

**Episode 93: Kara Parker and Megan Smith**

 [00:00] [background music]

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

**Stacey Margarita Johnson**:  [00:12] I'm Stacey Johnson. Today, on Episode 93, Rebecca Blouwolff interviews Kara Parker and Megan Smith, the bloggers behind the popular proficiency‑oriented blog, "Creative Language Class."

[00:29] Rebecca, Kara, and Megan give us a birds‑eye view of the field and talk about some of the issues teachers will face as they're moving towards proficiency.

[00:40] [music]

**Rebecca Blouwolff**:  [00:43] I am so excited to be speaking this morning with both of you, Kara and Megan. This is a total honor and a high point for me to speak with two women who have really influenced my teaching and thinking and who are a constant resource to me in the classroom.

[01:01] I would love for you to start by introducing yourselves and letting us know a little bit about your work.

**Kara Parker**:  [01:08] I am Kara Parker. Rebecca, I'm so glad that we're getting to continue this conversation. We met through Twitter and then got to see each other at the conference. It's great to actually be able to go back and forth without that 140 character limit, right?

[01:22] I'm Kara. I'm currently living in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I'm working with teachers and developing curriculum with Megan Smith. We're excited today to share what we're seeing and be able to hopefully give some good tips and pointers for everyone.

**Megan Smith**:  [01:40] I am Megan Smith. I am in Charleston, South Carolina right now. I love to be able to help teachers. Kara and I do a lot of traveling, and we work and train teachers. We help them move towards proficiency, which is what we're going to talk a little bit about today.

**Rebecca**:  [01:51] I'd love to know, you guys are these sort of itinerant teachers, nomads, traveling around the United States, seeing teachers on the ground in a way that I can't really do. I know what's going on in my building with proficiency and what our journey has been.

[02:10] From time to time I'm able to chat with other colleagues about their journeys. I'd be really curious since you've seen the lay of the land, what are your observations? What trends do you see among teachers who are trying to make this move?

**Megan**:  [02:24] I think there is such a variety. One thing we definitely can see from traveling and working with different schools is people know what proficiency is, and they're curious about it.

[02:35] What's interesting is, it's very much connected to the business world. You have those early adopters. You have the early majority, you have the late majority, and you have the laggards. In every group we work with, we see these things divided out.

[02:51] I don't know that we've ever worked with a group where everybody's on board and jumping in with full force. Usually, you've got a few that are jumping right in. You've got a few that are interesting, and making small steps. You've got others that are a little hesitant. You've got some that will be dragged along eventually.

[03:11] If that's you out there and you feel like, "Oh, our group's not on the same page," that's totally normal.

**Kara**:  [03:17] I would say I'm seeing a lot of teachers trying to make those changes and those steps, and a lot of trying to figure it out along the way. That leads to frustration sometimes, or feeling overwhelmed, and feel like, "I've got to change everything at once."

[03:35] I would like to tell everyone, this is a normal part of the process. Don't feel like you have to rush any of it. It's little by little, and it's not going to change overnight.

**Rebecca**:  [03:45] I'm wondering if you might speak a little about from those two really contrasting places that a teacher might stand, the early adopter who maybe has been doing this for a little while and is just like, "Come on, guys. Get with the pace." I definitely hear people talking about that.

[04:02] I'd be curious how you work with them and what their challenges are. Maybe from the totally opposite, the person who's just digging in their fingernails into that textbook as it's being dragged from their hands. How you make any peace between those people? Where do you even start when you have those people in the same room?

[04:23] What you guys are saying, and what my observation has been, is that every department has those elements. I don't think that people fully appreciate, as you said that, that's normal. We believe there's still a path forward.

**Kara**:  [04:37] I think one of the best things you can do is really talk about what your vision is. If everyone can get on the same page there and realize that the purpose of us having students sit in our classroom for 60 minutes or whatever, is so they can use the language.

