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**We Teach Languages Episode 42 (rerun): Choosing Critical Cultural Content over Grammar with Daniel Woolsey**

**Stacey Margarita Johnson**:  [00:00] This summer, the "We Teach Languages" podcast team is taking a few weeks off from producing new episodes to remind you of some of our greatest hits. The episode you're about to hear is a rerun from the first year of the podcast.

[00:15] If you're new to the podcast, this will give you a little taste of some of the great episodes you can find on our website at weteachlang.com.

[00:23] Now, on to our episode.

[00:25] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [00:30] This is We Teach Languages, a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of real teachers. I'm Stacey Margarita Johnson. Today, on Episode 42, Daniel Woolsey talks to us about choosing critical cultural content and ditching the grammar.

[00:54] I really love this episode. First, because we talk about something that's really important to me. I love the content. It's just exciting to listen to. Second, because Daniel Woolsey was a coworker and mentor of mine a few years back, I'm really excited to share his wisdom with a wider audience.

[01:14] This is a little bit of a longer episode, but I think you'll agree it's worth it. I can't wait to hear your feedback on the website, or on Twitter, or wherever.

[01:26] [music]

**Stacey**:  [01:26] I'm really excited to be here today with my old friend, Daniel Woolsey. Instead of introducing you, I'm just going to let you tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to be a Spanish instructor at a liberal arts college.

**Daniel Woolsey**:  [01:43] I appreciate you asking that. The reason I wanted to share background with your listeners is because I think that our backgrounds determine somewhat our interest levels and new approaches and this idea of critical pedagogy.

[02:00] I grew up overseas. My parents worked and lived in Santiago, Chile, for over 25 years. I grew up bilingual in Spanish. I will say honestly that I never wanted to be a Spanish teacher. I came back to the States. I went to college in a small college outside of Chicago. I was shocked. I went through the whole culture shock thing.

[02:22] I ended up majoring in French of all things. I majored in French because I loved the culture, the literature, and the history. I just was fascinated by that. When I finished college there, I actually had an opportunity to teach as a visiting instructor at that college. I've been a teacher assistant in Spanish, even though I hadn't taken any Spanish courses in college. I was able to TA. I was taking a leave of absence. I fell into teaching intermediate level Spanish, first semester.

[02:57] What I realized right away was my experiences in Chile, my experiences with French really had prepared me to be effective in the classroom, but also be passionate about opening students' perspectives to the worlds, bringing in my experiences from Chile growing up and trying to help former classmates also actually, broaden their horizons.

[03:25] Of course, the tension there is you have the traditional curriculum to cover, which was primarily grammar‑driven. I lived in this tension. I was really encouraged. I thought that all my experiences have come together, and I could be an effective Spanish teacher.

[03:44] Then I had the opportunity to go and do a doctoral program in language education in Indiana University ‑‑ I'll do a little plug there. One of the first classes I took was with James Lee, who worked closely with Bill VanPatten many years ago. It was so liberating, so refreshing.

[04:06] What he began to show us was, look, you can trust in a language acquisition process that requires input, requires careful task design, centers around communication. You can rely on that and not have to focus so heavily on grammar instruction and the intricacies of the systems and all that.

[04:31] In doing that, it frees you completely to be able to then bring in other content. That other content, for me, was, of course, the cultural component, the historical literary in the second year. That was really exciting. That, in my thinking, had informed my teaching from then on. Believe it or not, Stacey, I've been doing this for 20 years. This is my 20th year.

**Stacey**:  [04:57] [gasps]

**Daniel**:  [04:57] I know.

**Stacey**:  [04:59] Congratulations. That's a big milestone.

**Daniel**:  [04:59] Thank you. It is a big milestone. Really, my passion is that second year. I started teaching the second year 20 years ago. With very few exceptions, I've taught at that level for 20 years. I teach also Hispanic linguistics. I've taught teaching methods courses.

[05:23] I've taught first year, and then more advanced grammar and composition courses. My heart is in that second year and I hopefully have a fourth semester. That really is my bread and butter.

[05:38] Again, I keep teaching being informed by the SLA principles that I learned about at Indiana, and being able to incorporate the passion that I brought to teaching from Chile and my experiences there, and that cultural shock that I lived when I came back to the States and all that.

[05:57] I share that because I think there are many instructors out there who can identify with the passion for the culture and the literature and the history, but also may feel that tension between this is what I want to teach them but this is what I should be teaching them, which is the grammar and the structures and all that.

[06:15] I am here to say today, Stacey...

[06:17] [laughter]

**Daniel**:  [06:19] You can do the content that you want to do, and you can trust the acquisition process to take place. If there are any listeners out there encouraged by that, I want to encourage them in that way because there is just so much evidence right now that explicit grammar instruction doesn't lead to oral proficiency in the language.

