

Podcast 441: Cultivating Language Arts in Another Language, Part 1

Episode Transcript

Andrew Pudewa: What's the trick here to really break through in terms of fluency? And I realized that one of the most powerful aspects of the Suzuki Method was memorized repertoire.

Julie Walker: Hello, and welcome to the Arts of Language Podcast with Andrew Pudewa, founder of the Institute for Excellence in Writing or as many like to say, "IEW." My name is Julie Walker, and I'm honored to serve Andrew and IEW as the chief marketing officer. Our goal is to equip teachers and teaching parents with methods and materials, which will aid them in training their students to become confident and competent communicators and thinkers.

Julie Walker: So, Andrew, as we've talked about many times here, you spend a lot of your summer traveling.

Andrew Pudewa: I do. And while I'm pretty sick of restaurants, a little less sick of hotels and TSA checkpoints, I really do love being out there meeting new families that just came into. Homeschooling, teacher conferences. I've done a few of those. And then of course, meeting people who've been using our stuff or following me for some time. And I love it when people say, "I listen to every episode of your podcast. It's so good. Say hi to Julie for me." So there are a lot of people, probably more than we imagined.

Julie Walker: Yes. Well, I like to think that when we have our podcasts, we're inviting people in a little bit into our world and what we're experiencing. One of the talks I'd like to make kind of the center of our podcast today is the *Cultivating Language Arts: Preschool through High School*, that talk that you give at conferences. I remember the very first time I actually sat in on that talk, I thought, "Oh, this is a great talk because not only do you give some really practical advice of what to do at these various ages, you actually mention some products that families can use." You noticed that I was in the talk and you looked at me almost like with that look on your face that said, see, I did that just for you.

Andrew Pudewa: We do have a slightly different approach to the same end. I like to, as much as possible, just teach people useful and valuable stuff. And then kind of say, Oh yeah, and we have some things that would help you with that. Whereas your job is to let everyone know in a more explicit and complete way, all the things we have available.

Julie Walker: Right.

Andrew Pudewa: I am in trouble though because that talk, it was packed when I started it. And then we actually kind of divided it into mostly preschool through middle school. And then I had an entire talk *Hacking High School*. But it's problematic because recently someone gave me three hours to do that talk.

Julie Walker: Oh my word.

Andrew Pudewa: It was so fun. It was delightful. I was just able to unpack and explore and move. And I thought, Oh, this is dangerous because now we may have to like separate them all out and have four hours of talks. But everything's scalable, but there is so much embedded value. It's like thirty years of my experience compressed into that one talk.

Julie Walker: Exactly. And listener, lest you think that that's what we're actually going to be talking about today, we're not. We're going to be tagging on a different spin on this talk. But if you are interested in hearing the one hour talk, I guess now a truncated talk, we will have a link for that in the show notes. And we'll see if we can find some links also to the *Hacking High School* because we did that as a podcast. We talked about that.

Andrew Pudewa: Right. We have some talks recorded.

Julie Walker: Yes, we do

Andrew Pudewa: So the video is available online.

Julie Walker: Yep. We're and we're working to add more, always

Andrew Pudewa: You have a spin.

Julie Walker: I do have a spin. Well, it's because more and more people are finding out who we are and what we do from all over the world. Every time we do a live event, which we usually do a couple every year, where it's completely free, just come on in, we'll put it on our YouTube channel, and you can attend live, you can answer questions. We get people from like 50 different countries, and there was one story, and we tell this story often because it's just so darling. Someone wanted to enter our drawing, but she didn't understand what that meant.

Andrew Pudewa: She was from Pakistan, if I recall, which how anyone from Pakistan even found out about us or this event. And so she went to enter our drawing for free stuff.

Julie Walker: And so she actually drew with her colored pencils, a little picture of the Structure and Style for Students: Year 1 Level B, there it is. And that's not how you enter a drawing. You just put your name in an email and we put your name, you

Andrew Pudewa: Obviously there was a lost in translation there because what's a drawing? Well, if English is your second language, it would make sense. You draw something as opposed to what else we call it, a lottery, a chance at winning, a raffle.