[04:55] If that can be established and really work towards making everything fit that vision and that goal, then you're going to be able to take those steps that you need. What I've seen with some of those people that are really digging in and saying, "No, I want grammar. I believe this is the exact way," is that they do want that vision.

[05:17] They do believe that the grammar will lead to the communication. That's where everyone as a department should be able to agree. We want them to be able to do this, so as a first step, maybe we should have our assessments look like what we want them to do and then let teachers see how what they believe, what method they believe...

[05:38] You could teach it many different ways. Let that then lead to what that collective vision is.

**Megan**:  [05:45] I would say when we're doing a workshop, we can't push teachers in any direction, and that's not our job anyways. That's the district specialist's job. Good luck out there! We can entice them toward proficiency.

[06:05] I think the best way we can do that is by giving them tools that they can use right away. This is some of the best things I've learned from Kara is she didn't say, "Let's talk about theory."

[06:10] She was my mentor, by the way. If you didn't know that, Kara Parker was my mentor teacher.

**Rebecca**:  [06:15] I did not know that.

**Megan**:  [06:17] We got stuck together. I think she was more stuck with me and didn't realize how much work I was going to be, but we learned a lot together. Kara never told me, "You have to do this."

[06:32] She would gently say, "Here's a strategy you could try with this." When I had no idea what I was going to do the next day for lesson planning, then give me a great idea that I don't have to figure out on my own and I used it.

[06:37] I didn't know why it was great until later, but I think that we can do that with teachers. We'll do a workshop, and it may be with the foundation of proficiency in mind, but without telling everyone, "This is proficiency. This is why you have to do it."

[06:54] Just show them a really great activity, whether it's a reading activity or interpersonal speaking. If you give them something they can use right away, they'll start to use it without even necessarily realizing that this is taking you away from maybe explicit instruction to just more of a natural communication.

[07:11] We found that some teachers will take one activity that we showed from a workshop and start to include it maybe every week or every unit. Then, if they can try a second one the next year, that's just little by little enticing them to move toward proficiency.

**Rebecca**:  [07:27] I love that. Reminds me so much of when you're designing a thematic unit. You start with that hook where you have to bring the kids in with you. I think sometimes we poopoo the quick you can use this in your classroom tomorrow thing because it seems too easy or cheap, but don't you need to know the theory behind it?

[07:47] That's a great point that for the person who's not ready to bring down the whole system if you give them one or two tools for their tool belt...That was certainly what happened to me. I learned from Lisa Sheppard's blog how to do the interpretive reading template, and then that was all I knew how to do, and so I just did that.

[08:08] Now, it's five years later, and I'm like OK, you could actually do something different with interpretive Rebecca. Now, you have more skills. Just having a couple things that you feel like you know how to do this with your kids and you can get through it, that's such a powerful place to start.

[08:21] Then, you start wondering maybe why or how.

**Kara**:  [08:23] Yeah. When you look at everything that we're supposed to cover in class, we need to work on interpretive, interpersonal, interculturality, presentational, and make sure you're teaching them to do inferences and structures...Good lord.

[08:38] There are so many things that we're trying to do in class that you can't learn all those things overnight but just the steps one by one and take something, make it your own, and then develop it later.

**Megan**:  [08:53] The crazy thing about working with teachers too is that just like in a classroom, every teacher is at a different stage in the game. Some teachers have 20 years of experience, and they've been trained in a lot of different things that maybe we don't even know, and there are other teachers that are brand new.

[09:09] Just like in any group, you really have to differentiate and say, "I'm going to try to teach all of you something and all of you are going to be able to apply this in different ways."

[09:24] Respect the fact that these teachers already know a lot, have different skills and experiences and say we don't want to simplify this and only say you can handle one step. We're going to show you the spectrum. Wherever you are, jump in and take one step forward, just like proficiency.

**Rebecca**:  [09:35] We talked about this idea that you could start with just one small thing that you know how to do and that's kind of your entree to this whole world. I know Kara, you also mentioned the importance of common assessments.