[06:40] We have, in a sense, two decisions to make. The first decision you have to make as an instructor is "Do you believe the SLA research that's out there?" The data that's been collected, analyzed and has informed ideas about language acquisition. If you do, then that frees you to decide what your actual content is going to be.

[07:03] If you don't, instructors have to recognize, if you don't buy into that, then you are limiting yourself to content that is grammar. In a sense, by saying, "I can't buy into this, I don't feel comfortable with this," then you are automatically putting yourself in a position where you have to teach the grammar. That becomes your content.

[07:26] We just in October had a conference here. It would be a good resource for your listeners if they're interested. The title is "From Crisis Management to Innovation." If you google that title and Hope College, there's a whole web page with video recordings of the sessions from that.

[07:44] One of them was by Bill VanPatten. He basically shared that for just the middle ages...This wasn't pretty encouraging. I must admit. I told Bill, "This isn't pretty encouraging." Since the middle ages, this debate has been going on. Language has been taught either as the medium through which other content is delivered or it's taught as the content.

[08:10] We have to recognize that either we choose language as the content ‑‑ the grammar, the structures. We are creating little grammarians in our classrooms, or you have to decide and buy into the language acquisition theories and principles. But if you do that, then you can decide to teach other things. That's, to me, very exciting.

**Stacey**:  [08:35] That's really exciting. I had no idea. I knew that you guys had that conference, but I did not know that the sessions were available on video. I am going to go check those out. I'm going to also put a link to that in the show notes so that if people listen, they can just click right in.

**Daniel**:  [08:51] Good. That is a nice segue into a related topic. The topic of that conference was "From Crisis Management to Innovation." The question is what value does language instruction add to society as a whole, to our different institutions and their missional statements, to our students' aspirations and personal goals for their own education.

[09:22] I get passionate about this because I think if we look at what people want, our students, parents, administration, society, they don't want grammar experts. They want people who can I hope we have an objective and a mission about being global citizens.

[09:42] Our language department could lead the way in that, because we could incorporate that concept very easily if we move away from grammar instruction. There's, like you said, the critical pedagogy, critical issues, social justice. Those are very natural topics to bring to the classroom through language instruction if we can make room for them and get grammar and get ourselves out of the way.

[10:10] If you look at what students want, I hope we have many double majors in sciences, social sciences. We have very few...In fact, in my 13 years here, I don't think we've had a single student...I take that back. We've had one student go on to get a PhD in literature.

[10:29] Why are we teaching to that audience when we have so many students that are wanting to use Spanish in practical ways in their fields? They're wanting oral proficiency.

[10:42] The value that we can add to that is not just oral proficiency, but again, this critical pedagogy, cultural knowledge, cultural appreciation, ways to connect with the other in our communities. All of those are potentials that we can live into if we can get out of our own way, in a sense.

**Stacey**:  [11:02] Wow, you are just singing my tune right there. [laughs]

**Daniel**:  [11:07] Good, good. Good.

**Stacey**:  [11:08] One thing that I think about a lot is how many people have to take language courses. Like you said, your passion is the second year. My passion is really that first semester course.

[11:21] I'm thinking about how many students have to take our courses, or really are excited by language study and take even a little bit more than they have to, but they can't become majors for whatever reason, because they want to be scientists, or they want to work in an NGO.

[11:34] If those people in those lower levels are only learning linguistics, if they're only learning language patterns and language structures, then what we're doing is sending someone with linguistics training out into the field to communicate with real people. [laughs] That's not enough. It's just not a skill that's useful.

**Daniel**:  [11:56] Right. No, exactly right. I have students who are doing social work, so do they need to be able to explain the uses of the subjunctive to their clients?

**Stacey**:  [12:07] Right. [laughs]

**Daniel**:  [12:07] No, of course not, right? They want to be able to have knowledge. This is what my project with Lee Forester and others at Hope is as far as creating materials.

[12:21] We want to give students information, knowledge, in those first four semesters so that even if they don't continue in Spanish, and they don't have the linguistic proficiency to connect in Spanish with someone down the line, they will at least have knowledge about culture, about history, and be able to connect in a more authentic and real way in English.

[12:46] That, in my mind, serves that student better than insisting on grammar knowledge, because essentially, that's what we're talking about. We're not talking that, "Explain this adjunctive," doesn't translate into being able to speak using this adjunctive. There's very little evidence that that happens.

[13:06] What we're saying is when they can explain this adjunctive, that's the content that they come away with. That's the ability, and not the spoken language.

[13:15] The other thing that I think informs the materials that Lee and I are working with, and others, too...One of the presentations in the conference was by Simpson College. Definitely check that out, because they retooled, reworked their whole language department.

