

**We Teach Languages Episode 99: Cult of Pedagogy**

**with Jennifer Gonzalez**

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**Stacey Margarita Johnson**:  [00:00] This is "We Teach Languages," a podcast about language teaching from the diverse perspectives of teachers. I'm Stacey Margarita Johnson. Today, on episode 99, Rebecca Blouwolff interviews her favorite educational podcaster, Jennifer Gonzalez, creator of the Cult of Pedagogy website.

[00:27] Rebecca and Jennifer talk about four specific blog posts and podcast episodes from Cult of Pedagogy. If you haven't had a chance to check those out, you can go to the show notes for this episode and click through on the links we have there to all of Jennifer's work.

[00:45] These blog posts and podcast episodes were originally crafted from the perspective of Jennifer, an ELA teacher. During their conversation today, Rebecca provides her perspective as a teacher of world language.

[00:58] [music]

**Rebecca Blouwolff**:  [01:02] I'm really delighted this morning to be sitting here speaking with Jennifer Gonzalez.

[01:07] I was first introduced to her work when I started on my National Board certification journey, and I found a blog post by her that really laid out what it might feel like and what the questions were going to be for me as I began embarking on a really detailed evaluation of my own teaching.

[01:25] Since discovering her blog then, I've been learning so much more about all these other amazing ideas that she's sharing with the teaching community.

[01:32] Very often, I listen to your podcasts and read your blogs, and I think, "Oh my gosh. This has amazing connections to world language," and so I'm really excited to have the chance today to just speak to you about a couple of your posts and podcasts that I think have some great connections to our field.

[01:51] I'd love to have you introduce yourself to everyone, and then we can chat.

**Jennifer Gonzalez**:  [01:57] My name is Jennifer Gonzalez. I have a website called Cult of Pedagogy. We've been in business almost six years now, so it's been quite a while. Really, my goal with the site is to just help teachers do a better job. That extends to instruction, classroom management, technology ‑‑ lots and lots of issues that are all kind of intertwined.

[02:19] Actually, it's interesting that you see a lot of connections to world languages because I was an English language arts teacher, and I feel like most of what we do in ELA is still teaching language.

[02:30] It's just that it's usually at a higher level than somebody being introduced to a language, but a lot of the stuff that I tend to write about is maybe inevitably going to be from an ELA slant. I can see why language teachers would find a lot of [laughs] relevance in the stuff that I do because I think through that lens.

**Rebecca**:  [02:48] I know when you and I were going back and forth about what were the topics that we might address, my initial list probably included 12 different posts of yours.

[02:55] There is a lot, and I think the way that we're teaching world languages has changed so much in the last 5 to 10 years. What you're offering from the English perspective plays nicely with what our newer goals are for teaching languages in the United States. That's really exciting.

[03:17] Let's dive in and talk about, I'd love to hear you speak about your ideas from the post, "To Learn, Students Need to Do Something." Tell us a little bit about what that one is all about.

**Jennifer**:  [03:29] One of the things that I have noticed, some from observing my own kids, what they come home and talk about, and also from some of the things I read about online is that in a lot of classrooms, content is being introduced in some way, some sort of direct instruction or video or reading.

[03:50] Then, it seems like in a lot of cases students are being asked to jump straight to some kind of an assessment, whether it's a homework assignment that they actually get a grade at a point where they shouldn't have mastered it yet or an actual quiz or test or something. It's a lot of intake of the information, and then being tested on it.

[04:13] When I look at the structure of a traditional lesson plan, you have that direct instruction piece and you do have that assessment piece. There should be a piece in the middle, and sometimes several pieces of guided practice and application and independent practice and application.

[04:31] These, to me, should not be graded things. These should be doing something with the thing you just learnt. I'm not seeing a whole lot of that. I think we may be skipping that step too often.

[04:46] This is a broad [laughs] generalization, so it's not like I've got any data on it. It's more of a suspicion. I know that there are a lot of complaints about kids being given packets and worksheets all the time. That's pretty much the extent of their practice.

**Rebecca**:  [05:02] I know we're not going to get into freaking packets right now, but anyone who's listening, an amazing conversation with my second and fourth graders last year when I listened to that podcast and I relayed it to them.

[05:14] There are days when they come [laughs] home from school, and I'm like, "Tell me about your day." One of them will say, "Freaking packets, Mom."

[05:19] [laughter]

**Rebecca**:  [05:22] The kids are very sensitive to the fact that the work is all on paper. I think the younger the age, and rightly so, the more sensitive they are. Even if it's a really interesting task, it can just end up feeling like a worksheet, even just based on aesthetics.

