

**We Teach Languages Episode 97: Independence, Choice, Peace, and Montessori with Valerie Shull**

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

[00:09] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [00:12] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today, on episode 97, I get to speak with Valerie Shull about her early language Montessori classroom and what the rest of us can learn from the Montessori model.

[00:29] Valerie, would you tell us a little bit about what you teach and where you teach?

**Valerie Shull**:  [00:34] I teach Spanish in an elementary program that got started, boy, 17, 18 years ago. I've been with our school for about 22 years. I work in an independent Montessori school in Chicago. I started teaching grades one through eight as our school added upper elementary and middle school grades.

[00:56] Over the years, our program really grew. Now, I'm really fortunate, I'm able to focus on grades four to eight, that upper elementary and middle school. I have a really great colleague who teaches K‑3. We share a great space. We're able to really collaborate together.

[01:13] It's been really helpful being able to chunk it out and focus on those levels. It's also a really unique experience just working in a Montessori environment. I've been there so long. I don't know a lot of other environments. I've just come to be at home in the Montessori space.

**Stacey**:  [01:31] That's really interesting. One of the things I told you over Twitter when we were discussing the interview beforehand was that my children have mostly gone to Montessori school.

[01:41] A couple things that I love about Montessori that I'm really interested to see how it works with language learning from your perspective is when my children were in a Montessori environment, they were able to be at different levels in different subjects. Not only in different subjects, but in different topics within a subject. They could work at whatever level was right for them.

[02:02] It was really individual and really personalized. It was also a very calming, peaceful way to learn. It felt like a safe place for my children to be everyday ‑‑ not overwhelming, not overloading their sensory processing, but really just a calm quiet space for them to learn.

[02:23] I'm wondering what your take is on what are the things about Montessori that affect language education? How do they interact?

**Valerie**:  [02:31] It stood out to me what you said, Stacey, about like the peaceful environment. I would say really the kernel of Montessori philosophy is around peace education and helping the children develop peace within themselves, within their community, and then hopefully within the world. It starts in that environment.

[02:54] I would say there's a real focus on that, which makes it really fun. I think there's an opening as well around social justice, and being interculturally competent. When the kernel of the philosophy centers around peace, that's a big part of it. I feel like there's a lot of opening around teaching for peace and teaching for that inner cultural piece. This was a real focus of Maria Montessori.

[03:22] The other big part of that is independence. Children have the opportunity to determine where they are and work where they are. It's not uncommon to see students working at all different levels, and being able to branch out within subjects based on interest or things that they really start to hone in on.

[03:41] If everyone's studying Ancient Greece, for example, all the students are going to have different interests. There's an ability to do that in the Montessori environment.

[03:51] When I think about it in terms of language learning, teaching Spanish as a second language, there's already a mindset that the students are going to be at different levels. In my background, I'm not really coming in going, "Oh, everyone is novice‑mid, or everyone is at Spanish one level," just having an awareness that everybody learns and develops at their own pace and in their own time.

[04:16] The proficiency levels are at the back of the classroom. I ask the children to think a lot about like where they are, and also where they want to go, and accept that we're not all on the same path. It's pretty sweet because they're used to already doing that in culture and math. It's an easy pathway.

[04:36] Teaching for proficiency, it just really made sense. It made sense to my colleagues too.

**Stacey**:  [04:42] I have two follow‑up questions. The first one is for people who may not know very much about Montessori, what else do you think listeners need to understand about Montessori education to imagine where you work?

[04:57] The second one that I'm going to need your help remembering to get back to is a lot of people want to do differentiated instruction. I would love to pick your brain about what are some of the specific things students are able to do in your classroom that help you differentiate and help them personalize?

**Valerie**:  [05:19] What to know about Montessori. We're talking about Dr. Maria Montessori, who was from Europe. Some of her colleagues are Piaget, for example.

[05:30] She came up early 1900s. She worked mostly with developing self‑correcting materials, giving them an environment at which they could do hands‑on work and work at their own pace.