[13:33] One of the words that stood out for me from their presentation was persistence. They want students to persist in the language. If you think of the hours, thousands of hours, it takes to master a language, we have to recognize that we have to encourage students to persist, to continue.

[13:56] How do you do that? Some students are, obviously, not going to, but students come to college because they want to think about big ideas, right?

**Stacey**:  [14:05] Right.

**Daniel**:  [14:05] That's sort of the purpose. You come to college, you want your professor to challenge your thinking. Maybe you don't want to, but so consciously, you're thinking, "This is college. It should be challenging. My perspectives should be challenged, and my thinking should be sharpened." It just doesn't happen in the way we're teaching languages right now.

[14:27] Boy, I could go on and on. We talked about outside pressures, but there have been plenty of voices within our own field that have called for change.

[14:35] If I remember correctly, the MLA put out a white paper about the change needed of this two‑tiered approach where we do language instruction the first two years, and then we do the "content" later, and that they wanted more vertical integration. That was over 10 years ago, and the change has been so little.

[14:58] Actual proficiency guidelines. You look at the descriptors. There's very little about explaining this adjunctive. It's all about, what can you do in the language? Can you do these things? Can you use it in productive, meaningful, and creative ways?

**Stacey**:  [15:12] I'm going to actually shift the perspective just a little bit in the conversation, because I think in the traditional four‑year college model, the idea is to cram all the grammar into those first two years, and then maybe have a transitional course or two where they start to combine writing skills with grammar and speaking skill with grammar. [laughs]

[15:32] Then they only get literature from then on, which as you've just explained really clearly, does not line up with what we know about SLA. It doesn't line up with the external pressures to educate students. It doesn't expand their world view. There's a lot of problems with that.

**Daniel**:  [15:47] Yeah, yeah.

**Stacey**:  [15:48] The other thing I sometimes see that I wonder if you can speak to is people who really buy into SLA literature. They've read about the value of comprehensible input, and they understand how the acquisition process works, so they leave out all authentic texts in an effort to keep the language as simple and comprehensible as possible in those early stages. I wonder what you think about that.

**Daniel**:  [16:15] That's a good question. The SLA process is incredibly complex. The whole point of it, in my mind, is that you create the environment, you create the tasks, you give them reading assignments that will ensure that the SLA process takes place.

[16:32] If anything, the whole idea is that the instructor should have less control than more control. The task of the instructor is to make sure that they're getting the input that they need, and that they're trying to express themselves in authentic, creative ways, meaningful ways.

[16:51] I think that if you're trying to control the input too much, it's, again, putting the focus on you. It's putting the heavy lifting on your shoulders as an instructor, and I don't think it's needed.

[17:03] I will go further and say this. [inaudible] languages, to me, has to be an interdisciplinary project. On the one hand, I think those of us in SLA and language instruction, we get frustrated with the literary types, because they don't buy into the social science of this, and rightfully so, I might add. No.

[17:30] [laughter]

**Daniel**:  [17:30] I think both have to have a seat at the table. What I see, and what I think you have mentioned before to me is that the people in SLA bring all the greatest techniques, great methods, great ideas for language acquisition, but they're not the experts in the critical content ‑‑ in the history, in the literature, in the culture.

[17:52] That is the contribution which is incredibly important, that the humanists can have in our departments by bringing that.

[18:00] If I look at materials right now that are being used or promoted in our field, you have some that I wouldn't agree with ever, because it's grammar‑driven. Then you have others that have great SLA principles behind them, but the critical content isn't there.

[18:22] It's missing out on the opportunity that I think your next guests will elaborate on the critical content, the social justice, the service learning. All the exciting possibility you can have.

[18:34] To me, I feel like my call would be trust the SLA process. Your work as an instructor is to create habits of learning which would involve reading, writing, listening, as much as possible, input‑driven activities around communication, trying to express yourselves. That is going to ensure that your students progress.

[18:59] This leads me to another question real quick is about the question of rigor. One of the things that I sense from colleagues is that if they sacrifice grammar instruction, they're going to sacrifice rigor.

[19:11] That is a concern that we're stepping back. We're not as in control of the process as we're used to, so we feel like, "Well, I'm not as rigorous as an instructor anymore."

[19:24] Two things. One is if your content is grammar, you can be rigorous in making sure that they learn the grammar. The SLA process doesn't depend on extra efforts. It depends on time on task.

[19:41] You're showing rigor. The way you can show rigor in your SLA teaching is by making sure that they're spending enough hours each week inside and outside of class in a language.

[19:53] Then you can also take that rigor and then apply it to your content. I'm teaching fourth semester. We're doing big ideas of history, culture, and literature in South America in particular.