**Jennifer**:  [05:36] Sometimes, there are a whole lot of now digital versions of those same worksheets. I think that schools are spending tons of money on test prep programs that sit a kid down, and they go through and they answer lots of questions. It's still the same activity. They're processing the content a little bit, but I don't know that it's really helping them learn.

[05:59] With this post, what I'm encouraging teachers to do, I'm providing a list of nine different really easy types of activities that could be plugged into that gap that just give kids more of a chance to interact with and apply that learning before they go straight to an assessment piece.

**Rebecca**:  [06:18] We have to own that all of those things are going to take more time than we might want them to. Part of that rushing from the input to the assessment is people trying to teach too much.

**Jennifer**:  [06:30] Yet it's usually those teachers who then will say later I taught them so much stuff, and they don't remember any of it. These kids today, they don't learn anything. They don't want to learn. I hear that so much. We're not giving them opportunities to really absorb it.

[06:45] The thing is these are not super involved things. One of the examples I give is sorting. Anybody who's familiar with Marzano's work from 10, 15, 20 years ago, similarities and differences was a big thing, really high impact‑type of an activity.

[07:00] Any type of activity where students take their content and somehow sort things into categories, whether it's vocabulary words or anything like that, especially if it's world languages, we're trying to sort things into how they are similar.

[07:14] That can be done with index cards. It could be done super quickly and easily. It gives kids a way of looking at the information through a different lens. It could be done with a graphic organizer, for example.

**Rebecca**:  [07:26] I love making cards that have just the visuals for the [inaudible] we're working with and then have kids to think about what would be a logical way to group these, then [inaudible] perspective. Oh, I could group them from how much I like these things to how much I don't like them. How often I use them or do these activities to how infrequently.

[07:48] Then maybe as a more sophisticated version of that then giving them just the words without the visuals and seeing if they're able to do it. I'm seeing all these words in French, can I remember enough about them to figure out logical ways to place them?

[08:01] I find doing that with cards is a great learning check for me because I can quickly walk around the room and see, oh, these words [laughs] haven't been touched at all. Tell me what's going on with that. It offers me some immediate feedback about which ones are not making sense or we haven't spent enough time on them for the kids to actually acquire those words and own them themselves.

**Jennifer**:  [08:22] Absolutely. Just one other example. That is, is any type of kinesthetic work. Any type of role plays, simulation. I'm actually getting ready to do a big post on total physical response using gestures to represent things.

**Rebecca**:  [08:36] That's a representative of all language.

**Jennifer**:  [08:37] I bet it is.

**Rebecca**:  [08:37] [laughs]

**Jennifer**:  [08:39] Anything like that where you're just breaking yourself out of just looking at words on paper, it's going to form new pathways in their brains. There's lots of other examples in this post, but just having students do something with the information to get them to process it. They have to be processing this if they're going to really learn it.

**Rebecca**:  [09:00] I know in our field, we talk a lot about...The kids aren't ready to produce with the language immediately once they've been exposed to it. Trying to start with a nonverbal processing task before we ask them to produce the language back to us.

[09:14] For us, when I'm looking at my lesson plans, it's a great question to ask ourselves, what are the kids doing? Because kids need to do something as you were telling us. Then in the order of the doing, does the doing start with a nonverbal task?

[09:27] Maybe there are some sort of hold‑ups that they're using, manipulatives, cards, sorting tasks, ranking, putting things in order. Then there's a step where there is also doing in a more productive way where they're producing the language.

[09:41] We'll put in the show notes all the links to the posts and podcasts that you've made on that topic and people should definitely check that out for each of us to ask ourselves once we've planned the lesson, what are the kids doing and is that really going to be proficient.

**Jennifer**:  [09:57] Yeah.

**Rebecca**:  [09:58] The next one, I think this one is a potential pitfall of the one we just spoke about is the whole idea of is your lesson a Grecian Urn. What I love about this one is once I learnt that term from you, my department had shared this blog post with our department, it became this little phrase that we could say to each other in our department.

[10:19] That allowed us to see something that had always been there, but we had never had language for. Tell us a little bit about what it means to have a lesson that's a Grecian urn.

**Jennifer**:  [10:26] The reason I named it that is I was working with student‑teachers. I had social studies teachers, middle school. They were doing units. One of them was doing a unit on ancient Greece. It was a two‑week unit.

[10:39] About three of the days of these two weeks, students were making paper mache urns, Grecian urns. I said to him, "What standard is that actually meeting?"

