**Not Lost In Translation**

*A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops.*

*~Henry Brooks Adams*

As a teacher we all have those memories of students — we wonder if we were able to teach them or reach them. They pull at our heartstrings. You know, the students who run, not walk, into the room, bounce around in their seats, have a need to get out of their seats every five minutes or so, go to the pencil sharpener, throw something away, and always have an excuse to leave their seats. They don’t like to do homework, and yet they love to participate because they love to talk and they love attention.

I recently received an e-mail from one such student. Paco Rodriguez-Sanchez (not his real name). My students have always selected a Spanish name for themselves. Most select just a first name. However, there are those who insist on not only a Spanish first name, but also the two Spanish last names, to be culturally appropriate.

Paco’s e-mail brought back memories of one particular day and one particular class:

It is our high school’s first year of block scheduling — our classes are 80 minutes long instead of the traditional 40 minutes. There are no bells to signal the beginning and ending of a lesson. On this particular day, I am to be observed by two college professors because the class I teach is a college credit course in our high school.

Of course, I am proud of the fact that the class is conducted entirely in Spanish and the students do feel comfortable expressing themselves in Spanish. They come to this Spanish class with a Spanish name they selected for themselves when they took Spanish I. Many are attached to their new name and their Spanish class identity. This class of twenty-five is a pretty typical intermediate Spanish class. There are the third who absolutely want to be there — some are even considering majoring in Spanish in college, the third who are there because their parents want them to earn the college credit, and the third who are there because this class had seats left or because their friends are taking it. There are all sorts of reasons why high school students take the classes they take.

On this day, Paco comes running through the door with a toasted cheese sandwich in hand and a bowl of sauce for dipping. “After all, Senora Mike, it is the third 80-minute block of the day, and my lunch is not until next period. I'm hungry and I hope you don’t mind if I just quickly eat this great toasted cheese sandwich.” Because I insist on Spanish at all times, Paco has actually said in Spanish, “Senora, yo hambre y como el sandwich con queso, vale?” (Translated literally, “Mrs., I hunger and I eat sandwich with cheese, okay?”)

I say, “Go ahead, Paco, finish your sandwich, quickly.” Paco has not yet noticed the two visiting professors who are there to observe me today. He sits down and finishes his sandwich, with three or four bites, dipping each time into the sauce. “Bueno, muy bueno,” Paco says as he savors the last bite with sauce.

Paco has now noticed our two visitors. Of course, our two visitors noticed Paco the minute he ran through the door.

I am wondering how long Paco will stay seated.

The lesson is going along quite well, all the students are working in their groups, engaged in the assigned activity, and the professors go from group to group to interact and speak Spanish with the students. To my relief, this is going quite well.

Suddenly, Paco raises his hand. “Senora, esta lloviendo en mis pantalones.” (“Mrs. M. it is raining in my pants.”) Now, being Paco’s Spanish teacher, I understood what he wanted; his request was not lost in translation. I know that it was his way of requesting to go to the bathroom.

You can just imagine the laughter from the other students and the chuckles from the visiting professors.

I always wondered just how much Spanish Paco learned in that class, but I know he learned more than just Spanish based on an e-mail he recently wrote to me:

*I know 1 was a handful but you actually cared & were adamant about it. You knew I had potential but 1 messed up a lot & you never backed down.... But A HUGE THANK YOU to you Senora, everything you*

*taught me about Spanish, my attitude & life will stick with me the rest of my days....Wish I could go back for a day & do it again, toasted cheese & secret sauce from the cafeteria in hand, ready for fourth period!*

You see, Paco Rodriguez-Sanchez was my student ten years ago.

~Vickie A. Mike

2009 New York State Teacher of the Year

Spanish teacher, grades 10-12