

Lincoln Satterthwaite

A Life of Service in Central America

My Grandfather, Ridgeway Satterthwaite, has led an exceptional life of service in Central America. Having lived in Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico for large chunks of time developed his Spanish skills to a near-native level. His never-ending stories about sitting with old women shucking corn or sitting with a child's near-blind grandfather on the side of the road watching the world go by have always enthralled me. Though he rarely speaks Spanish these days at his rural home in Vermont, he holds the language near and dear to his heart, having taught it for 3 years at the Westtown school after his return to the States after close to a decade of service Central America.

Ridge (1) was born on Sept 26, 1936 (2) and raised right here in Philadelphia (3), speaking only English in the home. His first encounter with Spanish was in his high school Spanish class, which he described as “barely better than useless,” having much the same sentiment about the Spanish classes he took as a college student at Trinity. His main Spanish education came during his tenure in El Salvador with the Friends Service committee, where he was forced to learn how to speak and understand Spanish (5). His first experience with real Spanish was on a bus, where he distinctly remembers hearing a bunch of Spanish women talking at “the speed of light,” and wondering “how on earth will I ever learn that?” something I’m sure anyone who has tried to learn a language has dealt with. With diligence and curiosity, he managed to not only learn the language and eventually feel “very fluent” (6). Unfortunately, Ridge says that he “rarely uses spanish” at all anymore, only using it when he runs into the odd immigrant or at a Mexican restaurant (7, 8). Though Spanish is Ridge’s best second language, he speaks “enough French to get around” and used to speak a bit of Portuguese, but never really had occasion to use it.

Because of the nature of Ridge’s learning process, that is to say complete immersion, he picked up the language rather quickly (12). He found the best learning process to just be curious and ask the locals if you don’t something. He told me a delightful story that I mentioned above about sitting with some old women that were shucking corn, which was a strange thing for a man to do in that culture. The women would continue talking and gossiping, and eventually direct

their questions to him, and he'd have to respond in some way, coherent or not. They'd correct his mistakes, and he'd learn. Another way that he'd learn was by hanging out at the local store, and just asking what the words for things are. He said "three good exposures to a word is about what it takes to really cement it in your mind,' and to further aid this cementation, he read Spanish novels and kept a dictionary underneath it to lookup any word he didn't know immediately. His last trick for learning and really getting good at speaking another language was teaching it to people: "In order to be able to teach something to someone, you have to have it organized well enough in your head in a way that makes sense so that you can tell it in a coherent way." I thought that this applies to almost anything, ranging from language to chemistry and math. Ridge noted thinking that he'd "made it" as a Spanish speaker when he started having dreams in which people talked in Spanish (15). "It makes sense, I guess, that you'd dream in your operative language," he said.

Because of the job that Ridge had in El Salvador as a study abroad coordinator, he was regularly dealing with highly educated folks, and had to pick up the nuances of the language quickly so he didn't look like a fool to these professors and other people in the government. He would write letters to these folks, and have them reviewed by his secretary who would change phrasings and then explain why she changed them. "This really forced me to master the subjunctive and really learn how to say exactly what I wanted. Saying things like 'well I would have done that but...' are a good marker of someone's mastery of a language." The job as a study abroad coordinator gave him the opportunity to be a part of many people's Spanish learning experience, and he got to watch a lot of young people go through exactly the same thing that he did when he learned Spanish. About the different phases of learning, he said "There is definitely a plateau that almost everyone hits when they learn a language, which is when you have to start looking for the subtleties in the language to keep progressing."

Following the story about having his secretary, I asked if he could pass as a native speaker in a context like the phone, or some situation where his skin color couldn't be seen. He noted first that speaking on the phone is one of the ultimate tests of language comprehension, because there are no gestures, other context clues, and most importantly, you can't see their mouth. He then said "when I went to Mexico, I was told that I sounded like a Costa Rican that'd

spent too long in the States, which made me so proud of my Spanish,” emphasizing how much work he’d put into learning the language. Later, when he was in Cuba as a service camp coordinator, he was told that he sounded just like someone from Mexico, again something that he was quite pleased with. I asked if he’d spent a lot of time on his accent, or if it had just come naturally from listening to people with the accent, and he said it’d taken a lot of work to get it to where it is. “You have to be aware of it, [your accent] but also aware of what things are supposed to sound like.”

When asked if he thought differently after being in a Spanish speaking country for a long time, Ridge paused for a second before responding: “The one thing that I was always aware of was that I am a native born English speaking person, with all of the attitudes and habits of a North American English speaker. What I do remember thinking was that the language opened to me the possibility of understanding a lot about how the people there think, not that I think like them, but at least I understand them, the things that they like, the parts of their culture that are different. Attitudes, behaviors, etc. I was always expected to be punctual and very by-the-book, but the (rural) Spanish speakers were definitely more flexible and went with the flow. I didn’t understand this until I spent time with them, and learned that they [the rural El Salvadorians and Pueblans in particular] lived by the sun and season, not by the clock. That’s just how they worked, and it was just fine for them.” I was fascinated by this answer, because it’s a fantastic example of culture being intimately tied to language, and a concrete example of cultural concepts being a mystery to someone that hasn’t spent a good chunk of time there.

Ridge’s French got quite good when he spent several months working on a farm in rural France, but didn’t really have the occasion to keep it up to the same level as his Spanish throughout the rest of his life. Interestingly enough, he worked with a Spaniard who had “awful French,” and he was instructed by the owner of the farm “not to imitate him, you’ll be laughed out of Paris.” Most of his French is gone now, only having the rare occasion to use it as well as not having been very cemented in the first place (13). This points to one of Ridge’s most poignant quotes about retaining a language; “you have to have a reason to speak it [the language], or it [your knowledge] will go away.

Ridge has the interesting advantage for this project of not being raised speaking his second language, learning it more or less from scratch in his post-collegiate life, giving him a lot of insight into the experience of going into a place with minimal communication skills and getting better just by using it in real contexts. Being bilingual to my grandfather was a huge accomplishment, and something that needed to be constantly worked on, with huge payoff. He did note that it was just a necessity at the time, but he certainly appreciated the struggle later. This productive struggle is exactly what motivated Ridge to keep working at the intricacies of the language, rather than stopping at mere effective communication. In my opinion, the point of linguistic communication *is* the intricacies and fine points, and being able to do that in two languages is no small feat.