[10:50] [laughter]

**Jennifer**:  [10:52] I think he says something about appreciating art and culture or something like that. Students were allowed to decorate the Grecian urns in whatever way they wanted. It was so time‑consuming. I've seen that type of activity so many times, where it is something that keeps students busy and active. It looks like they're doing something.

**Rebecca**:  [11:10] They're probably very happy because paper mache that's super fun.

**Jennifer**:  [11:13] Sure, that's fun. Sure, they probably will learn the term Grecian urn from that kind of an activity. They'll remember that one fact, but because of how long it takes and the bang you get for that buck, it's not paying off in terms of students actually learning the standards. There are people sometimes that put down the standards.

[11:33] I think well‑crafted standards are fantastic, but when I looked at the seventh grade standards for social studies, students were supposed to be analyzing similarities and differences between our culture and theirs, extrapolating generalizations about what culture really means.

[11:48] To spend three days of a unit, slapping wet paper onto a form...

**Rebecca**:  [11:53] [laughs]

**Jennifer**:  [11:53] That's really the thing. The Grecian urniness of an activity can increase basically, depending on the ratio of how long it takes to how much actual educational value students are getting from it. There's nothing wrong with doing a fun art project, but if it takes that much time and it is not improving that students ability to do the standard...You can get into that territory a lot with technology now.

[12:19] Having kids spent seven or eight days just choosing fonts for a PowerPoint and getting [indecipherable] in, and they're not actually working with the content at all. It's just a general concept to keep in mind. I'm thrilled to know that your department is just using that as a term. That's why I gave it a name so that it wouldn't stick.

**Rebecca**:  [12:39] I think we're very sensitive to it now as a result. Again, I always knew that maybe we didn't need to make Mardi Gras masks with the colored feathers that I ordered from a catalog. I could feel that that wasn't full of rich language for them. I don't know. Somehow having the word just makes it very easy for me to look.

[13:01] I feel like I've been able to get some distance on my own teaching and on other lessons that I'm seeing people pitch.

**Jennifer**:  [13:07] Again, there's nothing wrong with students doing fun, pretty things. For example, that same Grecian urn activity I'm talking about, that teacher could have provided students a worksheet, a printout, that has the outline of a picture of Grecian urn and maybe given the students 10 minutes with some markers to personalize it themselves.

[13:25] Then they would have accomplished the same thing, and it would've taken way less time, goodness knows way less space in that classroom. God help that teacher who's got all that going on. It's really just a concept, and there are degrees of it. It's something to just look out for and question yourself on some of your darling activities that are so fun.

**Rebecca**:  [13:44] I had to have this beaten out of me a little bit, I will admit. I brought this post to the LangChat Twitter community. I believe we did a whole chat about this. I was the one being like, "Guys, we have to promote our departments. If I have all these junkie looking masks because I only let the kids spend 15 minutes on them, how am I going to promote the French program in my school?"

[14:06] People kept coming at me and saying, "What's really the goal? What's worth the time? What takes longer? Is there another way to show the excellence of your program that doesn't involve having the best looking masks?"

"[14:17] Take a look at your rubric. Does your rubric need to include appearance? Where is the standard from ACTFL, from foreign language community that says that you need to use a ruler, and you need to erase all the pencil marks?" I'm just putting that out there. I'll just come out.

[14:33] I used to put that stuff on the rubric. I probably have a lot of gray hairs on my head just from having fought some totally useless battles over that. It's a great post. I think everyone should read it. Again, what you were saying earlier, kids need to do something with their learning.

[14:50] There are ways for them to do something that doesn't take it to that extreme. That's where we have to find the sweet spot.

**Jennifer**:  [14:56] One other note about that is having them do something like a paper mache Grecian urn is so much easier to grade, especially if you are requiring things like neatness and things like that than it is to grade them on the level of conversation that they managed to reach during a class discussion.

[15:12] That's hard on a teacher to assess that, but that's the real valuable word. It's just that we've got to dig in a little deeper in terms of how and look for models basically.

**Rebecca**:  [15:22] I know you've got some good strategies on your blog about that one as well. Maybe to transition to the next one, I think that sometimes when we do these big art projects, our hope is kids will never forget this project. I kind of second guess that just because a child remembers when they were 25 that they did paper mache in French class.

[15:42] Is there actually research saying that they learned more French because they have that memory? Sometimes, I wonder, if our desire to make lessons really memorable can actually bring us in the wrong direction sometimes, which brings me to the next one we're going to talk a little bit about which is retrieval practice.

