

# Wringing the Neck of the Swan

## Second Language Learning as a Tool for Conviviality

KRISTIN DILLMAN JONES  
*Concordia University Chicago*

**I**N EVERY SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM, in every language dictionary, on every language website, there lives a beautiful swan. No swans were harmed during the writing of this paper; the swan is a metaphor for modernist and industrial methods of learning, borrowed from the Mexican poet Enrique González Martínez (1911/1996) who uses the graceful swan as a symbol for modernism. What is a swan but beautiful? Who would dare to murder this revered creature? Similarly, we dare not kill our sacred cows of education, transportation, and health care. Ivan Illich (1973, 1980a, 1980b) describes the absurdities behind our modernist certainties. We are certain that schooling equals education, that cars equal transportation, and that modern medicine equals healing. Illich loved to challenge us with his “paradoxical aphorisms: schools stupify, cars paralyze, (and) medicine sickens” (Burkart, 2002, p. 155).

In wringing the neck of the swan, I take up the Illichean challenge to break down some of our modernist certainties, specifically in second language learning. We assume that taking language classes taught by professionals equals second language learning, that reading dictionaries and textbooks equals second language learning, and that acquiring standard dialects equals second language learning. I offer here five movements, or narrative discussions, each one an attempt to deconstruct and break down these modern certainties about second language learning. These five movements trace my own language learning journeys and the modernist methods I have experienced. Following these discussions, I propose language learning as a convivial tool; language learning as a convivial tool opens our hearts to learn in the commons from our neighbors and also shatters the current commodification of languages.

In curriculum studies, we often ask large, looming questions such as: What is worth learning and experiencing? Schubert (2008) asks, “What is worth being and doing? Who do we want to become and how can we shape the journey to go there?” (p. 412). Here I also ask what is worth learning and experiencing and particularly *how* we approach our various life curricula. How can we learn languages in ways that build local communities and foster ecological wholeness and interpersonal growth? This question is central for wringing the neck of the swan.

## I. The Elusive German Bible

For years, my grandmother has talked of the German Bible her father used to own. This Bible was to be passed down to one of his children, then to one of their children. No one in my family seems to know quite where the Bible ended up, although we have some guesses; the Bible remains lost. My great-grandfather knew and spoke German, often calling my mom *schatzi*, or dear one. As the family assimilated into the English-speaking American culture, the language and customs my German ancestors brought with them to the United States slowly disappeared with each new generation. Now, though nearly all our ancestors were German, my parents and I know no German language and rarely even acknowledge our German heritage. The German Bible remains as elusive and lost as our family's German heritage.

Recently, I tried to recapture this lost German heritage by teaching myself the language. Instead, I found a swan. The swan led me to dictionaries, workbooks, and websites, but never to a native speaker. Knowing nothing of German pronunciation or grammar, I quickly quit the endeavor. Monolingualism is the assumed norm in the Western world (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 52) although most of the world's population still feels comfortable conversing with their neighbors in multiple languages and dialects (Illich, 1980b). Our industrial minds believe that all languages can simply be translated; there is no need to learn a language and interpret meaning for ourselves (see Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 54). My family, like many American families, remains monolingual and severed from our heritage.

## II. The Lost Celtic World

Another language from my heritage that I long to learn, Gaelic, remains only a dream. Since I know no native speakers and never travel to Ireland, I accept that I will probably never learn this language. The swan leads me to dictionaries, workbooks, and many websites. "Living speech is dismembered by the scribe" (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 12). I want to learn a living language, embedded in a culture, a place, a mythology. I inform the swan that learning Gaelic from the internet or from a book would dismember it.

Our shift from oral to literate discourse (Illich & Sanders, 1988) has become a complete reliance on written language, so that one never needs to hear a language in order to learn it. Even pronunciation can be learned in a dictionary or online. The swan easily shows me access to Gaelic language software, textbooks, and websites. We have shifted so far into a literate discourse that we believe we can learn a foreign language without ever hearing it.