[05:44] When someone walks into our school, they will see multi‑age classrooms. From the earliest ages, there's a mixture. There's 3 to 6‑year‑olds, 6 to 9‑year‑olds, 9 to 12‑year‑olds, and 12 to 14‑year‑olds, all grouped together within the same class. That is one thing that really makes a Montessori environment distinct.

[06:05] Every child in that three‑year cycle has the opportunity to be the person who might need mentoring from an older child, but during that cycle, they have the opportunity to be that older mentor at each step of the way. That's something really unique.

[06:21] The other thing too is that a mark of Montessori, for those who might not be familiar, is a real hands‑on environment. When someone walks into a Montessori classroom, especially at early childhood levels and early elementary, you won't really see textbook kind of materials. They're these hands‑on materials for learning the three core subject areas of culture, language, and math.

[06:46] Culture is the combination of science and social studies. That's something else that is a real difference that you might notice between a more traditional environment and a Montessori environment.

**Stacey**:  [06:58] I will also say that my children, when they moved to Montessori, they no longer struggled at all because everything was so concrete at those early elementary stages. They didn't have to deal with abstract concepts until they really had mastered the concrete ones. I'm a big fan.

**Valerie**:  [07:15] I am too.

**Stacey**:  [07:16] That makes so much more sense than just memorizing how things work.

**Valerie**:  [07:20] That's right. That's a main tenet as well, is moving from the concrete to the abstract, so making sure everybody gets it at the concrete level first before putting pen to paper.

**Stacey**:  [07:31] I don't want to go too far into left field, but I think an inductive approach to language that's really based on whole language use, and exposing students to actual spoken language, and allowing them to inductively acquire the language over time is very similar. Focusing on language is concrete before you start talking about abstract representations of language like grammar.

**Valerie**:  [07:56] I don't think that's way out in left field. That's why that mode of teaching really worked at our school because everybody's, "Well, of course, you start with the concrete before you move onto the abstract." I felt a lot of freedom, I will say this. I didn't get any pushback when I went to more comprehensible input methods and working with proficiency because that just made sense.

[08:18] It's so funny that you mentioned that. I don't think it's in left field at all. I was thinking about I didn't always teach this way. It came in teaching the way I had been taught, which was focusing a lot more on rules, more on rote memorization.

[08:34] Since really making the switch to proficiency, I noticed that the kids just get grammar more quickly after they've had a chance to just use it in conversation, hear it a lot, see it a lot. That whole idea of starting with the concrete moving to the abstract, I have definitely seen that in language too.

**Stacey**:  [08:50] I also hope that people who are still teaching just the way that they weren't taught know that there's no shame, because everyone I know who currently is on the proficiency train started just by teaching the way we were taught. We've had to slowly adjust to new realities over time.

**Valerie**:  [09:08] Yeah, absolutely. I'm so glad you said that because even in this Montessori environment, I went in and I did teach several years just like that, because it's what I knew. It's what was being supported around me, even in the language community for a while.

[09:23] When I ever doubted myself or was grappling with, "Oh my gosh, what's going to be the lesson? What's going to be the thing?" I went back to my own school experiences, which is what a lot of us do. It's really natural. I'm so glad that you said that, because it's definitely a journey. It was letting go of the control, I have to say that. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [09:42] That's awesome. I think all of adulthood is learning to let go of control. I like that a lot.

[09:48] [laughter]

**Stacey**:  [09:51] What are some of the actual things that you do in class to help your students personalize and differentiate?

**Valerie**:  [09:56] One of the things I started doing, I just really came to about a year ago, was doing free involuntary reading, especially now that I focus my time in upper elementary. It allows the children choice, which they fell in love with the first day. I was really nervous and I put it out on the Twitter sphere like, "OK, I'm gonna try FER. How do I do this?"

[10:19] I got such great feedback from the Langchat and EarlyLang Chat folks saying, "OK. Start with maybe five minutes at a time. Join the kids in reading." Just the baby steps. The kids fell in love with it right away. I asked them for feedback, because I was like, "This seems to be working, but I don't really know why."

