Colleen Coffey and Mark Knowles
Interview Transcription

**Mark:** I’m here with Colleen Coffey from Marquette University and I want to know what was the moment that caused you to want to get into language teaching? Or to learn languages altogether?

**Colleen:** I think that the first time that I thought about languages was learning about other places. The motivation for me was having a curiosity about other people and other places. It really wasn’t about a conscious thing about communicating, it was about understanding people.

**Mark:** And how old were you?

**Colleen:** I had an aunt who introduced me to this concept of exotic places, who was living in Bolivia and came back to visit maybe once every one or two years. And I remember that as early as maybe seven or eight years old. I think about seven years old, I was introduced to this idea. She came back and she drew a humungous mural, four walls of llamas in the basement of my Grandmother’s house, and as a child you can’t imagine sort of what that does to you. So you’re thinking, “what is that? And what are these mountains?” so it kind of, you know, pinched a curiosity. Maybe it was six, but it was a long time ago.

**Mark:** Did you go to South America as your first major destination?

**Colleen:** I did, but it wasn’t to visit her. I was a foreign exchange student to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, when I was 16. But I definitely think that her exotic kind of visits with all of these stories about colonies and different places in Bolivia were the reason that I wanted to be a foreign exchange student.

**Mark:** So, I’m gonna change gears a little bit now and talk a little bit more about lean learning, and what you do with virtual immersion. You said that students learn as much in their L1 as they do in their L2. Could you explain a little bit more about that?

**Colleen:** I think I’m remembering the context, but they learn as much in their L1 as they do in their L2 in the context of the virtual immersion, because as it’s a dual-immersion dynamic, they’re able to gain concepts. Until their language has developed to a superior level or an advanced high, they’re able to get windows into concepts, cultural concepts, linguistic concepts, even concepts about process of language learning. During the English portion, for our people, during the English portion of the session, and when they’re in the Spanish portion of the session, or in the French portion of the session, or in the Arabic portion of the session, they’re very much focused on surviving and being able to maintain some form of communication. So I would say their critical thinking is in different levels, and the English portion fills in the blanks there and pushes it a little bit.
Mark: So the cultural side of thing comes out strong in English in a way, right? That’s kind of where they’re doing a lot of that processing.

Colleen: They are able to negotiate cultural meaning in the target language as well, but I think that there are some things that they can fill in by being able to support the other learner and the target language of the other learner. It fills in some of what’s going on for them.

Mark: One of the reasons I ask that question is I almost hear a little resistance from some teachers about that, especially given the communicative approach, which has always had an insistence, maybe not always, but often has had a resistance to lapsing into English. Have you felt any of that in your experience?

Colleen: Oh, absolutely. And I certainly don’t condone holding language classes in English. I don’t think that’s what I’m getting at. But what I’m talking about is that form and content have different-there are different things that are going on. And so linguistically, we’re able to match it pretty well when we’re able to navigate where they’re at. But when it comes to having a foundation for motivation and understanding of a human person, another human being, being able to do that in both languages offers some angles and advantages that give learners more motivation to engage in the target language than actually cheating, or finding a short route to constantly translating. I don’t think the way that English is being used only for- it’s not being used for translation or as a crutch to avoid the target language, I think it’s being used to support the target language. And as long as there’s a learning environment where that objective is named and everyone’s clear about it, and the training and the strategy is laid out, I think it’s very functional. I think what happens is we think about, historically, everyone kind of going into these dialogues that we had and then what does that mean. And I don’t think that’s what we’re talking about. I think we’re talking about gaining an understanding towards a process and a people to make us want to jump in even further.

Mark: The other thing that anyone who looks at what you’re doing would say is you’ve got 25 minutes a week with a native speaker, and you’re using the L2 during those 25 minutes, which is a lot more than we’ve done probably in the hundreds of years in the past that we’ve done foreign language teaching.

Colleen: Right. And the other thing that’s very clear is if we do 25 minutes in L1 and 25 minutes in L2, we are very regimented in negotiating linguistic and intercultural meaning exclusively in those languages during those times. So we’re not mixing, which is very similar to the theories that you’re talking about. We’re not encouraging and we don’t allow, we try to support students in only using that one language during that one time. But what we find is by allowing them to engage and conversation in their native language, they’re also able to gain insight. But of course, negotiation of meaning we want done in the target language as much as possible for those strategies.

