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**We Teach Languages Episode 121: Collaborating to Build a Content‑based Language Program with Gwen Barnes‑Karol and Maggie Broner, Part I**

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**Stacey Johnson**:  [00:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspective of teachers. I'm Stacey Johnson.

[00:13] Today you will hear part one of my conversation with Dr. Gwen Barnes‑Karol and Dr. Maggie Broner about how they have collaborated for more than 20 years to build a language program that dethrones the grammar syllabus and instead teaches students to do college‑level textual analysis, provide evidence for their assertions, and express themselves using academic language from the beginning.

[00:42] I first heard Maggie and Gwen present at an AATSP conference back in 2014. It was such an impactful experience for me, that this past summer in San Diego at the 2019 AATSP conference ‑‑ that's the American Association of Teachers of Spanish and Portuguese, by the way ‑‑ when I saw that Maggie and Gwen were going to present on learner language, there was no doubt in my mind that I needed to be at that session.

[01:12] It was as great as I expected. I learned a lot. After their session, Maggie and Gwen generously agreed to sit down with me to talk a little bit about their program, their approach, talk about some of the successes they've had, and maybe how others might be able to have them as well.

[01:35] There might be some listeners right now who are wondering if their program can improve. Maybe you're wondering if it's possible to teach with content goals in mind rather than language goals.

[01:50] What Maggie and Gwen are here today to tell you that not only can you do that, but here's how.

[01:58] [music]

**Dr. Gwen Barnes‑Karol**:  [01:58] I'm Gwen Barnes‑Karol. I'm a professor of Spanish at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota.

**Dr. Maggie Broner**:  [02:09] I'm Maggie Broner. I'm a professor of Spanish at St. Olaf College, too.

**Stacey**:  [02:13] Awesome. How long have you guys been working together?

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [02:17] Working together since...

**Dr. Broner**:  [02:18] Together, 21 years.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [02:19] Yes.

**Stacey**:  [02:20] Wow.

**Dr. Broner**:  [02:20] Since 1997. It's a long time.

**Stacey**:  [02:18] You still speak and are civil to each other.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [02:24] Yes.

**Dr. Broner**:  [02:25] We are.

**Stacey**:  [02:24] That's really impressive. [laughs]

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [02:26] I have been at St. Olaf 10 years longer than Maggie. I was just waiting for her to come.

**Stacey**:  [02:33] [laughs]

**Dr. Broner**:  [02:33] I actually applied only to the position at St. Olaf because I knew that they were doing content‑based and they had foreign languages across the curriculum, that's what I wanted to do. That's how I ended up there.

**Stacey**:  [02:44] That's awesome.

**Dr. Broner**:  [02:44] We really looked for and found each other. It's been a wonderful...

**Stacey**:  [02:47] Is your background language acquisition?

**Dr. Broner**:  [02:49] My background is sociolinguistics and second language acquisition. My dissertation was in second language acquisition. My advisors were Elaine Tarone and Carol Klee.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [02:59] My background is primarily literature, but my PhD minor was second languages and cultures education at the University of Minnesota. I worked with [indecipherable] .

**Stacey**:  [03:09] Wow. [laughs]

**Dr. Broner**:  [03:09] One of the things that has been really wonderful for both of us is that we started this unending dialogue that started 21 years ago. It is this idea of how a literature person and a SLA person can work and learn from each other. What you saw today in the presentation, in a way, is a product of all these years of working together and thinking about what do I know, what do you know, and how do we learn together.

**Stacey**:  [03:40] How does it work together. This is probably a good time to mention that I stalked you after I watched your presentation at AATSP. [laughs] I thought maybe it would be a great thing to share with other people. Would you give us a little overview of what your presentation was on today?

**Dr. Broner**:  [03:54] We have done many presentations about the work that we do at St. Olaf. St. Olaf is a small liberal arts college and it's a teaching focus institution. We have a mission that hopes to develop globally engaged citizens. We do have a language department [indecipherable] fourth semester.