[10:39] All their feedback really fell into a couple of categories. One is they love having the choice. They felt like they could do it. I struggled because in our program in elementary, we meet three times a week for 30 minutes. I thought, "Can I really give up one of those class meetings for free and voluntary reading?" I have and I haven't looked back because...

**Stacey**:  [11:06] An entire 30‑minute class, you mean?

**Valerie**:  [11:09] Yes. They do it. They really like it. We do reading and then talking. I saw this an opportunity to get the kids into a really concrete conversation, just being able to say in Spanish, "What did you read?" "I read this." "What did you like about it or not like about it?"

[11:26] They can have a little conversation reviewing the book or magazine that they read and be able to share that with a partner. I would say maybe they read for about 20 minutes, and then we talk for a few minutes before the class transition time happens. That was the thing, the choice.

[11:43] I talked to them just really clearly about what feels like a good fit for them. We don't all have the same fit. We don't all wear the same shoe size. [laughs] Because if I try to wear Shaq's shoes, that wouldn't work for me. That has been one way of differentiation that has really worked.

[12:06] One thing I did worry about a little bit, thinking about how to meet all of the kid's needs around it. Not all of the children love reading. How was I going to pull them in? I just started asking them, "What do you like to read?" I went to Chicago Public Library, and I check out about 40 books at a time, [laughs] based on what they like.

[12:25] The other thing is what about kids for whom reading is difficult because of either dyslexia or other disorders. We've found on Bookshare, kids that are eligible for Bookshare. There's a huge Spanish Language Library available to them at different levels and even Read Aloud books on YouTube.

[12:45] During that time, they can put on the headphones. They have a chance to choose something. The choice seems to be really important and then finding what's a good fit. That was a real biggie.

**Stacey**:  [12:57] I really like that you include listening to books in your free voluntary reading. Are they looking at the text while they listen or are they only listening?

**Valerie**:  [13:07] They can look at the text. Like the YouTube videos that I found, it's someone doing the book is a Read Aloud. It's nice because they can see the words on the page, but really the focus is on listening. I found books written by native speakers.

[13:24] It's really a good exercise for them. Bookshare is more about developing reading. The voice doesn't sound natural, but it's good for developing the reading part. It's a tool that the kids can use.

**Stacey**:  [13:37] I know that there's a lot of people who buy the learner‑centered materials for novice readers. Do you use any of those?

**Valerie**:  [13:45] I use a real combination. I did start doing class novels in class with elementary and middle school. I went ahead and got the leveled books that are for learners, which they also like.

[13:58] That's also brought up opportunities for differentiation and choice. I have some of those on the shelf, but I also really try to find books that are written by authors who are native of the language published in their country of origin.

[14:15] That's where the library has been amazing to be able to get those. There are picture books all the way through some chapter books for my heritage speakers. We also still get "Diario de Greg," if you want, "Diary of a Wimpy Kid," because that's also a draw for them. It's just really varied.

**Stacey**:  [14:34] What do you think are the advantages of bringing in text by native speakers published in the target culture?

**Valerie**:  [14:41] First and foremost, authors from the culture are representing themselves. I just don't ever want to speak for someone else's culture. It's an opportunity for there to be authentic representation and multiple perspectives.

[14:57] Even children point out when we've used things that have food pyramids from other countries, like, "Wait, wine is on the French food pyramid." I was like, "Yes, it is."

[15:09] [laughter]

**Valerie**:  [15:11] I don't have to explicitly teach those things. It can be brought about in their choice and in their exploration. Authors from the culture can represent themselves. FER is a way that I've differentiated. The other thing is even up through seventh and eighth grade, I try to give a lot of choices.

[15:34] I mentioned, even during the class novels, that's an opportunity for differentiation and choice. I tell the students, "We're relatively new at this." I just started doing class novels a year ago. Again, [laughs] it's like I'm learning with them on how this is going to be.