[15:58] This is something that I've just been hearing about the last couple of years. I came from a place of just trying to get my kids to memorize flashcards. I'm not finding that super successful. I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about retrieval practice and how we might implement that in our class.

**Jennifer**:  [16:15] Yes. First of all, I'm thrilled to know that you've been hearing about it for the last couple of years because that's been my mission, too. I first heard about it in a book called "Make It Stick." I'm hearing more and more. I decided I'm going to go ahead and do a whole post just about retrieval practice because I want that to get into everybody's lexicon.

[16:32] I am hearing it more and more. Retrieval practice is basically the idea that when you test yourself on knowledge, the act of testing yourself on it, of trying to retrieve it from your memory, that act helps you learn it better and helps you remember it better.

[16:50] Try to remember it without looking at notes, and then you get it wrong, then that self‑correction that you do when you check the answer and see what it was, that's actually helping you to learn it better. There have actually now been lots of studies about how this is...For example, in a college class.

[17:08] A lot of college classes will get one midterm and one final exam, and that's it. What they found is that college classes that give a weekly quiz instead, those students at the end of the term when tested, do way, way better on the final exam than the ones who were only tested at midterm ‑‑ sitting there and trying to remember it.

[17:29] That's the thing. A lot of people when they study for a test, they just open their book and they just look at stuff. They reread things. The difference between rereading something versus putting it away, trying to remember, and then checking is massive. There are lots of ways to make this work.

[17:47] Flashcards are a huge way of delivering retrieval practice if you're doing it right anyway. If you're looking at the front and trying to guess what's on the back, then that is doing it correctly versus just staring at something and flipping it. There are other ways to do retrieval practice, too.

[18:06] One technique is called a brain dump. You say to everybody, "OK, I want you to tell me everything that you know about cells." The kids just write and write and write. Then they're allowed to check with each other, and then they're allowed to check their textbook or whatever to see how much they've got.

**Rebecca**:  [18:20] For example, yesterday in class, we've been talking about what does it mean to have a balanced lifestyle? I had posted on the board when the kids came into class [French] , the good life on one side, and then [French] which is like the daily grind on the other end.

[18:35] It was just a chart. It was, "Write every word or phrase you can think of that relates to either of these concepts." I had them write for like three or four minutes.

**Jennifer**:  [18:43] They weren't allowed to check any resources?

**Rebecca**:  [18:46] Only from your memory. I was pointing at my head. You're not looking at your notes. Just see what you can come up with. Some kids had 3 words, and some kids had 20. Then we just zigzag around the class. What can you add to the list? If you didn't know one, you just said pass. At the end, we had a really rich list.

[19:03] So often, with kids who aren't successful on assessments, when I ask, "How did you prepare?" They say, "I read over my notes." I'm like, "Am I ever going to give you a test on how well you can read your notes?" "No." "What does the test going to look like?" "I'm going have to write a paragraph." "Yes, you are. What would be the best way to prepare?" "I should write a paragraph."

[19:19] I think that conversation happens a lot. People can read a lot more about that. I know there's some links on your blog to even more about retrieval practice. I'm going to try to read, Make It Stick. It's sitting on my bedroom table I have to admit.

[19:31] [laughter]

**Rebecca**:  [19:33] Then I thought we would round up with this last piece, which I think we could do a whole podcast on. I'm going to try to rein myself in, but the apt question, how accurate are your grades? I would love for you to just speak about that, and then maybe I can try to add in my two cents from my perspective.

**Jennifer**:  [19:50] This actually ties in a lot with the whole Grecian urn concept. You were talking earlier about giving a lot of points for neatness. I think what we're doing in a lot of cases in the classroom is we are assigning points, and therefore grades. Two things that really are not that important and are not aligned with the standards that we believe we are actually teaching.

[20:16] It's a lot of different things. A lot of teachers give extra credit for kids bringing in things like tissues and hand sanitizer. A lot of times we will take points off for...Some teachers take a significant amount of points off for assignments being a day late or something because they'll have a "no excuses" policy.

[20:33] Other times, right within rubrics, we will give disproportionate amount of points to things like attractiveness, creativity. Goodness knows what that even means. For every single person, it means a different thing, a small amount of points to what we're actually hoping they're going to learn from the activity.

[20:53] It's just been a call to think to yourself, "What is the learning that this measures? Am I actually teaching the thing?" This is an example. In so many courses now, we assess through a combination sometimes of forced answer choices, multiple choice or something like that. Then a lot of our assessments come with a final type of essay or something like that.