Mark: Again, going from that subject to a new one. How do we set up the expert events? How do you find these experts?
Colleen: I think that if you’re able to think a little bit out of the box in terms of how we operate in our own culture and how we’re able to meet people and learn about exciting things that go on where we live, and you transfer that logic into another place, and then you put on top of that the opportunity that technology and information sharing offers to someone in our world today, it doesn’t take much to find somebody. I think as I’ve been able to brainstorm, it’s not really about who you know, it’s about what you want to know; it’s about what subject you want to gauge around, and then inviting people into that process. And what I found is there are many more doors that are open for collaborative sharing. Very talented, busy people with a lot of things to do in their life are more than happy to contribute to a learning partnership around a subject area that they are passionate about. And the opportunity to do so, to young people, is usually met with open arms. So this idea of “Well, I don’t know anybody”…The issue isn’t knowing anyone, the issue is can you logically find information about something and then can you connect who’s affiliated with that information and invite them. That’s how it’s done.

Mark: Do the schools ask you to find English-speaking experts and if so, does your class ever attend those expert events?

Colleen: We’ve had a couple. I mean, that’s kind of a new concept and I know it’s not new in the world, but it’s new in the network, and I’ve been kind of the one who’s crazy enough to push it out there more than others because there is a certain amount of anxiety that people have with having this whole thing work out. I mean, you do have to depend on technology and depend on things working out in a way that would make everyone feel that they’re not wasting their time, that they’re not waiting around for a microphone to work, and that kind of thing. And I’ve been able to have a certain amount of ease with going through those situations. So we have had a few. What I have done is I’ve found some really interesting experts in English, perhaps not affiliated with my university, but that would help people motivate- motive them towards cultural learning and intercultural learning and linguistic competency. And we’ve rolled out some of those options and they’ve been received pretty warmly. So I think there’s interest, but it’s an evolving program.

Mark: Talk about how you enlist the use of a traditional textbook to help you achieve your goals in virtual immersion.

Colleen: Usually there’s a couple of components that I’m looking for. It’s a scanning process, really. The first thing I scan for is content. I’m scanning thematic threads that I can pull through the semester. And then I’m scanning for communicative functions that I want to achieve with conversations. And ones that are most useful, that make sense, and where I’m going to or I have a history of getting the most amount of retention possible, where the learner seems to be able to get some form of the gist of it, you know. And then what I do is I try to weave those two things into discussion tables- I try to use ones I’ve already developed. I’ve developed 26 that are already pretty well ready to go for a lot of different textbook thematic topics. But if it isn’t, let’s say there’s a reading in the book and I decide that I want to do a pre-reading about it in a
conversation so my students are fully activated and they’ve had a conversation about maybe what the highest form of discussion we would have. Then I would create my own, and I would always provide vocabulary, subtopics, and then sample questions and answers. Everything that I do in the curriculum now—whether it’s a class discussion, it’s preparation for an exchange session, it’s a reflection, or it’s exams—has to do with asking and answering questions. It’s the baseline for all proficiency.

**Mark:** But some of it may not actually be based on the textbook—a large part of it is, but some of the conversation tables might be sortof-

**Colleen:** And the structure. And the structure of the textbook I may not follow at all.

**Mark:** So you can switch from one chapter to another, go backwards, go forwards.

**Colleen:** One of the things that’ I’m drawn to now is I’m using an open-source textbook that’s web-based. And the reason that I’m using that is because it facilitates a non-linear process that’s much better for me.

**Mark:** Could you just name that textbook?

**Colleen:** Sure. It’s a project that’s been carried about by the University of Kansas, by Dr. Amy Rosemundo and Jonathan Perkins and it’s open and free to all. In fact, if you email them, they will give you access to the back end where they have a lot of questions and it’s a very brilliant concept that they have, and you can find that if you Google KU Acceso, you can find it.

**Mark:** I think this is a related question. You talked about the fast train that makes it feel impossible to keep up. How does virtual immersion help quell that panicky feeling?