We also believe we can learn a language if we sit in front of a screen, with no actual human contact. Not only have we become a literate society that devalues orality (Illich & Sanders, 1988), we have also now become a society that is slowly attaching every part of our humanity to a computer screen. Barry Sanders (2002) discusses Illich's critique of this phenomenon:

Illich further worries about a system that reduces words to 'message units,' speech to the 'use of language,' and conversation to something called 'oral communication.' I can but stick my pointy nose in the air to sniff out the possible changes. I smell at least one thing rotten, this one image of possible change—the narrowing of interior space. (p. 97)

Irish language remains a highly localized language. The learning of a highly localized language does not exist in a global economy; vernaculars and indigenous languages eventually die out as English spreads (see Esteva & Prakash, 1998; Macedo et al., 2003; Pennycook, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). “At the rate things are going the coming century will see either the death or the doom of 90% of mankind’s languages” (Michael Krauss, quoted in Salzman, 1998, p. 289). Will Gaelic die out before I ever have the chance to travel to Ireland? This is a race against the English hegemony clock. English becomes a world language that not only kills other languages but becomes a substitute for thought (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 109). How many different modes of thinking, mythologies, and perspectives are we killing daily with our insistence on the worldwide spread of English? The spread of English connects people worldwide to the global economy and rarely, if ever, simultaneously preserves the native language. Second language learning becomes a tool for assimilation, native language loss, and membership in the global economy.

Global English exemplifies the industrial mindset, or the opposite of what Wendell Berry (1999) calls agrarian responsibility. An agrarian mindset would mean learning languages in our local communities, from our neighbors. It would mean learning languages in the spirit of conservation: conservation of local languages, cultures, and values. Industrial language learning, what we have now, and what the swan continues to direct us toward, means learning whatever global language will help us advance in the global economy.

Language becomes fragile in our global world. We see the fragility of text as it becomes electronic, just as orality was and is fragile with the coming of literacy (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 73). Language becomes reduced to a system or code, resembling “the exchange of communication between nonhuman entities” (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 114). Language becomes disposable in the electronic age. “That’s the new text—a glowing screen—and that’s the new attitude toward letters—no big deal: easily rearranged, mostly disposable, semipermanent at best” (Sanders, 2002, p. 96).

Gaelic, or Irish language, will vanish with the invasion of Global English, just as the Celtic world vanished after the Roman invasion of Britain. Just as their oral culture gradually faded into the mists with the incoming literate Romans, Gaelic now slowly vanishes with the incoming Global English, both literate and electronic.

### III. Language as Commodity: French and Russian

As a Spanish major in college, I decided to take a year of French classes to broaden my linguistic abilities and because French seemed similar enough to Spanish that I thought I might pick it up easily. I took two classes using *The Captrez Method* (Captrez et al., 1997). We conducted much of the class in French, watched language learning videos without any English, and used a textbook that incorporated cultural learning. The swan led me to many excellent resources. I learned as much French as I could, but I never once stepped foot in France or any other French speaking community. In fact, I have never even met a native speaker of French.

French can be learned anytime, anywhere. It is not connected to any place or community. French, like other Western languages, is standardized (Illich, 1980b). Rehner et al. (2003) describe that vernacular French exists, but only as stigmatized and associated with lower class speakers. When we learn standard, formal French, we never need to place French language in the

context of a community or local culture. We only need access to the right courses, books, or websites. French is just another global commodity to be bought.

Just like French, English has become standardized, one of a few world languages. Our dictionaries prescribe our language more than describe it (Thomas, 1999). Only one dialect is acceptable: Standard English. English has no use for Ebonics (see Salzman, 1998, p. 186), American South dialect, or any other localized version of English. All students must learn Standard English. While I was taking coursework in a Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language (MATESL) program, a professor once told us: “We only teach educated English.” English must be standardized, much as Nebrija’s Spanish in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century (Illich, 1980b). With no standard language, people are free to conduct their local economies in their own local languages (Illich, 1980b). The global economy destroys this autonomy, using standardized language as a form of control. The goal is to “replace the people’s vernacular with the grammarian’s language” (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 67). “Columbus was to open the way to the New World; Nebrija devised a way to control Spanish subjects by providing a way to standardize their language” (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 70). French is one such standardized language. The swan led me to class, dictionaries, videos, even a professor with a near-native accent. The swan never led me to a living community with its own unique dialect and mythology.