[09:46] I'm wondering if we could just dig in a little bit more to what it means to choose a common assessment and how that plays out in a department, for example, and also maybe the role of what the teacher sees when they watch their students complete an assessment and what that might prompt in you.

**Kara**:  [10:06] I'm going to go back to my own experience of when we were transitioning. I was a complete grammar‑based teacher and planning took five minutes. What activities do I want to do and I'm going to copy that test at the end of the book.

[10:21] We were challenged by [inaudible] when he was our district leader in Jefferson County. He said, "I want everyone to give an open‑ended performance assessment. Let's see what your kids can do," because I was one of those things. I know my kids are good. This is great.

[10:35] I gave them the performance assessment. I'll never forget giving it to my second year and realizing that they were novice‑mid. That was a smack in my face to say, "Now wait a minute. They know so much. I know they know all this vocab. We've done all these drills and vocab quizzes."

[10:54] I know they'd done past and imperfect and all of these things, but I didn't see where they were using those skills or using the language when they were doing that performance assessment.

[11:06] For me, I loved that we took that first step of give them this performance assessment, let's see what happens. That was my way of even being able to realize there was a disconnect between what I really wanted students to do, what they were able to do, and what I was doing in class, what I was focusing the majority of my time on.

[11:28] I also like this, and I applaud him. We did not have to tie a grade to it. We were allowed to give it just for the sake of giving it. Then, we brought the data back, we compared it, we did the STAMP test to see if it was matching what we thought.

[11:42] That was really important because the minute you put a grade on something, everyone stresses out. Kids stress out, parents stress out, admins and they're worried about what you're doing. Taking that grade away while we did that first step was crucial.

**Rebecca**:  [11:58] I'm sure the teachers would stress out, right?

**Kara**:  [11:59] Yup.

**Rebecca**:  [11:59] That feels terrible if you think you're doing a great job and then all your kids are getting Ds because they're two proficiency levels lower than they should be. That would not be motivating, so that was a way to get you to take that risk.

**Megan**:  [12:11] Exactly. The assessment is such a mirror to what's going on in the classroom. I think a lot of times this is a major hurdle for teachers. They're saying, "Oh, yeah, I teach proficiency," but then they assess with a fill‑in‑the‑blank and kids just knock it out of the park.

[12:32] Then, all of a sudden, you start to realize, why are they doing so well on this fill‑in‑the‑blank? Because that's really what the teacher is practicing.

[12:37] We've had an opportunity to observe some classes and had some really awesome teachers that said, "Please give me advice. I need to know. Is this proficiency or is it not?" because I think that is a major struggle for teachers too.

[12:49] They understand the proficiency levels, but what does a lesson look like when you're focused on proficiency? I will tell you, I've had observers in my own classroom that stopped and said, "Hey, I got to ask you a question. Why did you do that activity?"

[12:59] I said, "It's a great activity. We practiced the vocabulary. They need this vocabulary so later they can work on their sentences." This person asked me, "Well, what's your students' proficiency range? Where are they at right now?" I said, "They're not as high. They're pushing into intermediate‑low."

[13:19] This person stopped and said, "Then why are you going back to words and practicing vocabulary in isolation?"

[13:25] I think we all need that wake‑up call sometimes. We are proficiency, and we care about pushing our kids to that next level, but all of a sudden, we can easily revert back to an old activity that we did or maybe that we learned when we were in school or something that's fun for the kids, but it's really not supporting the students' proficiency.

[13:45] Asking for feedback, just help you see what you're doing and make sure you're on track. We definitely need that in world languages.

**Rebecca**:  [13:54] When you were saying, Kara, that everything looks fine because you're teaching them only the structures and then you're assessing only the structures, so it's kind of this closed system and everything is rolling along nicely and looks like nothing is broken.

[14:07] Then, it takes that outside observer who asks the tough question to sort of blow the whole thing apart. Then you realize oh, the emperor has no clothes.

