

Me Talk Pretty One Day - analysis

Being taught a foreign language is definitely a hard and challenging thing to do, and it is very important that it is done the right way.

Finding the right learning environment, with a good teacher that you trust, can be a huge challenge. As a teacher, you have to think about the way you act towards the students. If you don't, you can scare them rather than help them.

An unlucky incident is in David Sedaris essay "Me Talk Pretty One Day", where he writes about an unforgiving experience he had as a young student, traveling to France with the goal of being fluently in the language. I am going to comment on and analyse the story, where the main focus will be on the writer's attitude towards learning foreign languages.

Before leaving the USA, Sedaris attends some French classes. This is a requirement before going to class in France. He is quite anxious on the first day of school, and a bit nervous maybe. He doesn't feel very confident around the other students, as they seem very young and beautiful compared to him. Furthermore Sedaris feels that all the other students talk way better French than him. He expects to get tested upon arrival, because it is a normal thing to do in France: "That's the way they do it here-everyone into the language pool, sink or swim". (P1L16) But what he doesn't realise, is that this is slightest of his/her problems.

As the teacher walks in, the Sedaris notices that she is a very terrifying woman. She is described as deeply tanned after a recent vacation, and very verbally aggressive towards the students. (P1L16) She starts out by humiliating everyone that speaks in the class, just

to set the standard for how the year is going to be. Sedaris Describes it as being: "In the presence of a wild animal, something completely unpredictable." (P2L80) She will randomly pick on the student as they speak, which make them very uncomfortable. She will not tolerate the students speaking anything but French, which naturally shrinks their horizon and make them seem way more stupid then they really are.

The result of her being that cruel towards the students, is them being afraid to speak. They almost feel like being in a fistfight: "we soon learned to dodge chalk and cover our heads and stomachs whenever she approached us with a question. She hadn't yet punched anyone, but it seemed wise to prepare ourselves against the inevitable." (P2L83) Sedaris tries to disprove her thoughts about him by studying harder, but he didn't make much progress. She just calls him a "lazy kfdtinvfm", and make the extra work seem indifferently. She starts to form him into a shy dog that has been hit all its life. He starts to be very insecure in public, and toward the French: "Stopping for a coffee, asking directions, depositing money in my bank account: these things were out of the question, as they involved having to speak."(P3L99) He is afraid to say something wrong. Before his meet with the teacher, there would be nothing to shut him up: "Before beginning school, there'd been no shutting me up, but now I was convinced that everything I said was wrong."(P3L101) But now he avoids any human contact, like talking while getting groceries, ordering at a restaurant and so on. It is like the whole trip loses its purpose, as he travelled to France to get confronted by the language, but now is afraid of failure.

The text carries a lot of the typical essay like features. It is written in a casual and informal way, which makes it easy to read and makes the story very identifiable. This is shown by the extensive use of

everyday terms like “She’d been shaken up a little” and “an easy ten-minute walk”. Furthermore Sedaris is very personal in his form of writing and uses personal experiences, in that way the reader identifies with the narrator, which makes the story seem more lifelike. He is humoristic too, and uses a lot of imagery in his style of writing: “front teeth the size of tombstones” (P1L33) is a great example. He is very ironic too, and creates distance from the text by using those nonsense words when he does not understand what the teacher says: “If you have not meismslsxp by this time, you should not be in this room” and “has everybody apzkiubjxow?” This adds to the humoristic and the informal tone part.

The teacher’s way of rebuking the students is by humiliating them, teaching them to remember their fails by making them feel bad. But what she doesn’t realize is that it makes the students afraid of the language. This hits David Sedaris very hard, even though his is very humoristic about the whole thing. It is very clear that he does not like her style of teaching. She frightens him, and punishes him on his failures. When it comes to learning, it is very important not to be afraid to fail. What she should have done was to give him some constructive feedback on his failures. The writer seems to be enjoying learning a new language before meeting her. It’s the teacher that destroys it for him through humiliation. According to Sedaris, he does not learn anything from her. Not what he realises. One day he catches himself in understanding her insults: “And it struck me that, for the first time since arriving in France, I could understand every word that someone was saying.”(P3L120) But in some way, this isn’t how he imagined being good at French was like. Sure, he could understand all her insults, but he was not able to reply because of the missing piece in her lectures; the verbal use of the language. This is a critical part in learning, you have to speak it and just jump into it. There is a

tremendous difference between speaking a language, and understanding it and the theory behind it.