[04:16] The presentation today was looking at learner data, basically the internal language, the language that is unrehearsed, that students produce in a third semester Spanish course that is a content‑based course

**Stacey**:  [04:29] Can you tell me, what do you mean by content‑based?

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [04:33] Obviously, we're working on language, but the focus of the course is not a traditional focus on grammar, which tends to be the underlying notion in most foreign language programs. Even those who talk about being communicative or task‑based, or other words.

[04:53] Basically most language programs are built around a grammatical sequence. Students will be doing communicative activities, all kinds of different tasks. In most cases, those are done to help practice grammar.

[05:09] We obviously need grammar. We need grammar to communicate ideas, but we flipped the priorities. Students are still learning grammar. They're learning language. They're learning to read, to write, to listen, to speak, but to learn new information through Spanish.

[05:30] They're learning content through their Spanish. They're developing linguistically as they acquire content that, in our case, we hope is as interesting and as compelling as the content they're learning in other introductory college‑level classes.

**Dr. Broner**:  [05:46] This is something that relates more to Gwen's earlier story. St. Olaf College was, I think, the first program that had foreign languages across the curriculum program, where first people who don't know what that is, these are students taking courses, content courses in English, for example, in political science and religion and philosophy. Then there's some sort of component in a foreign language.

[06:11] Given those experiences, seeing what students who had only finished the foreign language requirement that for us is the fourth semester, what they could do with that kind of intermediate language in processing really difficult texts and talking about those texts inspired us to say, "Well, why can't we do it?"

[06:36] We also have to rethink about we're doing language at the college level. I think that you could argue this even for high school too, is that, why are we always starting with the book or the method that is out there that is the latest thing and not think about, "Well, wait a minute. We have college students."

[06:56] We started asking ourselves a different set of questions to start out and say, "Well, what does a liberally educated adult ‑‑ young adult ‑‑ need to know about the Spanish‑speaking world and the language to talk about that Spanish‑speaking world?"

[07:11] The minute that you do that, you start thinking about what you do in the language classroom in different way. You're going to need different types of content and vocabulary. You're still going to give them vocabulary. It's just going to be different one.

[07:24] You're going to think about different ways of engaging evidence. College is all about evidence. It's how do we look for evidence? How do we process evidence? How do we analyze evidence? How do we talk about evidence?

[07:36] Those are the kinds of things that have really impacted the way that we do Spanish now. Did we do it all in one day? No. It was a very long process that we started with baby steps, but those are basically the underlying ideas.

**Stacey**:  [07:52] When did you start the process?

**Dr. Broner**:  [07:53] '93.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [07:54] '93.

**Dr. Broner**:  [07:56] Before I came.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [07:59] We had received a large NEH grant to create a very comprehensive foreign languages across the curriculum program. We weren't the first ones. We had one of the early grants to create a big systematic program. That started in the fall of '89. I was involved in that very first group of faculty developing the very first courses. I had that flack experience.

[08:26] After that, as Maggie said, I started thinking...At that time in Spanish we were doing a communicative...

**Dr. Broner**:  [08:34] Task‑based.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [08:35] approach with...We were working on a lot of inputs and listening. It was still basically focusing on the grammar but doing a lot of things with it communicatively.

**Stacey**:  [08:46] I've heard you say that several times, the idea that certain types of language goals...

**Dr. Broner**:  [08:53] Function.

**Stacey**:  [08:54] language functions are the central goal of the classroom, and all the activities we do lead to those goals.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [08:57] Yes.

**Dr. Broner**:  [08:57] Right.

**Stacey**:  [08:58] is a communicative approach and a lot of people are just now figuring out how to do that. You're saying, "No, no, no, the language goals, we're taking those off the table, making them secondary, and teaching them certain thinking skills and certain content knowledge is the primary focus."

**Dr. Broner**:  [09:15] The content was the leader. Once you have the content, you say, in order to process this content that all of a sudden, it wasn't just about how do you vacuum the floor, what do you have in your refrigerator, but it was about immigration in the Spanish‑speaking world, for example, then you're going to need a different type of vocabulary, and specific language functions.

[09:38] You're still doing language...