**Colleen:** The train part that I’m referring to is the interaction part of the session, and there’s no way around the experience the first time that someone starts talking at you and you’re not sure if you get it or not. But there’s a lot of emotion around that, whether they’re understand it, they’re not understanding it. And the sooner that you’re able to engage in that process, and figure out what to do when the train takes off, the faster you’re able to engage in the linguistic process because there’s a whole bunch of that process that isn’t linguistic, it’s emotional, and it could even block you emotionally in order for you to not pay attention linguistically or cause you stress so you’re not able to create the forms that you’ve studied 8 years in books. So what virtual immersion does is it provides you opportunity to learn strategies and employ strategies that, while the train is moving at 100 miles an hour, you can continue to engage and you can figure it out, and you can ask the train to slow down a little bit, or you can ask for clarification, or you can repeat what the train has said. They’re strategies that we need in everyday life, but they’re hard for us as language teachers that are so trained in a method that talks about asking a student to repeat that, could you please repeat that, could you slow down, let me see if I heard you correctly. I never knew that we needed to know that when we were communicating until I started teaching using virtual immersion.
Mark: Are there any particular resources that you’ve relied on to help give you ideas about strategies?

Colleen: No. The resources that I’ve used the most are watching my students in immersion environment and encountering what they need as bridges to continue the conversation. They don’t need to take themselves away from the conversation, they need to engage in the conversation so it’s how do they manipulate the train? That’s the key to this whole thing. If they can go and they can figure out how they can engage with the train, then they feel that it’s part of their process, and when we have the train moving at only 2 miles an hour in a classroom, or 3 miles an hour in a classroom, and we never ask them to slow it down ‘cause there’s no need, students, or learners, are not equipped with the tools they need to be in what their end goal is, which is to communicate with native speakers. So the idea of having the fastest train you can find isn’t a terrible idea if the students are able to strategize. So I’ve drawn out my own curriculum from watching them. There’s only about 80 phrases that they need to be able to dance with the train. It’s so simple it doesn’t even make sense.

Mark: Right, but the fact that there’s video probably helps too, because you can sort of read the facial expressions.

Colleen: And there’s chat. And you can ask them to write, but asking them to write is also a way that they can help manipulate the train. You can ask somebody to write when you’re ordering from the deli, too, and they might even write it for you.

Mark: Maybe give me one example. Let’s say I’m having trouble actually understanding the person that I’m talking to, and I want them to repeat it. How do I do that gracefully, so that I don’t look foolish?

Colleen: Well, the beauty of this is that your confidence is built in sort of a pre-existing contract of it being safe to learn. There’s two people in the same situation, there’s no power struggle, so it’s kind of a good practice place for them to be. That said, they can equip themselves with the phrases they need, so by the time they’re done with their 8 or 10 sessions for that semester, they won’t be struggling with their self-confidence when they leave. I mean, one of the biggest things that our students have reported, you know, 85 percent have said that they’re more willing to initiate a conversation- I mean, to initiate a conversation with a native speaker after this- because all of the bugs have already been worked out. These are students that still won’t participate in our controlled classroom, but when it comes the opportunity to do something that’s real, they’ll initiate a conversation. So an example would be, somebody saying something- the first things that are cleared out is ‘can you hear me.’ So that’s safe, you gotta work on your equipment, we have to see if our equipment’s working. Can you see me, can you hear me? That’s all neutral. And then you get into other things like they ask a question and you know, ‘what did you do yesterday?’ Depending on how that question is asked, I might understand you and I might not. So I say, ’Excuse me? I’m sorry, can you tell me again?’ “Oh, I was just asking what did you do yesterday? Did you have a good
weekend?”… ‘Oh, weekend! Weekend. You asked me about my weekend?’… “Yes, I asked you about your weekend.”… ‘Can you write that for me please? Oh, right! What did I do yesterday? Perfect, okay great. This last weekend let’s see, what did I do?’… So it becomes kindof a slow motion conversation, but all of those things that the student does, the student is doing it. I’m not doing it and an instructor, as an educator, I’m not doing it. The student’s doing it, and their friend’s doing it. And they tend to remember them more, they can actually visualize what that word looks like in the chat, and they remember the last time. ‘What did you do yesterday? How was your weekend?’ The next week they come back on, they say ‘How was your weekend?’ It’s just like being abroad. Same 15 lines that you practice when you go into a café, right?

**Mark:** Does the inclusion of culture add to the panicky feeling of- because you can see that it’s- you can talk to people, but when you then get into something a little closer to the bone as culture, that seems to add to not just the cognitive burden, but the emotional burden.