[15:49] I'm like, "Listen, this isn't going to be about you doing a true‑false, fill‑in‑the‑blank comprehension test, I just want to see what you understand and what you can do with it." I try to give a lot of different choices on the assessment and let them choose what they think is going to show off what they can do.

[16:06] I really try to emphasize that. Show off for me. Show off what new words you know, what you can really do, what you can really say about a character, or the most important thing from the novel, in your opinion. By just focusing on that, I feel it's a lot more open‑ended.

[16:22] I've had a few rare students who have taken the STAMP test and they are leading at intermediate high. I've had a couple of advance slow readers. I really believe this. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [16:32] That's amazing.

**Valerie**:  [16:33] I believe this to possibly be a fluke, but I think the reading is key.

[16:40] [laughter]

**Valerie**:  [16:40] For those kids, I want them to feel like they have something that they can show off, but I also want the students who might be novice mid for a very long time to feel like they have a chance to shine and feel good about.

[16:55] Giving choice, to me, is really important. It's definitely a work‑in‑progress but when the kids can choose it, they have a lot more buy‑in. At the end, I want them to just feel good about what they can do, which is a lot.

**Stacey**:  [17:10] Your job isn't to weed out the low performers and make them pay.

**Valerie**:  [17:14] No.

[17:14] [laughter]

**Valerie**:  [17:14] That's right.

**Stacey**:  [17:15] To help everyone succeed.

**Valerie**:  [17:17] I want everyone to feel like they can do something and they can. That's the thing about working in elementary. Even saying it out loud I'm thinking, it's really all of our jobs to do this. I feel like teaching children, they come to us with so much enthusiasm and openness.

[17:37] That there's a lot about just writing that and using that, too. I really want to foster that early love of the language and then help them to also feel like they can continue forward. That's the big part about differentiation as the children get older and they become adolescents, and then they're going to transition into high school not attached to our school.

[18:02] They fan out and go into high schools all over the city. I cannot possibly teach the whole of Spanish language to the children in [laughs] kindergarten to eighth grade. That's not even a reasonable goal for any program. It's about what can you do as a student to get what you need, to keep going forward, to keep learning. What are the ways that you can keep using this in your life?

[18:27] That's a big part of what's happening at middle school. Without offering some choices and some differentiation, it really can limit that. I feel like the goal is, "OK, this is about your whole life."

**Stacey**:  [18:41] Could you possibly give me a few examples of the kinds of assessment choices that you give students?

**Valerie**:  [18:46] Yes. First of all, if we're doing writing, it might be you're writing an email to a pen pal, or imagine that you are one of the characters from this book. I would list them. Write a couple of diary entries from that character's point of view. I would use that even with fifth grade.

[19:09] We can do this with a Read Aloud book. It can also offer choice for listening. I often use Audio‑Lingua, that website for authentic recordings because you can set the level and it's just short bits. Even students choose from one or two recordings. What are you going to be assessed on?

[19:28] If we're doing reading, I may throw out a couple of different info graphs or two different kinds of reading. Let them look at it first and decide, "OK, this is the one that I want to do." Again, it's totally a work‑in‑progress. [laughs] I'm sure if you ask me a year from now, I'm going to say something different. [laughs]

**Stacey**:  [19:47] That is a good idea. We will check back in with you in one year and you can tell us how things have grown. That sounds great.

**Valerie**:  [19:55] What I do find is that all these independents, my fourth graders, are not as independent as my older students, and I sometimes forget that. I'm looking for ways like, "How can I scaffold?" If I'm going to give them choices, what can be the scaffolding?

[20:10] That's something that I'm really experimenting with, how to help them have choice even though they might not be able to produce very much or have very much language.

**Stacey**:  [20:20] I teach novices at the college level and other listeners might be at a range of proficiencies in ages. How can we use language teachers take some lessons from the Montessori model?