This raises important issues for teachers of English as a Second Language (ESL). Should English be taught worldwide? Whose English should be taught? Who would benefit from non-Standard English classes? These and other critical questions are beginning to appear in the ESL research community (Macedo et al, 2003; Pennycook, 1994; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000).

Language, like education, becomes a commodity. I paid my tuition dollars, bought the books, and eight credits of French became the commodity I acquired. With over 375 million native English speakers worldwide, and another billion learning it as a second language (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 23), English language is the new global commodity. We can continue acquiring global languages as commodities, or we can wring the neck of the swan and utilize local languages to find meaning in the commons.

Language learning is not language acquisition. Steven Krashen (1981) first made this distinction, in quite a different way. I would like to offer language pedagogues a different interpretation; *language learning* exists as a tool for convivial living whereas *language acquisition* refers to the acquisition of commodities in a global economy. However, I find it quite appropriate that the TESOL (Teaching English as a Second or Other Language) professional community uses the word *acquisition* so easily, since we consume languages and language certification just as we would any other commodity in what John Dewey (1933) called an acquisitive society. I distinguish the two here in terms of convivial living. Just as Illich (1980a) saw a difference between education *in* life and education *for* life (p. 92), we can learn languages *in* life, or we can learn them *for* life. Foreign language can be something we acquire, *for* life, or it can be a convivial tool of learning, *in* life. Illich similarly draws our attention to the word *acquisition* in educational settings. What was once a verb has become a noun; “‘to learn’ becomes ‘acquisition of credits’” (p. viii). “To learn a second language” has become “acquisition of second language credits.”

“The commodity called ‘education’ and the institution called ‘school’ make each other necessary. The circle can be broken only by a widely shared insight that the institution has come to define the purpose” (Illich, 1973, p. 19). Textbooks, dictionaries, and websites have become the institutional mediums through which we acquire the commodity of second languages. Can we

break the circle by seeing how textbooks, dictionaries, and websites have come to define the purpose of second language learning?

Modernity has distorted second language learning, like other convivial tools, into that which we consume for the global market. We see that after the coming of modernity and the industrial era, commodities replaced convivial tools; “plastic had replaced pottery, carbonated beverages replaced water, Valium replaced chamomile tea, and records replaced guitars” (Illich, 1980a, p. 9). Second language acquisition has replaced second language learning. Rather than using the tools of our communities to satisfy our needs, we turn to the commodities of the industrial era to both define and satisfy our needs. “For the first time, needs have become almost exclusively coterminous with commodities” (Illich, 1980a, p. 13). The global economy defines our need to learn global languages, so we consume them as commodities. Second language learning becomes an economic stepping stone; we learn other languages only to advance ourselves in the global market (see Menard-Warwick, 2008).

French became to me another commodity, a language that I acquired in a classroom, with the aid of textbooks and dictionaries, and never used in any meaningful way to communicate. I never learned it *in* life; I learned it abstractly, in the hopes that one day it might be used *for* life.

After consuming eight credits of French, I felt compelled to consume more. I attempted to learn Russian language in Nizhny Novgorod, where the Olga and Volga rivers meet. This was my introduction to using another language as a convivial tool; I paid to consume my language credits, but unlike my French experience, I began learning language from a living community. I learned the word *дом* (pronounced “dome”) for *house*, not from a vocabulary lesson, but from telling my host mother that I would be returning home.