**Kara**:  [14:17] It was really listening to students too. Once I switched to proficiency, I just heard more students saying, "I talked to this person the other day in Target," or, "I did this when I was traveling in Argentina."

[14:31] I heard more about students using the language. It gave them that comfort level and that it's not about being perfect, but it's about using it.

**Megan**:  [14:40] One story that's kind of neat, we worked with a school who was learning about proficiency. They knew the levels.

[14:46] They started giving performance‑based assessments, but they continued to give grammar quizzes at the same time because they knew that these students were high achieving students. They wanted to make sure that they knew the grammar and test it and that sort of thing.

[14:58] They came back to us later and said, "We've noticed a really interesting trend. These kids are getting 100 percent on the grammar quiz for the unit, and then they turn right around and misconjugate some of these words in the performance assessment in the same unit."

[15:16] They basically came to the realization that kids knew how to take a grammar test, but if they can't apply it to a paragraph or they can't apply it in on‑the‑spot communication, do they really know it?

[15:31] They came to this idea of saying we need to give spend more time practicing on‑the‑spot communication and teach the kids how to use it there because, in the end, this grammar quiz isn't holding any weight if they can't apply it to a conversation or to a writing.

**Rebecca**:  [15:45] Sure, sure, sure. I'm sure once the kids get into a deeper task where they're trying to think about wait, what would make sense to say or how would I explain this opinion, then the grammar is going to fall away a little bit because they're putting all their energy into addressing something [inaudible] than that.

[16:00] That's certainly been my observation with my students, is that sometimes I'll see some really crazy structural stuff because they're so focused on making a good point about an authentic resource.

**Megan**:  [16:12] That's OK. That's what we have to tell teachers too is because that's scary when you leave right and wrong, this world of what's right or what's wrong and allow room for errors.

[16:22] We have to remind teachers it's about creating and when they're getting into that originality and coming up with something that they've never said before and what message are they getting across.

[16:32] The more we moved away from perfect accuracy, especially in the lower levels, to saying, "Let's create. Give me an original statement," and letting kids say what they really wanted to say, the students' message became so much more interesting. Kids really felt like they were able to say what they wanted to say even if there was errors.

[16:50] Allowing the students to take that risk and make an error really pushed our kids to open up and want to talk.

**Rebecca**:  [16:57] Getting the teachers comfortable with student errors. That's one hurdle they need to get over. Maybe could you talk about some of the other hurdles that you see people coming up against as they're trying to evolve their practice?

**Kara**:  [17:10] Absolutely. I think one of the major ones I see, it's coming from the curriculum. Even though I was teaching for proficiency, I still had in my brain that these traditional topics and themes that are very textbook still needed to show up.

[17:26] There was just something inside of me that said no, level twos have to learn about the house or level ones have to do the I like activities and this extreme thing.

[17:38] I found that even though I wanted to shift toward being more communicative, I was still going back to those ideas of I need this unit. This is something I loved about working with a new teacher that had no experience. Megan is sitting there going, "Why are we teaching that? Let's try this."

[17:57] I just sat there and said, "Absolutely. Let's see where this goes."

[18:00] There's a part of me where I'm like, "Is she going to be able to pull this off? What does that look like?" I remember she read out a few of our units where they were really focused in. They weren't about a mile‑long vocab list. It's, "I'm going to be able to talk about this sporting event and this athlete," or, "I'm going to be able to talk about Cuba and salsa music."

[18:21] It was those types of lessons. When she started doing those, I started watching, going, "Those kids want to talk about that. I want to see this lesson." It was exciting again. It wasn't just, "What chores do you do during the week?"

[18:35] I'm going to go to curriculum has limited us. It's kept us from doing what's best. I also like this that districts need to have a discussion or departments need to have a discussion with each other that, yes, we're going to cover some common themes, but it doesn't have to be so focused in that you have to teach all 50 chores.

