



From Reluctant Language Student to Award Winning Dutch Teacher (Interview by Elisa Crassweller)

This September marks the 25th Anniversary of Learn Dutch Fast. Join Sylvia Clements as she looks back on her journey from reluctant language student to award winning teacher and owner of Learn Dutch Fast.

What is your personal experience with learning another language?

It was traumatic...I went to the "Gymnasium" because I wanted to become a vet. But there you need to learn a lot of languages.

My first day of French. Upon leaving class, I said "bonjour" to the teacher and she replied, very angrily, when you leave you don't say "bonjour" you say "au revoir." So I had to stay an extra half an hour. After that I didn't speak French in class anymore....

My first English class. I grew up on a farm and we never went on vacation.

The teacher began the class saying, "So you all have a TV at home." Nope. "You've all been abroad on vacation and heard or spoken English." Nope.

"Most of you have had English in elementary school." Nope again.

"So let's begin with chapter 4." It made me feel so behind that I didn't come up with the idea to carefully read, review, and try to understand the first three chapters.

I just couldn't do it. I knew how to learn the boring vocabulary (most of the time offered without any context). But the listening tests... no way I could hear a word...

Six months before the final exam, there was a lottery for a two week exchange program to England and I thought if I can do that, if I can go to England, then I can learn English there. All my friends thought it was a great idea for me to go to England. "Sylvia, we'll all put YOUR name in, so you'll have a bigger chance to go."

The teacher held up the paper with my name she just took from the bowl with all the names....and said, "No Sylvia, your English isn't good enough."

That took away all my hope...I didn't even dare tell my mother. I thought if she would go to my teacher and upset her, I would never pass my exam. By the final exam I was extremely nervous. I did well, however my spoken English still wasn't good.

As for German, I had a nice teacher but there was no class time for speaking. I learned all the German grammar and many words but I had never spoken the language. So that is how I began my language career, haha.

When I began my professional studies, engineering at Delft University of Technology (I was not lucky enough to make the lottery for becoming a vet, twice), most classes were in English. Yes, it was difficult for me, but I made it. Only the last class was a disaster. I was close to graduating cum laude and I had one class left to take. So close. That class was taught by an American guy who loved to say “I won’t be satisfied unless your English is correct.” I had to do the course twice. The class itself wasn’t hard but I was so nervous during the tests, because he wanted my English to be perfect.

For my graduate work, I went to Friesland where I had to interview farmers about their house or farm. Someone suggested that I should learn Frisian. I thought, Oh no, not another language! On the other hand, maybe speaking Frisian would give me more contacts. So I signed up for Frisian lessons but it wasn’t just the language I got. There was a nice, motivated teacher and a good group of people. We sang. We talked. We laughed. The Frisians were encouraging and pleased that I tried to speak with them. It was a great experience.

In 1990, after my graduation, I went to live in America. But I didn’t dare pick up the telephone. After all the classes, exams, and studying in English, I still couldn’t bring myself pick up the phone. Half a year later, my English had improved drastically out of necessity. People helped me when I tried to speak and I learned a lot by just doing and trying and making mistakes.

Later, back in Holland, I got over my French trauma with help of my friend Sylvain at www.talenvoortalent.nl. Many teaching tricks and activities I now use in my lessons, I learned from him.

How did you get started in your current profession?

It was never my plan to become a teacher. Not...At...All! My parents, grandparents, uncle and aunt were all teachers. They loved to tell me all the time "One day you'll be a teacher too." To which I replied, "Not me. I'll never become a teacher." During my time at the technical university in Delft, I was part of a group that helped foreign students learn Dutch. So I had already begun to teach (a little). I liked it a lot, but still had no plans at all becoming a teacher.

In 1990 I went to New York, to be together with my friend (Bart, who is now my husband ;-). I was going to pursue a PhD but something went wrong with the university budget, so I had to wait until that was sorted out. I took odd jobs from public postings: psychological tests, babysitting. Anything and everything.

One day, I saw an ad from someone who wanted to learn Dutch. I thought it would be great to emulate the structure of my Friesian lessons. I began teaching her using my Dutch translation of the book she had written (Mermaids). She was delighted. So I wrote to my mother requesting more good Dutch materials. (It was way before internet existed). Six weeks later I received them. In the meantime I also created my own lesson materials. The woman suggested that I go to the Netherlands Institute to teach Dutch. I thought, ok, but I am not a teacher. But I went to the Netherlands Institute anyway.

I walked into the institute and saw a woman nearly in tears at her computer. Her computer had crashed. She didn't ask who I was or why I was there. "Are you good with computers?" she asked. I replied, "Yes I am good with computers." After I helped her with the computer she asked, "So why are you here?" "I want to teach Dutch." She said that was great.

But there occurred a problem when I met the students. It was a mixed level group and there was only one book in the curriculum. I couldn't deviate from the lesson plan since everything was focused on the exam.

There was no time to have conversations in the lessons and I had a lot of material to cover. No one could SPEAK Dutch at the time of the exam. However, everybody passed nonetheless, because the exam just covered grammar issues.

Soon after that, I started my own company (September 1990): “Dutch in New York”. I wanted to make sure people could really use their Dutch after the course. I began researching different learning methods. How do people learn languages? Why do some methods work and others don’t? Was there a method that would work for everyone? It turned out there wasn’t one method that worked for everyone.

(Now I use a variety of methods that I learned from teachers I admire. I have a variety of teaching methods that I can apply to my courses. You can read more about the methods I use in Elisa’s article <http://hilversumtoday.nl/learn-dutch-fast/> . In my classes you learn Dutch fast while having fun in a brain friendly way. It isn’t just one method for learning; it is a combination.)

In 1993, I returned to the Netherlands to look for a “real” job. But I didn’t find anything I enjoyed as much as I had teaching Dutch. Then a friend’s mother called me about teaching Dutch. She knew someone who wanted to take Dutch classes. “The woman lives in your area. Can you give her lessons?” I found it more enjoyable than the work in my profession. Thus, in 1993, I began with Standby Bussum (later called Learn Dutch Fast).

What was the best compliment you received from a client?

Well, I have won different prizes: the European Award and a nomination for that Award and some more prizes, but the best compliment was that one of my former clients, Annika, who participated in the language course for a journalist exchange program

and is now my colleague for that very same program for more than 8 years now because she liked it so much. I still remember that she came to me on the first day and asked me “how will I remember all those new words?” I told her not to try. If it is important they will come back, if not you don’t worry and don’t spend time on it. Not even a year later she passed the NT2 II exam with 97%. She’s now teaching Dutch in Germany ;-)

For more information about lessons with Syl and her special Anniversary Event: Sylvia Clements, Learn Dutch Fast, www.learndutchfast.nl

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