[09:39] [crosstalk]

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [09:40] We're still doing communication. The whole idea of a communicative classroom, what's happened over the years of the decades is it's become very reductionist.

[09:50] We thought of communication, the daily life functions of, say, the intermediate level, whereas we're communicating but we're communicating actually at the "intermediate" level of construction in a curricular sequence using functions and topics that are much more closely aligned with the ACTFL guidelines at the advanced level.

[10:12] We're doing advanced‑level functions and topics, but with students who are, in proficiency terms, at the intermediate level.

**Stacey**:  [10:22] Intermediate low. Right?

**Dr. Broner**:  [10:23] When they start out, yes, it's intermediate low.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [10:26] Actually, the whole idea of the communicative approach means communication of topics from daily life to much more sophisticated ones, but it's become very reduced in most textbooks, and so we need to clarify that...

**Dr. Broner**:  [10:44] I think we need to reclaim the original intent of what a communicative approach was, because in the beginning it was communicative approach that encompassed the functions that you would see up to the superior level and the content.

[10:59] It's just like Gwen said. Over the years it has been translated into a much more reduced, self [indecipherable] , in many ways, curriculum that, when you take out the fancy clothing, it's really a grammatical syllabus. I think that that is where...

[11:19] We're still hung up on that. We're still using the red marker, even though all the data from second language acquisition, and that's where the research comes in that doesn't transpire into textbooks, is that we know that interlanguage, learner language, is going to develop at a different rate.

[11:39] Like Corder said in the 1960s, input is not equal to intake. What you teach the student is not what they will have acquired. There's still a lot of mystery or misunderstanding about that, but we're still hoping that the students are going to acquire the full grammatical syllabus in a very short period of time, when you can teach it, you can practice it, but that's all explicit knowledge. It's not implicit.

[12:09] The minute they go out that door, they leave the classroom, they're going to show you what they can actually do with what they have acquired, and there's a mismatch between what the textbooks say about that, what they can do, and what students can actually do.

**Stacey**:  [12:24] I'm sorry.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [12:25] Yeah. To go back to the history.

**Stacey**:  [12:25] To go back to what you were saying, you guys are redressing all of this. Back in the '90s.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [12:29] Yeah. Actually, I can speak about my own personal experience. My first foreign languages across the curriculum experience was working with a colleague in religion. This was a course we did in Mexico. We have a J‑Term.

[12:47] This was a course on liberation theology. I'm with her. She's doing the course in English. I'm doing the Spanish‑language subset ‑‑ pull a group of students out, and they discuss materials written in the language and the discussions in the language.

[13:03] We're on site in Mexico, so we have the whole context of visits to base communities. I'm working with students at, say, the intermediate level of proficiency, and we're reading things about liberation theology, but we're reading accessible texts, things that would have been used with semi‑literate people, explaining what liberation theology is.

[13:25] We're talking about that, and talking about ideas. I'm doing that, and then I come back to campus. Third‑semester Spanish at that point, which I had not taught, was a grammar review.

[13:36] I'm thinking, "I can't do that. There's something that's so way off."

**Stacey**:  [13:42] The cognitive dissonance of the two experiences.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [13:43] I can't deal with students who are similar to those I just had in Mexico," it wasn't just the context, "and just do a grammar review with, 'OK, we've got preterites. Tell me about the most important experience you had in high school, or what was your favorite...'"

[13:58] That's important. That's not, not important. But that, they've already done it in first year. Of course we can have them create longer narratives with more details, but there's something amiss.

[14:16] I got permission from my chair to do an experimental third‑semester course. We were starting to make a change in the department, and we were thinking, "Yeah. OK. We have to have a cultural framework."

[14:29] We were using some materials, had a cultural reader and then a grammar book and an activities book, and using that. It was three of us working together. We taught a year doing those, and I'm still thinking, "This just doesn't jive," because what was driving was still the grammatical syllabus.

[14:49] We'd had the preterite and imperfect here, only one chapter, then we have this cultural thing, and then we've never come back to the preterite. I personally didn't like the cultural topic, connect with preterite and imperfect in how can you use that chapter of the grammar that's the most important one.