Julie Walker: yeah, but a drawing is typically what we call it. And I get that. I am trying to learn Spanish, and so I practice my vocabulary every day, and we've got someone on our team who speaks Spanish fluently. And we are actually working to translate some of our materials into Spanish so that you can *enseñado*, which is teaching, writing, *escritorio*. And I can't say the whole thing, but the whole idea of *Teaching Writing: Structure and Style*, we're working to translate that so families who speak Spanish can have some materials. We have Spanish

subtitles on our teacher training course, but there are so many languages, Andrew. And so my question is, and I'm not sure we can answer this in one episode, maybe we can, cultivating language arts preschool through high school—are there some things, some advice that you can give to families who perhaps English is not their first language and they want to teach their children English.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, let's back up slightly for anyone who's not already familiar with our idea of language arts, because in that talk, I pointed out that I don't like the term language arts because in the schooly world kind of evokes a whole lot of yucky stuff all at once. So you have to get your handwriting and phonics for reading and then spelling, and then you have to have reading comprehension, and then you have to have grammar, and then you have to have composition, and then probably some literary analysis.

Oh, don't forget public speaking, and who knows what other stuff is all thrown into that idiom.

Julie Walker: Right?

Andrew Pudewa: So I was talking to this superintendent of a school district and I said, I don't like the term and he said, well, that's because you don't know what they are. And so I took a little humble pill. Okay. And that's where I first heard this idea. And this was, oh, gosh, 16 years ago.

Julie Walker: Mm. More than that, I think. Yeah.

Andrew Pudewa: And he said, well, there's only four in a more classical way of thinking, and they are listening, speaking, reading, writing. And then he said this super intelligent thing. And this, I'd already been thinking in this direction with my Nurturing Competent Communicators idea and all that. But what he said is one of our problems in schools, As we work so hard to try and teach reading and writing because we test those, but we give short shrift to listening and speaking because we don't assess those things. And what we've unpacked many times is that the listening and speaking are really the foundation of the reading and writing.

And so, along with kind of the *Nurturing Competent Communicators* theme, and then another talk I developed, *Copywork to Composition: Learning Writing Through Imitation*, trying to bring as much as possible to parents to understand that if they attend to those aspects—listening and speaking—then the reading and writing goes so much better. And so, I think that's very cross applicable to anyone trying to learn any language,

Julie Walker: Yes. Okay. And, of course, that listen, speak, read, write, and then adding the think, that's part of our tagline for IEW because of the research, because of that conversation you had with that superintendent.

Andrew Pudewa: I think it all was very alchemical in the way it came about. I'm very grateful for him. I believe he has since left working in public schools and now teaches at a university. I'm sure his students are blessed. He's a brilliant guy. So I guess we would start with listening. This is a point where I don't think we necessarily have the same conditions of having a low level of English in everybody's daily world, peers, busy parents, media. I think people trying to learn a foreign language are, in general, a little bit more attentive to. We have to create an environment here where people can hear the language. If you're living in the country of the language you're trying to learn, that's, of course, much easier. I know when we went to South America with my, I had five, five children to South America. And we're there for a few months. And one of the kids in particular, I think was at a sensitive period. And she wanted to watch soap opera, like daytime TV shows, in Spanish and she, to this day, will say, I think I learned so much from watching these shows because it was kind of simplified language, paced in a way that wasn't squeezed between the busyness of all life, controlled environment, so the vocabulary is somewhat limited.

So, that's an interesting thing. I don't know what the moral or literary quality of these shows were. I would guess it's possible they were better than most American shows, but it was native speakers in Spanish, acting and doing daily life kinds of little drama. And so that struck me at the time. Oh, she thought this was one of the best things. And she said, Oh, I learned that on the TV. So. I guess television can have its place.

Then you could supplement that with language that's not too far above the child's comprehension level because you don't want to blow them away and have nothing make sense at all. But I think it would be interesting to find, say, Aesop fables or nursery rhyme style of children's books in the language you're trying to learn that you could listen to. And if you don't have a native speaker in your environment, then I suppose recordings would be a second best option there.

Again, it's that fundamental principle of bringing it into the auditory environment of the child, rather than how we often would think, like, get a book and start looking at words on paper, and that's how you're going to learn a language.

Julie Walker: I think of your story of memorizing Jack and the Beanstalk and how you had your Japanese teacher read it in your tape recorder and then that's how you learned how to recite Jack and the Beanstalk.

Andrew Pudewa: Sony Walkman

Julie Walker: A Sony Walkman, oh my word, wow.

Andrew Pudewa: Some people are old enough to remember that. Others, like young Abigail here, might have seen one in an antique store. I don't know.