Text is infused into daily life (see Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 43). Though this was my first exposure to convivial language learning, I was still bound by text. The oral nature of my language learning in the community was contrasted with the textual learning I faced in daily Russian language classes. The grammar and vocabulary lessons did not necessarily strengthen my language abilities in the community. If anything, the classes caused me to constantly refer back to grammatical forms in my mind and lexicon in my dictionary. I felt that the textual learning interfered with and slowed any meaningful oral communication that I wanted to have outside the classroom. I saw a glimpse of convivial language learning, but also how it had very little connection to the classroom language instruction. The swan kept leading me to grammar and vocabulary tests, while I looked out the classroom window at a living community.

#### IV. **שלם שבת**<sup>1</sup>

In graduate school, I took a Hebrew language immersion course for my own personal enjoyment. I longed to learn this ancient language that fascinated me both linguistically and spiritually. I had no idea everyone else in the class was Jewish and already somewhat fluent in Hebrew. The instructor was a woman actually born and raised in Israel, sharing Israeli and Jewish culture with us as much as Hebrew linguistic form. I began to see a unified, holistic approach to language, inseparable from the culture and community where it is spoken.

Similarly, I attended many synagogue services and learned even more Hebrew in the context of a living community. Language occurs in community. The shift from oral to literate discourse meant the development of the individual (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 41).

“We cannot conceive facing each other except as selves. The image of the self that we have inherited seems to us fundamental for western culture” (Illich & Sanders, 1988, p. 73). In leaning Hebrew, I saw myself in others, much as Martin Buber (1970) describes that no *I* exists without *Thou*.

What I describe here is more than a socio-cultural or sociolinguistic approach to language learning (see Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Certainly language learning begins socially and societal factors affect how we learn languages. However, what I describe here is a radical new approach toward education, and language learning more specifically. Language learning as a tool for conviviality is an alternative to industrial and institutional language acquisition. This convivial (Illich, 1980a) approach

is the creation of a radically new relationship between human beings and their environment. A society committed to high levels of shared learning and personal intercourse, free yet critical, cannot exist unless it sets pedagogically motivated constraints on its institutional and industrial growth. (p. 80)

Language learning in a convivial setting is not a commodity to consume; it is a tool that draws us into communal life and meaning-making when we place constraints on the growth of industrial and institutional language learning.

In learning Hebrew during Friday night services, I saw beyond my individuality; I was embraced by a loving community that gathered every week to celebrate life. Certainly I followed along in the service books to try to improve my textual knowledge of Hebrew, but more importantly, I found myself using the language as a tool for conviviality within this religious community. I sang along to beautiful melodies that blur the divisions between individuals, revert to an oral language once sung out in the desert, and recall a celebration by the Sea of Reeds. The swan stayed at home with my Hebrew dictionary and language tapes; I saw a glimpse into learning a language within a convivial community. On Friday nights, I stepped out beyond textual language learning and embraced the communal nature of orality.

## V. Diciendo adiós al cisne<sup>2</sup>

Spanish, my strongest non-native language, also happens to be the non-English language most useful in our immediate community. I began learning Spanish in high school, earned a bachelor’s degree in Spanish, and since then have utilized my language skills in several employment opportunities with Mexican migrant workers and immigrants. Currently, I encourage my children to learn Spanish as an act of social justice.

Throughout our culture, within institutions and between neighbors, we force all incoming immigrants to learn English (see Spring, 2010). We never force ourselves to learn the languages of others, especially the languages of the disenfranchised. A white student might learn Spanish to someday become the manager over their Mexican workers, and even this is done by choice. We do not give immigrants a choice; they learn English often at the cost of their own native language and native culture (Spring, 2010). As an act of social justice, and at the very least an act of solidarity, we might humbly learn Spanish because we no longer want to enforce English-only policies that deny all other languages or dialects in the public sphere.

Language learning is not a one-way road; we white suburbanites need to learn Spanish as much as Mexican migrant workers and immigrants need to learn English if we are to share a convivial life in the commons. However, here in the suburbs, we experience a language learning disconnect. We encourage our children to learn second languages, like Spanish, but only through particular mediums. My daughter learns words like *arriba* and *uno, dos, tres* through *Dora the Explorer*© (Nick Jr., 2010), yet never has a conversation with the Mexican landscape workers five feet outside our door. We want our children to learn Spanish, but never from the actual speakers. As they get older, they can take classes in public schools or we hire tutors. The swan leads us and our children in many directions, but never toward the Mexican migrant workers or immigrants working in our lawns and restaurants. In our move away from an oral discourse to a literate one, we have separated speech from the speaker (Illich, 1988, p. 44).

