

Lisa Chason, "Learning Kinderlijke Dutch"

I: Tell us your name.

L: My name is Lisa Chason, and my story is going to be about when I lived in Amsterdam in the Netherlands for almost 20 years. My children were born there, and I learned to speak Dutch, and I learned to speak through them, and um, by communicating with them. And so, my first level of Dutch was very "kinderlijkje" Dutch. And I have some artifacts to show what that is about.

I: And you can just keep going.

L: Oh, okay. Does it, will it get edited or?

I: Um, I'm not sure. Right now they're not being edited. It just goes straight through.

L: Ok, so um, in my mid-20s, I moved to Amsterdam. My husband, who I met in the United States is Dutch, and um, when I went there, uh, originally to travel, and then finally to settle um, what turned out to be 17 years of living there. I had two children while I was there, and living in, um, in the Netherlands it's not necessary, everybody says, it's kind of common knowledge, common, common wisdom, that it's not necessary to learn to speak Dutch. You can manage there by speaking English. Well that's true, but you stay really on the periphery of the society, of course. And, uh, if you're really living there, and you're going to have children, and they're going to be in the public schools, and you've got neighbors, and, you know, you want to learn to speak Dutch. Um, so, uh, that was a process, that over the whole 17 years evolved. And um, and the point at which it took the biggest leap, my being able to really communicate, was when I had, um, my children. And, um, it was through speaking with them, and reading things that were meant for them, and engaging with the culture and the society because of them that I really started to become a Dutch speaker.

And so when I heard about this literacy project, I thought that that was um, you know, an example of someone's literacy developing under special conditions. Um, so, um, it was also an interesting, um, uh, aspect to the story. I had many Dutch friends, but also English speaking friends, and American, British, and we often talked about raising children bilingually, what kind of issues were involved with that. And the solution that we came up with, and everybody has their own solution. I'm convinced there's no perfect way to do this. The advice you get is that each parent should speak their native language, and the children should respond in that language, and they should keep the two languages apart. But that was very unnatural in our situation, and what we did was that the children would speak Dutch, that was their, you know, total environment, and I would speak English with them, and they would speak Dutch back to me. And in that way I felt that they were getting passive understanding of English, and I was getting a, and I was developing my Dutch in that way. So that was our method. And um, but having said that, I used the fact that uh, the level of Dutch that was geared to them was one that was really useful for me to learn from. So I would also try, to this day they laugh at my accent, um, but I would try reading to them in Dutch, and I would read their books and so on, and this was also, at that particular stage, a very fruitful way to develop the language for me.

L: what's going on?

I: It's still recording.

L: Okay. So I brought a couple of things to show. Um, one is a classic book that is, that every um, Dutch child knows. And uh, and a writer, her name is, I'll say these things in Dutch, Annie M. Schmidt, and this is *Jip en Janneke*. And these stories are, at least in the 1980s, and I'm assuming still, although by now they are getting a bit dated, are short little stories that maybe each of them a page, and these characters are really familiar, the the, also the illustrations. And there are many, they are used in many marketing campaigns, and it's about a little boy and a little girl that live next door to each other. And they get into all kinds of mischief, and many things happen to them, and through that, you know, they develop language. But these are beloved stories and many of the children know them by heart, and so I would read these with them. And some of them are, like, um, I would say now that they're dated, I don't know how, [laugh] how to, um, really think of that in terms of the Dutch culture. I once made a suggestion that um, in a a parents' group that I was participating in, wouldn't it be interesting if we switched the roles? And every time you read Jip you said Janneke and every time you said Janneke you'd say Jip, because they're totally sexist. I mean, Jip does all of the active things; that's the boy's name. Jip does everything that's active, and Janneke's always watching him, and she's scared by things, and he battles on, so on. So they're really, like, strongly stereotyped. Wouldn't it be interesting if we just changed the name? Read them to the kids but changed the names. Nobody wanted to hear that. It was just, the stories were just too classic, I think is the thing. Or maybe in the 1980s people weren't thinking along those lines there, and um, and they didn't like it at all. But I think it's a great idea, and I wonder if I, I bet today those kinds of things do get more played with.

Um, so, uh, I don't know what to do, if uh, you want to show that. Just by way of showing some more, um, of what it meant to become, to be developing as a Dutch speaker under these circumstances. This was my, my daughter was in a um, what they call a kresh, so um, childcare from the time that she was several months old until she started school. And you used to have to write in a book, write in a book back and forth, um, from the caretakers at the kresh, and it would go home with the child, and then the parents would write things, and you would communicate in this way. So, uh, when I look, when I look back at this, it's a mix of Dutch and English. You know, and so I, and they were very, um, they were very, uh, they humored me. And they were very understanding. They would always write, and they thought that they were helping me to learn. They would always write to me in in in totally in Dutch, and they insisted that I write back in Dutch. But then it's sprinkled with words like um, uh, like uh, it starts off: "Hopefully," because I didn't know the word, "hopefully" You know, this kind of thing, you know. So it was just mixed with the two languages, and they accepted that. Um, so uh, so this is a good example for me also of the level I was at at that time, and also the grammar is terrible, and the spelling is terrible, but I was struggling to communicate with them, and it's because of doing that kind of daily communication, of living, you know, um, living a Dutch life, being this non-Dutch mother, but um, surrounded by Dutch family and culture that um, that I was stretched to learn the language.

I mean, if, it was definitely the way that I um, I'm not sure that I would have learned a language the way that I did under different circumstances. I studied French when I was in high school, and

I've tried to study a bit of Chinese because of, and now, by the way, I'm a teacher of English as a second language, or to speakers of other languages. I started doing that work there. I was also an English language editor while I was there; I worked in English, using the fact, you know, using my skills as a native speaker. Because Dutch people, while they are, uh, very good in English, often their um, you know, their writing needs to be, if it's going to be for publication, it needs to be worked on because, um, it's not the equivalent of native speaker or publishable English. So this was uh, a kind of work that many native speakers did that were living there. And I also, um, taught English classes. So uh, when I came back to the United States, about 7 years ago, um, I got my master's degree in that field, and now I, now I find myself mostly teaching Asian students, but um, it's all based on my experiences. Also for the Asian students who are here, they're in a similar situation to what I was of learning Dutch. I was learning Dutch as a second language. They're in this English immersion situation, surrounded by English, and they can draw on so many things that are surrounding them, and they're um, you know, it's no longer English in a classroom or English as a foreign language, as it would be called if they were learning it in Korea, or uh, Taiwan. That's the same situation I was in, so I'm often able to talk to my students about what I went through, and I can, I can relate to some of the things that they're going through when they're um, trying to to to especially to to climb plateaus. Like when, there's this tendency to get to a certain level, and you can communicate well enough, and how do you get past that level? And um, and there were all different ways that people helped me to do that, and uh, little tricks that I created and situations that enabled me to then go from the level of 5 year-old Dutch to, uh, a more mature level. And in the end, I got my diploma for speaking Dutch as a second language, and I did very well on that exam. And I'm considered a fluent speaker, and based on that I even have a Dutch passport, uh uh European passport, and this is the uh, the well worn Dutch-English dictionary that was never far from where I was. And uh, and you know, it was this particular period of my life where I never 100% knew what was going on, and yet it was um, so creative, uh, because of trying to um, engage people, communicate with people, get the meanings that I didn't know, make myself understood anyway, and um, and interacted with a culture that that wasn't my own.