[15:05] I asked them permission to do an experimental course the following year, and I got permission. What I did was just take the cultural book, get rid of the language. I thought, "If I've got cultural readings, I can create language use activities based on those cultural readings and have it more coordinated to that."

[15:23] Then I thought, "I'm going to rearrange the chapters and get rid of the ones I don't like, take the topics I like, and change the order. Then I'll scaffold the language use." Over a period of years, before Maggie came, I keep thinking, "OK. What are we doing FLAC?

[15:39] The students in the English course read something in English, discuss it in English, with the professor teaching through English, so they have all this content knowledge. Then we read something in Spanish that's coordinated, a primary document, and they have all this previous knowledge from the course in English.

[15:54] Then I can take the document that looks too difficult because of the linguistic features and because the content, but the content is now familiar, we've got a context, and we can do exciting things.

[16:07] OK. What am I going to do? I'm working with primary documents in FLAC. I'm going to start using primary documents, authentic sources. Then I started using the chapters in the culture book as my base content, and then I brought in authentic materials.

[16:23] That before the Internet. I was looking in magazines...

**Dr. Broner**:  [16:25] Magazines and newspapers.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [16:26] getting whatever I could, and then writing...

**Stacey**:  [16:29] Coming back from Spain with a suitcase full of documents. Yeah. [laughs]

**Dr. Broner**:  [16:30] Exactly.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [16:31] Anything..."Oh, can I borrow that to photocopy?" I was using a cultural book as the background, then specific articles, authentic materials, then wrapping the grammar and the language around it, and then Maggie appeared four years later.

**Dr. Broner**:  [16:47] [laughs] Very briefly, I was coming from...Just finished my PhD, and I looked at immersion settings. That is all about content, and the students can do amazing things. It is true that students still have features of fossilization in their interlanguage.

[17:04] This is immersion speech, something that people in that era talk about all the time, but there's no question that these students can talk about. They can do all of their elementary school in Spanish and doing very, very well.

[17:20] I was already coming from, "Yeah, the students can do it." When we start to collaborate, it was one of the reasons why I wanted to go to St. Olaf. It was because they were doing this kind of thing.

[17:31] When we start working together, basically, we took what Gwen had already started and started to think about this not just as this reader and these isolated topics, but to give it more of an overarching theme and make the course start to have a real cohesiveness to it.

[17:54] Where, if you look at what we have now, we have materials that they're basically an in‑house textbook. The course has gone through several iterations. I think the last one is "The Spanish‑Speaking World in a Globalized..."

[18:05] Dr. Barnes‑Karol : "The US and the Spanish‑Speaking World in a Global World" is the title of the course. It's no longer intermediate...

[18:09] [crosstalk]

**Dr. Broner**:  [18:09] No. That was already a big win.

**Stacey**:  [18:15] I'm imagining someone who has taught in liberal arts colleges.

**Dr. Broner**:  [18:18] Yes.

**Stacey**:  [18:19] Traditionally, the sequence has been maybe three or four semesters of communicative, self‑referential sort of courses and then maybe an intro to grammar and then an intro to composition, and then you start literature courses.

[18:33] What you're saying is...Actually, we haven't talked about what you've done with the first year. I don't know what your first year's like, but starting in the third semester, they're learning that background content that they need in order to make sense of film and literature and other types of resources they're going to need in order to study in the major.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [18:54] Exactly.

**Dr. Broner**:  [18:55] Right. Right.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [18:56] Exactly. Yes. We have an in‑house placement test. Most of our students start at the third‑semester level, go on to fourth semester. If they continue on, yeah, we're teaching them the academic language. We're doing textual analysis. We don't call it that, but we say, "Oh, we're analyzing data we have," or "We're looking at these article...whatever."

[19:12] We're teaching textual analysis, but we're not calling it that. We're doing the functions that they're going to be doing at upper levels with other texts, but we're just introducing them. We don't have a bridge course.

**Dr. Broner**:  [19:27] No.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [19:28] We don't have a grammar review. Upper levels, we work with language.