**Colleen:** Well, it’s usually an initial. It’s like a ghost that they think is there, and it’s really not there. Everyone talks about culture, but what it’s really about is human beings, right? And until the student or the learners in their learning partnership realize that they’re really both human, and they’re connecting with one another as humans, they pretty much get down to brass tacks within one or two sessions of not really having all that many differences. They’re quite alike, actually. We try to match people up who are the same age, so they can have a curiosity about one another. That really works. And the greatest thing about it is it teaches intercultural competency more than anything that we do in the classroom, because we usually focus on ‘look at this!’ and ‘look at that song!’ and what’s different. And what these learners experience is, ‘I thought this was all gonna be different. I mean, that’s all we talk about, that’s all the media talks about!’ And what it’s really about is how we’re all the same. So it is like the iceberg coming to fruition. Once you get over the fact that there might be something weird, like someone answers their cell-phone during a session, and you say ‘well, we’re not allowed to do that in our school, and so-and-so can do that.’ That’s a curiosity, but I would have to say the ghost isn’t there, and they realize that there’s no ghost. The cultural ghost of ‘Ooh, I don’t know what I’m gonna do.” And the way they have described it to me on surveys is it’s a feeling that’s worth getting nervous for, the feeling that they have- which is definitely one of apprehension- it’s worth every ounce of it because they come through the other side and they realize that it’s really about connecting with people. That’s the number one motivation they have.

**Mark:** That’s very cool. You mention somebody named Wheatly who says that it gets messy sometimes. Do you have any- and I forgot her first name.

**Colleen:** Margaret.

**Mark:** Okay, so you mention Margaret Wheatly who says that it gets messy sometimes. Do you have any inclination to give us an example of that, a real world example?
**Colleen:** Yeah, Margaret Wheatly is a wonderful writer and speaker and world leader that has gone around teaching us how to connect more with one another. And she’s very concerned about the fact that we’re becoming disconnected, and that the whole reason that we grew together to begin with, even a family unit, was because that was the natural part of who we needed and that the alienation of ourselves is participating in a lot of the fears and the panic and the anxiety in the world that causes a lot of problems. So I use her as a teacher to mentor for all of us to follow, because what we really do with this virtual immersion is we’re bringing people together. We’re bringing people back together, and it’s through conversation that she says this can be achieved most. And it’s on an occasion of this conversation that she has these principles. And one of the principles is it can get messy sometimes, so we should be prepared for that. And in real life it’s the same, you know? It’s not just because it’s on a computer and you’re talking to a different culture. I mean, people don’t like to deal with conflict, and they don’t like to deal with differences. But what’s great about it is because there’s a different culture, or cultural and a linguistic thing, we have to already talk about it, we have to tell each other that it’s okay to talk about it now, it’s not okay to talk about it with the professor who has the office next to yours, but it’s okay to talk about it because we’re gonna go to a different culture. And the one I can think of that’s the most hysterical is a student who was on and was getting very offended. “This is ridiculous! This guy’s not talking to me!” And I see that there’s some distress going on, so I went over and I said “What’s going on here?” and “I don’t know, he doesn’t wanna talk to me!” and I said “Well, can you give me some ideas of what he said?” So, I don’t remember the topic of the conversation, and he said “I not listen you, I not listen you.” It was in the English portion. But to listen and to hear is the same word in Colombia. They use ‘escuchar’ in Colombia for both. And he was translating ‘escuchar’ into English. She says, “He says he doesn’t wanna listen to me!” and became very offended. And they both were very hot-headed about it and so the intervention is, I said “I think I know what happened here.” And I told the teacher, because I think he was upset on the other side, and we took it as an opportunity to teach them first, and then the entire group of how a word, and a translation, can change everything. And it was wonderful, but it was messy first. And then we went to where the mess was, and we understood it, it was the understanding.

**Mark:** I’ve heard it said that it’s like we’re going to be wrestling in mud. And I think that’s true and I also just read a passage by a student at the University of California who said, “It is like wrestling in mud, and then after you wrestle for a while, the mud turns to water,” which I think is a very beautiful way of describing it.

**Colleen:** They’ve documented since 2007, collectively, I’ve never had an incident that has turned someone off. If anything, they have agreed to disagree over certain things. It’s not a lot that it even happens where they’re disagreeing, most of the time there’s understanding. But more things come up in these conversations than you would think. Many more things come up- especially because we do treat the conversations, we do provide a theme, and we do direct subtopics. And we’re asking them to go into some pretty courageous terrain- Identity, Beauty, Social Causes.

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Mark: Well, I really want to thank you very much. It’s been a wonderful time to have you here and I certainly hope that we can continue with this.

Colleen: Me too. Thank you very much.