languages and cultures. Because Ms. Hokama taught me with effective methods and did so zealously, I will always have a very positive view towards learning new languages and cultures. By balancing various teaching styles, teaching passionately, and integrating various language skills in her teaching, she truly broadened our knowledge and perceptions of language learning. Instilling a positive desire to learn more is by far one of the greatest things a teacher can do for his or her students. As an educator myself, I hope that I can steer students in this direction as well.