Julie Walker: She saw *Back to the Future*. He has a Sony Walkman, I'm sure.

Andrew Pudewa: And that moves us then kind of into the area where we can be a little bit more proactive, and that would be speaking. One thing that I came up against living in Japan was kind of this, I had studied Japanese with books, and I had learned to read and write to some degree, and I had a Japanese teacher there. And I had studied conversation from textbooks as well as others, but I just didn't know how to get further than that. It's kind of as though I knew all the words I needed to know to say most of what I wanted to say, and people could understand me if they were patient, and I would apply the rules of Japanese grammar and could mostly be understood. And they're very respectful and polite. Oh, your Japanese, so good. On the other hand, when I'm listening to people, people don't always use the rules of grammar in daily life, in conversation, right? We mix up stuff and say things in fragments.

Julie Walker: Oh, we never do that in English, Andrew. What are you talking about?

Andrew Pudewa: So the actual conversation that happens in daily life is a much more fragmented and diverse, in kind of a good way, but it's less consistent than the conversation in the book of how do you ask or say something specific.

The funniest thing was I got a Berlitz course in Japanese. And I intended to study a little bit, but I didn't have time, or I was lazy, or whatever. So all I did was start listening to it in the airplane on the way to Tokyo. So when I got there, the only thing I had learned was, "Tabako wa doko de suka?" Which means, where are the cigarettes? Which is a completely useless thing, especially for me at that age, but it was a case where I realized, ah, you could substitute in something else for tobacco and say, where is something?

So anyway, I learned a bunch and I spent most of my time with Japanese people to try and create the optimal opportunity. And obviously it's easier to learn a language if you live in the country where it's spoken. But I did hit that wall where I just thought, what's the trick here to really break through in terms of fluency and confidence? And I was a Suzuki Method student studying with Dr. Suzuki at the Talent Education Institute. And I realized that one of the most powerful aspects of Suzuki Method as an education system was memorized repertoire. I knew that kind of having grown up Suzuki and having memorized a lot of music.

Julie Walker: Yes, because your mother was a Suzuki teacher

Andrew Pudewa: Well, yes, she came to it. But I was one of the first Suzuki kids in Los Angeles. This was mid-60s. And there weren't a lot of people who even knew about this in the States at that time. So I did have a violin teacher who had some training and was doing her best, God bless her. But I did memorize and retain repertoire. So I knew that if you memorize a lot, it's easier to make up stuff, like, and just pick up an instrument and fool around on it, and improvise, right? And variations and play with the musical ideas from the memorized repertoire.

And I saw this, and I understood it, so I thought maybe the trick would be memorize some Japanese, so I did. I got a children's book, *Jack and the Beanstalk*. "Jakku to mame no ki" And I had my Japanese teacher, who was an English teacher at the high school. So he spoke

decently well, he understood English grammar very well, and I asked him to record the story into the cassette tape recorder. And I just thought, I'm gonna try to memorize this. So I would play it and listen to it again and again and again. And I could read enough, and since it was a children's book, it wasn't too complex in terms of the sophistication of the kanji, and I had dictionaries and all that.

So I could read it and listen to it, and then when I was just cooking or riding my bike, I would just be listening to this thing, and then I started memorizing it, just one sentence, the way you would memorize anything, one sentence again and again and again and again until you could do it. Without hesitation and then the next sentence and say them both again and again and again so you could do it without hesitation then the next sentence again and again and again. Pretty soon I'm reciting it along with the recording, which is helpful because his Japanese obviously didn't have the odd accent that my Japanese probably would have.

And once I couldn't recite with it, I would just listen, get to my destination and just do that. And it took months, but I did get it. And this was no wimpy little “Jack and the Beanstalk.” This was a good couple hundred sentences of “Jack and the Beanstalk.” And it was very enjoyable because, number one, once I knew this whole story, I could entertain Japanese children like you would not believe. I would just go to someone's house for dinner or something and start telling the children this story. And they'd never seen anyone who could do that, let alone a big ugly white guy with a funny accent.