We have also focused exclusively on literate and textual learning of Spanish. When we start our Spanish learning in classrooms and textbooks—as my own learning of Spanish started—we reveal our inclination toward literacy and dismissal of orality.

Orality provides the armature, the shaping force for literacy. For me, literacy begins there, in orality, with the broad stroking of the mother's tongue—freedom to roam, freedom to explore. Literacy heaps on that unboundedness a large helping of rules—of complete sentences, correct spelling, exact punctuation, syntax, tone, and on and on. (Sanders, 2002, p. 94)

Hurley and Tinajero (2001) describe the importance of oral language development in second language learning. Oral language builds a foundation for reading; oral language is also how second language learners initially encounter the second language, only later extending their skills to textuality (p. 32). Why then do we not acknowledge the important role of orality in second language learning? Why not have second language learning start with meaningful oral language encounters in the commons? Perhaps our colonialist and hegemonizing discourse too often prevents us from opening our doors, and our hearts, to speak with the Mexicanos/as, Puertorriqueños/as, and other Latinos/as in our communities.

Sanders (2002) claims that orality begins with mother's tongue. What happens when mother's tongue is replaced by Nick Jr.? What would language learning look like based in the orality of family and community rather than the orality of television and internet? I struggle with these questions as my three-year-old learns most of her Spanish from *Dora the Explorer*©. I struggle with her discomfort in using Spanish to talk with Mexican waiters.

A language learning experience rooted in convivial interaction with native speakers would involve a radical new attitude toward the other. We need to analyze our racist and colonizing discourses that have shaped our American identity for centuries. We need to ask ourselves why we are fine with turning on *Dora the Explorer*© but not comfortable talking with working-class Mexicans five feet outside our front door.

Spanish becomes a language of the oppressed. With subtractive ESL programs in schools, Spanish becomes a second rate language (Valenzuela, 1999, p. 162). We implicitly tell our students that only English is a valued language; Spanish is disposable. However, Spanish also becomes a global language, taught and learned world-wide. We teach and learn Spanish to secure global jobs that require bilingualism, or we learn it in order to manage low-level workers. Even as a global language, Spanish becomes a language of the under-class; only English will secure the jobs associated with power.

In comparing the different ways I have learned languages, I began to see that some methods contained everything I wanted from language learning—conviviality, togetherness, engagement in the community—while others promoted the same consumerism and institutional dependence that plague our entire culture. I conclude here with three alternatives to the swan’s modernist methods to promote these life-affirming aspirations:

1. *Second language learning should be a convivial tool that helps families move toward producing and meaning-making rather than industrial acquiring and consuming.* “Both the school and the family teach children how to be consumers” (Sandlin & McLaren, 2010, p. 8). Language learning can be the tool that helps families navigate their lives away from consumption and toward conviviality, particularly in a time when parents find it difficult to distinguish between educative/informative aids and commercialism (Martens, 2010). Language learning from native speakers in the community can direct parents toward meaningful interaction and dialogue rather than bearing the burdensome task of distinguishing educative aids from commercialism.

An alternative to consumerism, Illich’s (1973) conviviality is “autonomous and creative intercourse among persons, and ... of persons with their environment” (p. 11). We as a society would “guarantee for each member the most ample and free access to the tools of the community” (p. 12). Second language learning becomes a tool for cultivating meaningful interactions with others and our environment.<sup>3</sup> When we learn a language in a classroom, we not only become disconnected from one another, but we also limit access to language learning (often based on socioeconomic status). If we reconceptualize second language learning as a tool for conviviality, the urban homeless man can learn Spanish as easily as the privileged Harvard student.