**Dr. Broner**:  [19:35] Grammar.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [19:35] The students still need to work, but we look at it in a discursively appropriate context.

[19:41] Not that it doesn't have so many bumps, but we've tried to make it a smoother incline, and our students just...After a couple semesters, they say, "Oh, well, all the courses are like, 'They all have authentic material. They all have a whole bunch of things that our professors wrote. Yeah, you're going to read something literary. You're going to do this.'"

[20:06] They have the idea that there's a method...

**Dr. Broner**:  [20:07] This is not what they're...

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [20:09] or approach, and they get the approach. They get the approach.

**Dr. Broner**:  [20:11] They know that they need to use evidence ‑‑ that it's not just their ideas. I think that one thing that it's important to really mention is that as we think about foreign languages in general, really, most of our students, if they take languages, they're not going to continue as majors.

[20:27] For us, it's really important to give them a really significant experience by the end of that fourth semester. Because most of our students start in this third semester, this is where we can really hook them and say, "Look. Welcome to college. Welcome to college Spanish at a college level. What do you do in a college course?"

[20:52] That's why you in a way need to think about not just the teacher expectations and think about our students in different ways, about what they can do linguistically, but also, think about how you have to change the students' mindsets ‑‑ that they need to see themselves as students who are literate in their first language.

[21:11] They're in college, so they have acquired academic language in English. They are interested, hopefully, in learning interesting material. They don't know that yet.

[21:22] It is true that there's some research of what the students expect and what they want ‑‑ there's some kind of interesting research that came out a few years ago ‑‑ but the reality is that it's not just about teaching them the content.

[21:35] It's not just about wrapping the functions in the language, but it's also about the opportunity of transitioning students into what it is to be a college student, and we do it in Spanish.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [21:49] We do it in Spanish.

**Dr. Broner**:  [21:48] We do it in Spanish.

**Dr. Barnes‑Karol**:  [21:50] We try to do it empowering students. We want them, if they don't go beyond the language requirement, we want them, at the end, after the fourth semester, but even at the end of the third‑semester course that's the focus of our comments here, we want them to realize what they can do with the language instead of what they can't.

[22:11] Because most of our students come, and on the first day, I say, "What kinds of activities did you do in your previous classes?" It's always fill in the blanks, vocabulary exams, skits, verb conjugations. Maybe we made a video. It's a lot of grammatical precision, seeing how accurate their grammar is.

[22:36] I always ask my students to fill out an information sheet that's confidential for me to give me some ideas about their background. The discourse among students is, "Oh gosh. I just am so bad at grammar. I still can't conjugate these verbs," or "Oh, I made so many mistakes," or "I'm so dumb." There's a lot of "I can't do this."

[23:00] In focusing on content, you can learn content, or help you bring the grammar along, but we want them to see what they can be successful at, and not see what they're "bad at," quote‑unquote.

[23:15] We were talking about in our presentation how much of our teacher talk is about, you know, "They still don't have [indecipherable] ," or "They don't remember preterite/imperfect. My goodness, how am I going to have 'em read this? They can't master the preterite/imperfect." We have such a discourse of students as deficient language learners, which really means deficient in grammar.

**Dr. Broner**:  [23:38] Yeah, and that's where, again, we have really introduced in a very baby‑steps approach these ideas of multi‑competency and to see themselves not as deficient L2 users, but actually as multicompetent L2 users.

[23:52] These are ideas that come from Vivian Cook and from Virginia Scott. We teach the students some SLA notions, and that's what the presentation that we were doing today was about ‑‑ about empowering students looking at their own language learning and to make sense of it, but bringing them along into the processes that are involved in learning this language.

**Stacey**:  [24:19] We would love to hear your feedback on this episode. You can find us on Twitter or Facebook at @weteachlang, or you can leave a comment on the episode page on our website at weteachlang.com.

[24:36] We would like to say a special thank you to the Pearll Foreign Language Resource Center for partnering with us to provide transcripts and other professional development resources related to the episodes. You can learn more about Pearll by going to pearll.nflc.umd.edu. Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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