

The Rassias Method and the Exchange Student: A Successful Marriage

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It was the year 1985, in a small college not far from Hanover, NH, when I heard about the Rassias Method for the first time. I had come from the University of Munich, Germany, with a degree in linguistics and German literature, and I was eager to start my first teaching job in the United States as a college instructor. Joel Goldfield, a French professor, gave an introductory workshop on the Rassias Method. Although I liked his performance, I was skeptical about the method. The terminology—"drill class," "drill instructor," "master teacher"—didn't resonate well with me, a young woman from Germany. Still, I liked the energy and the fact that students were taught by their peers in the target language only. Nevertheless, I was skeptical, especially because my first ATs (Assistant Teachers) didn't have the linguistic skills and cultural knowledge to be the most successful teachers. In order to learn more about the method and develop confidence in using it, I decided to become a "drill instructor" myself.

Somewhat intimidated after seeing John Rassias in action, but reassured that I didn't have to break an egg over my head nor rip my shirt to pieces in order to be a successful AT, I taught all levels of German in summer 1986 and '87 in ALPs, the Accelerated Language Programs for adult learners. My fingers had blisters, and I was exhausted, but happy with the results. In ten days students were able to master approximately one semester's content of a college German course and sometimes even more. In my mind I had renamed "drill class" "oral practice session"; I had become an oral practice teacher, and the substitution and transformation drills were exercises. What I realized was that the method worked well for the more grammar-focused American foreign language textbooks, but only if the AT had excellent language skills, lots of energy and enthusiasm, and a good knowledge of the target culture. The question was: "How to get such instructors?"

Nearly ten years later Joel Goldfield—by then my husband—and I moved to Fairfield, Connecticut, where we introduced the Rassias Method to the Modern Languages and Literatures department at Fairfield University, where we were teaching French and German, respectively. The most challenging part for me was the recruitment of native or near-native students. As the German program was relatively small, there were hardly any native German speakers on campus.

Luckily, soon after my arrival, Fairfield became a member of the Baden-Württemberg Exchange program.

In 1996, our first two American students went on the exchange to study in Freiburg and Tübingen, and we welcomed two students from Germany. It soon became common knowledge that the AT jobs were the best-paying jobs on campus. The director of the exchange program used this fact as an incentive to recruit students for Fairfield. As study abroad became more popular at my former institution, training native speakers or advanced foreign language speakers for French, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Japanese and Chinese became easier. Students who wanted to work as ATs had to attend a fifteen-hour workshop and then audition for the job. We often had more applicants for German than we had jobs available and were able to employ the additional students as tutors or substitute AT instructors. The cultural exchange has not only been welcomed by the students, but also by me. I am now always up-to-date on the latest pop songs, linguistic novelties, and other cultural events, and my students meet a "real" German their age. This situation motivates them: they try to give their best, and they also have the opportunity to interact in the target language outside the classroom. Looking at the data from 2002 to 2008, we employed thirteen ATs for beginning and intermediate German: nine native speakers and four non-native speakers.

The ATs have inspired students to study abroad, and the number of students who go to Germany has been slowly growing. Recently, five of my students studied in Germany from January until mid-July. Many of our students who study in Germany have participated in the teaching workshop upon their return. Ninety percent of them have also applied for a Fulbright scholarship. We find that students who have studied in Germany are more likely to receive a Fulbright scholarship to conduct research or teach English abroad, and all students of German who either attended an Oral Proficiency Session (OPS) workshop or who attended the workshop and worked as ATs and then applied for a Fulbright teaching assistantship received the award. Since 1998, twelve of my students have received a Fulbright to a German-speaking country. Two have received a research/teaching Fulbright to Austria; four have received a research grant to Germany, and six have been awarded a Teaching Assistantship to Germany. Of these twelve Fulbright recipients, only three did not study in Germany as exchange students. Six participated in the OPS workshop, and five worked for us as ATs.

The above statistics indicate that going on study abroad combined with learning and practicing the Rassias Method increases an American student's chances of receiving a Fulbright teaching assistantship. The Baden-Württemberg Exchange prospers from the Oral Proficiency Sessions and brings a bit of Germany to Fairfield. Students from France, Spain, Nicaragua, China, Japan, Ukraine, and Belarus who come to study at Fairfield and help our students learn French, Spanish, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian, respectively, internationalize

our campus. The OPS workshop and ensuing job introduce them to each other, and they form a kind of "family" that does not remain insular but to the contrary, introduces them to: (1) American students who speak a foreign language well; (2) those who spent a semester or year abroad and; (3) the students who want to learn the language and are hoping to go abroad one day. Fairfield's campus has become more international as a result.

Originally, John Rassias developed his method to teach French and other languages to American Peace Corps workers to enable them to function in French-speaking Africa and elsewhere on the continent. Today, this method not only helps American foreign-language students function linguistically and culturally abroad but also allows foreign students to play an active role in foreign-language teaching at Fairfield University and elsewhere. They help to develop a global learning environment and thus bring substance to Fairfield's Strategic Plan's objective of developing global citizenship, internationalizing the curriculum and enhancing diversity on campus.

Inter-American

Being polite and culturally aware, sometimes a few more elements occur.

I was in central Mexico directing U.S. college students who were studying Spanish. Like my students, I was also living in a town known before we arrived. Our first assignment was an aspiring television journalist, was a story. Spontaneously, a half-dozen students, with him, his mother, and a film crew. When he filmed the story, we watched, and he had lunch. When the filming was over, Gerard had lunch.

The restaurant, perched on the hillside, was simple and rustic. So was the fifteen-year-old chef. The basic: *pescado* (fish), *pollo* (chicken), and *carne*. The lake was the town's specialty, all day long.

Someone must have asked what the mother just wanted to be the perfect waitress. A flustered waitress hurrying into the kitchen. A moment later with the name of a fish. In the work, she disappeared again. This was the fish on a plastic plate to show us all.

Now, I've often found myself reminded of where their food comes from. It is often inexplicable. This group of students made "live" food, but they made me pay attention to everything we had discussed during the trip. The details were hardly perceptible to the untrained eye.

When the waitress reemerged with a clean apron, the group was ready to order. "I want *pollo*." "Yo quiero el pollo, por favor." The students smiled, relieved. They had a cross-cultural moment with grace and