**Valerie**:  [20:30] For me, when I think about the Montessori model and languages, I just still it down to these core ideas, which is fostering independence. It can be independence as far as independence in their work. I've been experimenting with work plans. Any language teacher could do that where students come in and they look at their list of works. [laughs]

[20:54] It's the Montessori lingo for the classroom stuff. After having gone through with Montessori, they've got there, like they work plan with their works and just letting them have a work time and manage their time. This is something I think we could all do outside of a Montessori environment.

[21:08] I think about those Montessori core subjects of language, culture, and math. I started thinking about it in terms of modes, so interpretive, interpersonal, presentational, then I chunk out the work plan that way. That's something that language teachers can do whether they're in Montessori or not.

**Stacey**:  [21:27] Let me get this straight. You're talking about students coming to the classroom, and they have some interpretive, some interpersonal, some presentational work available to them.

**Valerie**:  [21:36] Yes.

**Stacey**:  [21:36] They get to create their own work plan choosing from a menu of possibilities.

**Valerie**:  [21:41] That's right. That can be one way that we can do it.

**Stacey**:  [21:45] That's really exciting, actually.

**Valerie**:  [21:48] It's been fun. That's something I've been experimenting with. I try to get a variety of work. I know that it's labor intensive as far as planning. Sometimes I'm not always able to offer a lot of choices. There might be one in interpersonal task, "OK. That's the one that's on your work plan, but choose your partner." Choose when you want to do it.

[22:10] Maybe you're not up for talking today. Maybe you really want to focus on reading today or listening to something, that level of choice and independence. I also think about how many times a day the kids say to me, "Valerie, [Spanish] ." I go right into my reflexive mom mode, and I feel like I've to answer right away.

[22:30] [laughter]

**Valerie**:  [22:30] I started taking a breath and just asking, "How can you find the answer to that?" It seems like a really small way but it's something that we can do to foster independence and then give the list of choices.

[22:41] Like, "Could you look it up on Word reference? Can you ask to friends before asking me? Is that on your personal vocab lists? What are the tools?" but just say, "How could you find that out for yourself?"

[22:53] That requires zero planning for me. It's just about my mindset and taking a breath before I impulsively answer the barrage of questions. That, for me, really comes down to it because, ultimately, we're working towards some independence using the language.

[23:12] Even if we have baby novices who need a ton of scaffolding, always thinking what the outcome of, "How can we work toward independence and what choices can they be given? Can they do it in a self‑directed way?"

[23:26] How can they find out the answer for themselves? How can they work collaboratively? Those are some of the core things. When we talk about things like intercultural competence and taking multiple perspectives, to me, that gets right down to that peace education part, how can we come together as a class community, and then take that outside of the class, which is a big philosophy thing?

[23:54] I can't list the concrete behind that, but if we come in with that as a value, that's one thing that we can really bring in as language teachers.

**Stacey**:  [24:02] I've actually been reading some different people on Twitter and at different language teacher communities talking about things like class roles and student responsibilities. For me, that all ties into what you're talking about.

[24:19] If you really think about the students in the classroom, not just as recipients of learning but as active participants in a community of learning, that changes how much responsibility you give them, how much you expect of them.

**Valerie**:  [24:32] Absolutely. It can be down to the literal, maintaining the environment, which in elementary is key, so having class jobs, having class roles and responsibilities is I think really important.

[24:46] Keep bringing it back to the community. Are there activities that bring the class together to be able to work together in some cooperative and productive way, where students feel validated and supported? That's really important, and gets at the kernel of that community building.

**Stacey**:  [25:06] That was a great conversation. I really appreciate you taking the time to sit down with me and chat a little bit about your work in Montessori.

**Valerie**:  [25:14] This was a delight, Stacey. Thank you. [laughs]

[25:16] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [25:17] We would love to hear your feedback on this topic. You can reach out to us on social media. We're on Twitter and Facebook, @weteachlang or on our website, weteachlang.com. You can also send us an email, weteachlang@Gmail.com or send us a voicemail or text message to our Google voice number, (629)888‑3398.

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