[20:06] I want them to be rigorous about the ideas in the text. I want them to be able to connect the dots between the conquista. Then we're looking at the Chaco War and then later in Bolivia, seeing those things. They can be rigorous in that and then trust that the SLA process is taking place.

**Stacey**:  [20:27] That's fantastic.

**Daniel**:  [20:29] To me, that's really exciting, because it also goes back to what's the value we add. I'm at a really large institution. We want our students thinking critically. They want them to connect sources to see the themes, to see the big ideas. I can do that in a fourth‑semester class and still trust that they're acquiring language.

[20:50] I think you're asking about a couple of examples of not how this works but data. This is maybe a side note, but I would encourage listeners. If you have questions about this, try it. You can use instruments out there to collect data that will prove or disprove what you're trying to do.

[21:13] I'll give you an example. Fourth semester, we had three different types of instructors. Everyone was teaching fourth semester. We had a professor who was very, I'd say, grammar‑driven, but it was teacher‑focused, the spokes of the wheel type thing all on a person. The person would transform whatever sentence they were saying.

[21:35] It was very much structure‑oriented grammar awareness and that instructional approach. We had two months for doing more content‑driven. A colleague, of the three days a week, was doing one.

[21:51] The first day was language and grammar. Then the next two were culture and content. She was two‑thirds content, one‑third language. Then I was doing mostly, I'd say, 90‑10. Last five minutes of each class, I'd say the only question on that language homework or whatever.

[22:11] At the end of the semester, we take a 60‑item placement test, the University of Wisconsin placement test. It's primarily a reading comprehension, fill in the blank, grammar questionnaire type of thing.

[22:23] My students hadn't really seen much of that, so the students in my class are placed right in the middle of those three classes. The grammar‑driven one is actually the lowest. Then the one‑third was a little bit higher but within five points of each other.

[22:41] My point is I'm not doing anything special to accelerate the SLA process. What I'm doing is I'm trusting the SLA process to get my students where they need to go linguistically.

[22:51] I'm also able to put all this extra cool interesting critical content that not only will serve them better in the long term but also might encourage them and inspire them to continue in the language, which goes back to a whole persistence thing.

[23:07] I think those are some ideas that can help. The other thing ‑‑ and I'll [inaudible] a little bit ‑‑ [laughs] you were here when we taught the second semester. You were teaching a very different way. I would say critical pedagogy, raising awareness about issues of social justice and the cultural topics.

[23:32] In the semester, we had all students take the WebCAPE, which is the online placement exam. We just saw the results by coincidence. This was a few years back already, but the question was me and my colleagues were concerned about the students coming out of the critical issues, critical topics course, and that they wouldn't get enough "grammar."

[23:54] The WebCAPE is a very grammar‑driven test. The cool thing is the students from both sections came out just about the same. Again, the idea is let the SLA process take place. Trust it.

[24:11] If you have problems with trust, that may be an issue, [laughs] but you have to be able to get yourself out of the way. Do your job by making sure that they're getting the input in the activities and the work that they need to in the language.

[24:26] Spend your time in your passion, bringing all the other cool stuff that you want them to learn about the culture and about the literature. Does that help?

**Stacey**:  [24:35] That's amazing. This conversation has been a whirlwind. I'm going to have to really process a lot of the things that we talked about.

[24:42] Just to recap a little bit, one of my favorite things that you said though was we can teach interesting content and trust the SLA process to take place.

[24:53] If we are teaching in the target language in ways that are mostly comprehensible to students, they are going to pick up the language. Something I've heard you say before also is at a predictably slow pace. There are very few ways to speed it up. It is what it is.

**Daniel**:  [25:10] I tell this in my linguistics class. The main difference between a semester abroad and here on campus isn't that something magical happens overseas, is that you have 10 times the exposure to the language that you do in a semester here.

[25:27] If you look at the OPI, the Oral Proficiency guidelines, you know that majors in most collegiate programs may end up exiting programs at the intermediate high or advanced low. If you look at those descriptors, it's still very limited language amazingly enough.

[25:52] To push these expectations onto our first and second‑year students is not helping our program. It's not helping our students as they go out into doing other jobs. It doesn't help them in wanting to persist in our programs. It's not helping our programs sell themselves as valuable to institutions. Reason to change.

[26:11] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [26:10] Thank you for taking the time to share all of this with me. This was fantastic.

**Daniel**:  [26:19] Thank you. I really appreciate it.

**Stacey**:  [26:23] If you would like to comment or give feedback on the show or be a guest on the show yourself, let us know. You can find us on Twitter @weteachlang. You can comment on any of the episodes on our website. Or you can send a text message or leave a voicemail on our Google voice number, which is 629‑888‑3398.

[26:44] If you leave us a voicemail, we may even play your question or comment on the air. Don't forget to tell your friends and colleagues about the show. Thank you so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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