2. *Second language learning should be a convivial tool that reshapes our conception of how we learn languages.* Rather than learning languages from actual speakers of a language, we learn them through industrial means (e.g., textbooks, classes, and websites). Before the standardization of language,

language was drawn by each one from the cultural environment, learned from the encounter with people whom the learner could smell and touch, love or hate. ... Speech resulted from conversation embedded in everyday life, from listening to fights and lullabies, gossip, stories, and dreams. (Illich, 1980b)

We also currently learn languages exclusively from professionals, with the rare exception of groups like those found at Meetup (2010). Second languages are currently a restricted tool “becoming the monopoly of one profession” (Illich, 1973, p. 22). Immigrants must take ESL classes from certified teachers. College students must prove proficiency in a second language through coursework with some certified professional. One must have money to have access to language learning. One must have few socioeconomic barriers in order to learn another language (as defined by modern society). A reconceptualization of second language learning as a tool for conviviality means that we rupture the notion that we learn languages only from professionals. We learn languages from our neighbors, who may be landscape workers and restaurant cooks, not necessarily from language professionals.

Books, tapes, and internet resources all become supplemental to convivial interaction with native speakers. Certainly classroom foreign language teaching will not disappear; certainly dictionaries, grammar books, and language websites will remain helpful for learners. What I



suggest here is that these all become supplemental to the oral nature of language learning that starts in the commons, interacting with the native speakers of your local community. This alternative approach to language learning is rooted in the commons, but even second language classrooms can incorporate this reconceptualized approach through planned interaction with native speakers and class field trips to visit various target language groups throughout the community. This involves a classroom, school, and community partnership as well as a commitment to prioritize experiential learning the local community. This also involves a commitment to a radically new (and ancient) approach to language learning; it also requires a commitment to renew the commons.

3. *Second language learning should be a convivial tool that helps Americans (and curriculum theorists!) broaden our definition of education.* In one sense, we can expand our conception of education to include more life experiences and community resources. We severely limit access to language learning in schools, creating a narrow definition of literacy and education (see Nicholson, 1999; Warriner, 2007). Learning a language from a native speaker in a local context opens up opportunities for language diversity, both in urban areas and rural areas, especially those with migrant workers and immigrants. Schools discourage children to be bilingual (Crawford, 2001; Tse, 2001), though our communities are richly diverse in languages. Using language learning as a tool for conviviality leads us to encourage bilingualism in each other.

In another sense, we might take a closer look at convivial tools that directs us more toward human interaction and less toward computer screens. Even second language learning on the internet often hides ideological agendas, attaching us further to the market economy (Stapleton, 2005). Language learning as a convivial tool directs us away from the internet, away from the global market economy, and toward personal interaction. As Meetup (2010) advocates, we need “more face-to-face time and less face-to-screen time.”

This reconceptualization of second language learning must also include a commitment to learning local languages. My desire to learn Gaelic remains secondary to my desire to interact meaningfully with the Spanish speakers around us. We must also make language learning an issue of justice, or equal access for all. It means connecting speech to the speaker. It means using an agrarian mindset to learn languages locally, and from our neighbors. It means using language in the commons, not on Facebook.

Language itself is not the end, but the means toward convivial life; language learning becomes a tool for conviviality. The swan of modernist language learning does not lead us to each other but to further commodification and industrialization. As we reconceptualize second language learning as a tool for conviviality, we wring the neck of the swan. I wring the neck of the swan, not as an act of violence, but of mercy. I lay the swan to rest, then greet my neighbor with a warm *buenos días*.

## Notes

1. Shabbat Shalom
2. Saying goodbye to the swan.
3. Vygotsky (1987) first analyzed language as a tool for social meaning-making. Illich (1973) further claims that tools, like language, should be freely accessible to all, should help direct us away from an identity of mere consumerism, should give us autonomy, and should draw us toward collective meaning-making. Vygotsky saw tools as psycho-social meaning-making instruments; Illich too believed this but added a historical and political context to the idea of societal tools.

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