[19:00] It needs to be you talk about what you want in that area that matches what students are talking about, what's cultural, what's relevant.

**Rebecca**:  [19:08] That reminds me when I did a training with Greg Duncan, he asked us to envision the difference between a unit about food and a unit about coq au vin, which is this classic French dish.

[19:19] That, at least for me, really helped me to realizes like, "Oh, if I zoom in, I can go to all these exciting places and talk about the five Cs." There's so much culture. There's communities. There's all these other pieces that when you say food, it's like, "Ugh, food." I don't know. Somehow, food even doesn't sound exciting in that sort of textbook chapter. That is a ton of work.

[19:41] I would also love to talk about, what are you seeing? How are you managing teacher stress? To be honest, I am, as you said, planning the old way it was like, "Five minutes, it's page 26, Exercise A, B, C. Tomorrow, it's Exercises D and E." How are you helping people manage that? What could be a really substantial load to start changing all the units?

**Megan**:  [20:05] I'm glad that you brought that up because, how much work it requires sometimes is a major hurdle for some people.

[20:12] I think there are a lot of teachers out there ‑‑ we've even heard from them ‑‑ that said, "Hey, I'm on board. I like where this is going, but I have three kids," or, "I have some other responsibilities, " or, "I'm a coach, and I don't have time to spend seven hours figuring this thing out."

[20:26] This is where collaboration is so huge. I found that having Kara along the journey has been such a huge help for me. When I get stuck, I can go to her and say, "What do I do with this?"

[20:44] Some of us they are those early adopters that have been doing this for a while, we've got to share some strategies to help other people create lessons. This is Kara and I's big passion is.

[20:48] We look at other people on. We look at these teachers who want to make changes and are standing hours and hours every night, and are burnt out, and have a really great unit one time and then have to start again the next one. It's frustrating.

[21:02] We want to create curriculum so that teachers have some options so they can pick and choose and have their buffet if they want and pick a lesson here or even sharing in our blog Creative Language Class.

[21:12] We know that it's not for everyone. I can't tell you the number of times we've shared a post going, "I don't even know if anyone needs this, but I feel like somebody out there maybe will be encouraged by this." We'll get one email back that said, "Thank you so much. I'm using this tomorrow. I had no idea what I was going to do. This is going work."

[21:31] It's sharing. Twitter is great about this. Teachers are great at conferences when they have a session to share some ideas that work. We've got to work together if we're going to be able to make change.

**Kara**:  [21:42] I'll second that, the collaboration. I could go to a French teacher, look at a unit, and say, "Oh, I see exactly how I can take..." What was that dish you just mentioned?

**Rebecca**:  [21:50] Coq au vin.

**Kara**:  [21:51] I can take coq au vin. I could easily switch it to a food from my target culture," and then just basically recreate what you did but make it specific. I think that's huge. I would also say this, districts should be helping their teachers with purchasing the resources that they need. I don't think a teacher should ever feel like they've got to make everything.

[22:14] That's what I loved about the textbook thing, is that I had a lot of resources that I could pick through. That wasn't coming out of my pocket. That was the district helping me out in that way. Lastly, there's just a lot out there on Twitter, social media, blogs, and all of that. There are a lot of people that are already sharing good things. It's also worth going through and finding those.

**Megan**:  [22:40] That's the other big hurdle. Sometimes teachers have spent so much time creating something or working on something in their classroom, and then proficiency is asking them to make changes. You look back, and you're like, "Wait a minute. What used to look so good is maybe not as perfect as I thought it was, but I don't want to let go of it."

**Rebecca**:  [23:02] I'm wondering also about that. I think when you create something and then you share it publicly, it can be hard to accept feedback on what you've shared, but I also see such value in doing the sharing.

[23:15] For example, I learned, by sharing my Edpuzzles on the French teacher's new US Facebook page, that other teachers would use them with their kids before I even got to them with my own classes. They would find all the mistakes and tell me, "Rebecca, that word was actually not in the video," or, "You've got the wrong answer. Marked us correct on that."

