

Abby Broughton  
Reflections on Teaching  
2015

### Tennessee Foreign Language Teaching Association 2015 Conference

I attended the Tennessee Foreign Language Teaching Association's (TFLTA) annual conference in Franklin, TN for the first time on November 6, 2015. Though we all teach different levels and ages, everyone was there with one common goal – to learn more about the world of foreign language teaching in order to foster self-improvement and growth as language instructors. Meeting with second-language education teachers is inspiring and helpful. As an instructor who works with university students, it is important to understand the role foreign language played in their lives before coming to Vanderbilt and the type of instruction they received. While at the TFLTA conference, I attended one panel specific to my language group and one meant for a general audience.

The first panel I attended was given by Korey Wheatley, a high school French teacher in Knoxville, TN. Entitled “Stromae: Est-il un vrai « Maestro » ?,” Wheatley’s presentation detailed how she incorporates the works of Belgian musician Stromae into all of her French courses. Prepared with handouts for the audience members, Wheatley played interviews and music videos and walked the audience through how the songs can highlight and reinforce different grammatical structures and other topical course material. For first-year French students, the internationally well-known song “Alors on danse” can be used to emphasize regular “er” verbs. “Papaoutai” is useful when going over commands and questions. As students advance into second year French, the song “Carmen” highlights 19<sup>th</sup> century opera culture and brings in issues of social media addiction. Finally, for third-year students and beyond, the song “Quand c’est” deals with death, cancer and the French tendency toward homophones. For Wheatley, the classroom is a safe space where students can explore mature themes and ask difficult questions. During her presentation, she said, “You have to be willing to talk. You have to be willing to answer those questions.” Because she has the same students for all four years of high school, Wheatley considers herself also to play the role of a parent to students in need. Her motto is, “You have to know your kids.” Wheatley uses Stromae’s music to inspire her students to step outside of their comfort zone in order to explore universal real-world issues through the French language. Her resources are easily adaptable for university students as well, and I look forward to following her lead in my own classroom, both in using her suggested grammar exercises and in emulating her inspiring attitude toward her students.

After discussing the role of pop music in the foreign language classroom, I switched gears completely and sat in on Errol O’Neill’s workshop regarding Technologies for L2 Writing. O’Neill, an assistant professor of French at the University of Memphis, is currently conducting research on student use of online and computer technologies. After a brief overview of these types of technologies, namely online dictionaries (i.e. wordreference.com) and online translating programs (i.e. Google Translate), O’Neill introduced the results of his research. What was most interesting about his approach was the focus on online translating programs. Banned for use on graded assignments at most universities throughout the country (including Vanderbilt), O’Neill found that 75-80% of the French and Spanish university students polled admit to using online translators at least sometimes for graded assignments, even when aware that they are not allowed. This news was frankly surprising, as we tend to trust our students to follow the rules

and the school honor policy. O'Neill's upcoming research project will focus on how the use of online translators affects L2 learning and retention. O'Neill's presentation stressed the need for educators to realize how students are using technology in order to integrate it in the classroom instead of rejecting it in an uninformed way. He then demonstrated Google Translate's new features, such as the ability to define independent words and look through suggested translations in order to select the one that best matches the intended meaning. Though I fear that a reliance on online translators will hinder student comprehension and retention of the foreign language, O'Neill is not wrong to suggest that they do have value for the L2 learner. The results of his upcoming study will indeed be curious!

Thanks to Wheatley and O'Neill, I am more informed about my discipline, excited to share music with my students, and am now aware of what may or may not be happening in my own classroom regarding the use of online translators. The TFLTA conference holds so much value for the foreign language teacher. We are all working toward a common goal, and it is important to build relationships within the community in order to support one another as second-language education evolves throughout the twenty-first century.