But the other thing I noticed, and this was way before I ever knew anything about Structure and Style or imagined I would ever teach language. I was just a kid trying to learn how to be a Suzuki teacher. But I noticed my conversation was enhanced by the templates of grammar. So I would be trying to say something, and then I would kind of see a sentence or a phrase or a clause or some little pattern of Japanese would hop out of my memory and then I could change the words—the nouns, verbs, adjectives, articles, whatever needed to be changed. And I could put together a sentence in a more sophisticated way than I would have been able to do just by constructing them using the rules of Japanese grammar, which for a lot of people, especially in the beginning, I was probably a year and a half into living there at the time, are fairly predictable and constrained.

But, when you have this huge kind of database of variety, of pattern, not only can you speak with that greater variety of pattern, you recognize those variety of patterns when people are using them. Although I remember this specifically, I was having a conversation and I wanted to say something like a long time ago. And so I used the beginning of the story,

Julie Walker: Once upon a time.

Andrew Pudewa: “Mukashi mukashi,” which means “a long time ago” basically like “old, old.” “Once upon a time” would be our storybook in our fairy tale. And whoever I was talking to just laughed at my use of that. Evidently, that's not something most people would say because it sounds too much like a children's book. So I might have sounded a bit like a

children's storybook from time to time, but it was a huge breakthrough. And I have since then had many clear illustrations of how memorized stuff in a foreign language, poetry, songs, phrases, clauses, really does a lot to build that fluency. I probably told you about the time I was in Pasco, Washington, and I was working in...this was a high Hispanic population school in the agricultural area of Washington state.

And so I was working with what they called a Spanish-English transition class. So these kids were not quite good enough in English to do all of their science and social studies and stuff in English. So they were doing English, but also learning in the Spanish language for the content areas. And so this is a tough environment. Anyway, I had put a key word outline on the board, and we had talked it through a few times, and then I told them. I'm going to give you homework.

My intention was to say take your key word outline home and try to tell it back in English to anybody—Your brother, your sister, your mom, your dad, your next door neighbor, your dog. Practice telling it through. And as soon as I said the word homework, all of these kids erupted reciting in unison this poem by Jack Prelutsky. “Homework, oh homework, I hate you, you stink, I wish I could wash you right down the sink. Oh homework, oh homework, you're giving me fits, if I had a bomb I would blow you to bits.”

And that was just one of three stanzas, they, poof! I was kind of amazed because it's very rare in a public school to see children in groups reciting poetry from memory. So, I asked the teacher afterwards, “How did you know the value of memorizing poetry for these kids?” And she said, “Well, English is my second language.” And I wouldn't have guessed it. Her English was perfect. But she said, “English is my second language. I grew up in Puerto Rico. And when I came here for university, I memorized poetry to help me better improve my English, , particularly vocabulary. Because it is in poetry, you meet words that you might not meet in daily conversation or conversation books or even a English language for second learners textbook.”

That's one I could regale you with half an hour of stories.

Julie Walker: Sure. And you do in Nurturing Competent Communicators

Andrew Pudewa: ...of how I've come to seeing how memorized language comes out. So those would be the two things I think that create a foundation for learning a language as a foreign language or a second language or if you have immigrated and you're trying to, as quickly as possible gain as much skill as you can in a new country, is find some stuff and memorize it. It moves words from the passive vocabulary to the active vocabulary. It creates grammatical templates. And I think for me, and I think a lot of people have found this, it just gives you confidence. If you can recite a whole poem in a different language, that's a huge thing. The other thing I did in Japanese was I learned a few jokes.

Julie Walker: Oh, nice.

Andrew Pudewa: And if you can learn a play on words in a different language, you have now learned that problem of words that sound the same but have very different meanings. And in a joke, it's dramatic and you can make people laugh and you like to do that. So I actually learned some jokes in Japanese that I think made me look better at using the language than I actually was. But it was a big confidence boost.

Julie Walker: Yes. Absolutely. Okay. So, the tips to listeners, whether they're learning a foreign language, meaning they're learning something other than English, or if English is not their native language, and they're wanting to learn English, two tips. Listen to it. Surround yourself with a native speaker speaking that, perhaps by watching television, listening to podcasts in that type of language.

Andrew Pudewa: Or recorded audiobooks for children in that language. That was a resource I don't think existed probably until even 20 years ago, but I think now we see it. In fact, I've talked to people who are working on recording children's literature in Spanish.

Julie Walker: It's awesome.

Andrew Pudewa: So, that would be helpful to anyone wanting to learn Spanish, and of course, you people wanting to learn English, we have phenomenal audiobook resources. And much like a child, you know how young children are happy to let you read them the same book again and again and again and again and again, especially as a grandparent?