[23:34] For some reason, I had a huge problem with marking the correct answers correctly on different websites. Even though in the moment, it was a little humbling to realize I just shared a messed‑up Edpuzzle with 3,000 French teachers, all of whom know my name and what I look like.

[23:48] That was the way to get the feedback. I did not have time. Even if I had had the time, I probably couldn't have seen my own error. That was incredibly valuable, but it can involve getting some feedback that you're maybe not anticipating on your work.

[24:03] I'm so grateful for that feedback because, otherwise, I would have a little revolution in my class with 25 kids, being like, "Madam, madam, I know I marked the right answer, and it says I'm wrong." I appreciate the colleagues who can step in and save you from yourself sometimes.

**Megan**:  [24:17] Yeah, those people who can give you feedback without making you feel bad.

**Rebecca**:  [24:23] What have I forgotten to ask you, two, that you want to share with our dear listeners?

**Megan**:  [24:28] One of the piece of advice I would give to people is to continue learning and continue listening to different people. One person on their own maybe doesn't have all the answers, but maybe you can learn a little bit from your colleague who's on this path to proficiency.

[24:38] You can learn a little bit from a session at a conference, or maybe you're listening to a podcast to learn more about proficiency because it's new in your area. Whatever it is, keep listening and keep learning. We need to hear certain messages more than once. We need to hear them in different styles that can connect to the way we like to do things. It's not only one way.

[25:09] We went to one conference and they made a big emphasis on it's the paths, with an S, plural, to proficiency. We're all hopping on this path from a different exit. We're all going at different speeds. We're in different vehicles. I think that's OK. There's not only one way to do it.

[25:28] Kara and I have a certain style that I think we've developed just from working together and having a common vision. It doesn't have to be exactly this way. It doesn't have to look just like this.

[25:40] As long as we can get on board like we're headed to that same destination which is students increasing their proficiency, we can have our different styles and don't feel like you have to be exactly like somebody else.

**Kara**:  [25:53] My main advice would be just keep everything in perspective. Take a step that feels comfortable for you. Keep your time that you're spending on your work limited. Make sure you also have that good, healthy life balance. That is also important for us to stay excited to come back every day.

[26:13] Find people who want to work with you. We've got the Internet now. Something I love is that Megan and I can jump on and have a quick FaceTime back and forth and chat something out and, "All right, see you later."

[26:27] You don't even have to work with someone that is in your school anymore. The world is open. Keep everything in perspective. Take your steps. Like Megan said, try something new. To quickly say, "It doesn't work. I'm not doing it," is also not very helpful. It's a journey, right?

**Megan**:  [26:47] Yes. We're all teachers. We're all learners. None of us ever have it perfectly figured out, but it's a continual learning and moving forward always.

**Rebecca**:  [26:59] Well, I so appreciate the chance to talk about that journey with both of you and hear stories from around the country and your own perspectives, both from your time in the classroom and also as teachers now of teachers. That's really important for us to consider. Thank you again for speaking with me today.

[27:18] [background music]

**Kara**:  [27:18] Thanks, Rebecca.

**Megan**:  [27:19] We're glad to have this opportunity. It was so fun.

**Stacey**:  [27:24] We would love to hear your thoughts on this topic. You can find us on Twitter or Facebook @weteachlang. You can comment on any of the episodes on our website at weteachlang.com.

[27:36] Don't forget to tell your friends and colleagues about this show. Please consider leaving us a review on iTunes or on your podcast app of choice to help others find the podcast. Thank you so much for listening. Buh‑bye.

|  |
| --- |
| Podcast transcripts are provided through a partnership with **PEARLL** (Professionals in Education Advancing Research and Language Learning), a Title VI Language Resource Center at the National Foreign Language Center at the University of Maryland. Find additional transcripts: **www.pearll.nflc.umd.edu/podcast** |

Transcription by CastingWords