

Late Summer
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Katherine Langan Answering the Call to Learn Languages



1. What is your main ESL or second-language/multicultural activity now? What are your principal projects, and what is on the back burner?

Since I'm looking for a job this is difficult to answer. I'm hoping to find a position where maintenance bilingual education is considered normative. I would like to deepen and broaden the research which I started on headedness and writing proficiency, perhaps relating the preliminary results or speaking proficiency and to measures of passive proficiency.

One project which I've back-burnered since coming to Kansas is a book on the history of writing systems. Studying the historic process of writing (both in terms of discourse and issues like spelling) can inform the current studies of the developmental issues in both first and second language acquisition, as well as language planning issues for newly written languages.

I would also like to reprise my dissertation research and see if (or how) the patterns of bilingualism, language use and language attitudes have changed in Santo Tomás Chichicastenango.

I would also like to move the research forward on my study of Poqomam Oriental as a boundary variety between K'ichean and Yucatecan languages. There are some interesting features of PO reflective of the processes which occur in contact situations.

2. How did you start your ESL/SLA/linguistics/multicultural career? Who influenced your decision? What were some important formative experiences in the early stages of your development?

I can remember in grade school reading something about Mayan and Aztec languages and deciding it would be fun to learn to speak all the languages of the world. The Latin Mass provided my first opportunity to try and figure out the structure of another language and I listened to opera as a child. So for someone growing up in an almost exclusively Anglo environment, I had enough exposure to be curious. My commitment to linguistics coincided with feeling called by God to work with unwritten languages somewhere in the world. I was a second year forestry major when that happened, but I fell in love with the field and am very glad that I could move into it. The more I learned the more I wanted to learn, both in terms of languages themselves as well as how language works on all levels.

3. What are the four or five language/culture backgrounds with which you are most familiar as a teacher? Which ones are you familiar with from the perspective of a language learner yourself? What insights have you gained in how to meet the needs of learners from these cultures and language backgrounds?

Mostly I've taught Mayans, Hispanics, and Southeast Asians. I have studied a wide number of languages and have gained speaking fluency in about half a dozen with reading fluency in about that many.

4. If you had to give three pieces of advice to a new teacher, what would they be?

Don't be short-changed on linguistic fundamentals. The deeper the knowledge of how languages work the less dependent teachers will be on "methods" and materials. They will be able to figure out what wasn't covered in the course work, workshops and conferences. Learn a second language at least well enough to carry on a conversation, which will give a better sense of what students and their parents have to deal with. Keep reading (ethnographies, ethnographies of communication, descriptions of languages, etc.) and keep an observation journal of issues which come up in the classroom, you never know when you will notice the trend that has stumped you and everyone else for a long time.

Interview by Robb Scott

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