Julie Walker: Yes.

Andrew Pudewa: And you're even a little tired of this book, but you do it because you love them. And for years, I kind of wondered. Why do they want to hear the same story again and again? They know the story. They know what's going to happen. But what they are experiencing is a little bit better comprehension each time through. So that word or that idiom or that combination of words or that unusual thing that they might not have understood perfectly the first or second or even third or fourth time through, once they kind of have a good sense of most of it, then their attentiveness, their learning bandwidth, if you want to can go to the maybe less important to the whole story, but of interest or of beauty in the language and they start to decode and understand that a little better as well. And so this availability of children's literature in the target language is a huge blessing and I would encourage everyone to make use of that.

And I would think that Aesop fables have been translated into almost every language. And if you can't find it, maybe you can find a native speaker who could read some and create your own recording. And then if you understand the Aesop fable in one language and when you hear it in the new language, it's easier to make all those connections because most of the words are familiar.

This might be true with selections of Scripture as well. Some of the, the well known scriptures that you may have heard or even memorized, if you're inclined to do so, some of

the parables, hearing those in the new language, you're not going to have to struggle to understand what it means, and you're free to make the associations. Oh, That was this word. Those two words are this idiom. And so that's a natural way. And of course, if it's a recording, you can listen to it dozens, hundreds of times.

Julie Walker: Right. And of course, tagging onto that then would be the second tip, which is memorized language, memorizing it. So that's the listen, and then that's the speaking, because, of course, when you're memorizing something, you're going to want to rehearse it and speak it out

Andrew Pudewa: Well, and the thing too, is the younger a person is, the easier it is to memorize by auditory repetition. And then there's that middle zone where you're still highly absorbent auditorily and you can start to read and decode the letters or characters or symbols, whatever. And then once you get older, you'd like to see it because things go by too fast auditorily. And so combining the listening of the thing with the seeing of it as it's age appropriate to do so, that's a hugely beneficial

One more thing on this that I would mention, which I think is very interesting, and I don't have personal experience with this, but I talked to someone in the military who was going to be assigned to the Middle East and went to the military language school, which is a very intensive program, because what they're trying to do is get you as fluent as possible in the shortest amount of time, like within six months, I think. So you're spending pretty much a full time job studying this language with the intent to go somewhere and be able to converse and understand and even gather intelligence in a foreign language. And the person was telling me that the military, they have scientifically, very organized here, created dialogues that use a large chunk of the vocabulary that you would run into on a daily basis. And that mostly the time was spent not studying grammar, but memorizing dialogues and practicing these memorized dialogues back and forth. And in doing that, they gain a fluency faster than most people would be able to do so. And of course, I'm sure going there, there's some continued practice and training in a more normal native environment. But I thought that's interesting because I don't think we did that when we studied foreign languages in high school.

Julie Walker: No. No, we spend a lot of time on grammar.

Andrew Pudewa: Yep, grammar and reading, but the memorizing, probably a lot less.

Julie Walker: I'm just going to end with this, and we occasionally get, I'm going to read you a question that we occasionally get. This came from someone from Africa, Andrew.

Andrew Pudewa: Who has a word in a language you're not familiar with?

Julie Walker: I am not sure how to say her name, but she is homeschooling her 11-year old son and wants to teach him how to write in Afrikaans.

Andrew Pudewa: Oh, to write in Afrikaans.

Julie Walker: The only reason I'm bringing this up at the very end, because this would obviously segue into another episode, or we could just stop this right here and say, let's not ignore this foundation that you're so clearly laying and jump right into writing because writing is so much further down the line.

Andrew Pudewa: Well, it does also depend on age because the listening, speaking, reading, and writing, while the listening and speaking are kind of prerequisites for the reading and writing, things can be done at the same time, depending on age, of course. So maybe we should do another episode and talk about those two, the reading and writing in the target language.

Julie Walker: Okay. Well, let's do that next week.

Andrew Pudewa: All right.

Julie Walker: Thanks so much for joining us. If you enjoyed this episode and want to hear more, please subscribe to our podcast in iTunes, Stitcher, or Spotify. Or just visit us each week at IEW.com/podcast. Here you can also find show notes and relevant links from today's broadcast. One last thing: would you mind going to iTunes to rate and review our podcast? This really helps other smart, caring listeners like you find us. Thanks so much.