[21:19] In a lot of these classes that are not English language arts, the teachers never work with the students on the type of writing that they need to do in order to do that assessment if they're only looking for the content. Yet, the kids, a lot of times, end up getting graded on the writing.

**Rebecca**:  [21:33] I think maybe in foreign language is almost the opposite, which is the content is extremely flexible in our courses. It's really a course in communication and how well can you communicate. Sometimes, if we've learned about a particular cultural product or practice or perspective, then we're going to absolutely want that in there.

**Jennifer**:  [21:52] One of the other points that I make too, and I think this probably would be very relevant to language teachers, is we a lot of times give point significant proportions of a student's final grade to things that we probably should just be calling practice.

[22:07] For example, we'll give homework assignments where students are just now working with content that they've been exposed to. Rather than giving everybody a check for doing it and then going over the answers and seeing how they did ‑‑ that's feedback ‑‑ we actually give them points on how many they got correct on that homework.

**Rebecca**:  [22:26] When do you ever get to practice?

**Jennifer**:  [22:28] Right. We're basically giving them a summative grade on formative assessment. Part of our shift in classroom culture could be to say, "On Friday, we're going to get a quiz on this." For the next two days, you're going to get assignments that are going to be practice for that.

[22:45] I think it would be great if we could say, "No, you're not getting a grade on it, but you're getting a grade on Fridays, and this will tell you. This is going to prepare you." Then their grade is much more accurate because you're grading them on that summative that they've gotten practice in. They've gotten good feedback.

[23:01] They're not discouraged yet. You've got a culture of sort of failure in your class for students who are like, "It's OK I took a risk. I didn't get it. Now I understand. I'm ready for the final assessment."

**Rebecca**:  [23:11] I love that. I think our field is definitely moving toward performance‑based assessments and trying to think more about how much of a term grade, for example, should show what a student can do with the language.

[23:24] In our department, we made a big transition from being pretty much all over the place with our investments to being told by our department head, starting next year, I think the first year it was 75 percent of the term grade has to be performance‑based assessment. Then the next year it was 90 percent.

**Jennifer**:  [23:39] Wow. He's weaning you guys off of it.

**Rebecca**:  [23:44] Yeah, but the thing is I realized how much time I was spending on the 10 percent. Then I was like, "Honestly, it doesn't change their term grade that 10 percent. I'm just getting rid of it altogether." Now I'm 100 percent performance assessment.

[23:57] I give a lot of feedback to families, kids, and other staff about all the building blocks that the kids are putting into the course in order to do however they're doing on those assessments. I haven't had situations where people feel like there's a shock surprise at the end, but it's kind of liberating.

[24:13] It basically means the only things I'm grading, and that does take time because I'm using a rubric, are those end of wherever assessments, which could sound like it's the same as when you were talking about the college courses that have the midterm and the final, but it's not.

[24:28] Every homework, every activity is a building block of that. The kids are getting feedback. They're redesigning their path because they know what's coming.

**Jennifer**:  [24:39] The more you have that going on in your school, the more students will be able to come along on that. Some teachers solve that problem by still assigning points to that type of thing, but way, way, way less than your ultimate performance assessments.

[24:52] Yeah, that's the thing about retrieval practice. In general, it shouldn't be graded and even those college classes, those courses where you can drop your two lowest grades or something. It's definitely about low stakes quizzes.

**Rebecca**:  [25:06] Right. That brings us to the end of our little quick journey through I think some powerful ideas for us, world language teachers, to think about. I just so appreciate the strategies you shared. We'll put in the show notes, links to everything, and you can listen on your commute to your wonderful podcast. I think if world language teachers haven't already dug into this stuff with you, I know they're going to get a lot out of it. Thank you so much for your time.

**Jennifer**:  [25:33] You're welcome.

**Rebecca**:  [25:33] It's been such a pleasure to speak with you and learn from you.

**Jennifer**:  [25:35] Great conversation. Thanks so much for having me on, Rebecca.

[25:38] [music]

**Stacey**:  [25:40] We would love to hear your feedback on this topic. You can reach out to us on social media or on Twitter and Facebook @weteachlang or on our website weteachlang.com.

[25:53] [background music]

**Stacey**:  [25:53] We want to especially thank the PEARLL Foreign Language Resource Center, who has partnered with the podcast to provide transcripts and other resources for the episodes. You can learn more about PEARLL and see everything they have to offer by going to pearll.nflc.umd.edu. Thanks so much for listening. Bye‑bye.

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