



Interview with Dr. Martin Louis DUNCAN on His Academic Background and Language Teaching



IMT Times : What is your academic background?

Martin Duncan: I have attended school almost all my life. For more than 30 years I was a student. So I know a lot about

student life. I was first educated in my home state of Delaware in the U.S.A. After I graduated from high school, I went to Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. I am a proud graduate of Morehouse, and that education played a big part in forming my world vision, just as it did for my namesake Martin Luther King, Jr., and other famous men. I studied for a year at the Complutense University of Madrid. I did my Master's degree in English Literary Studies at the University of Durham in England. I completed some graduate studies at the University of Delaware. I earned a doctor of philosophy in Hispanic Studies from the University of Puerto Rico.

IMTT: What are your job experiences?

M. D.: Well, I could sit here all day and tell you about my job experiences. Most recently I have been employed as an educator and that is my longest experience. But I worked in several sectors. I was a freelance translator and interpreter (Spanish/English/Portuguese). I worked as

a tour guide in Spain. That was the most fun I ever had while “working”! I worked also on a plant nursery; I took care of trees and plants, watered them, pruned them and helped to sell them. On that same nursery, in the winter time, we used to work for hunters, cleaning and gutting ducks and geese they’d shot. That was not a pleasant job sticking my hands inside those dead birds to rip out their guts! I have worked a lot with children as a nature camp counselor for many years, every summer in Delaware. That’s another sort of teaching, much more pragmatic. I worked at McDonald’s serving hamburgers and milkshakes. They even named me “Employee of the Month” at McDonald’s! I worked one summer in road construction; I was a laborer sweating under the sun with a shovel in my hand. While waiting long months for my Ph. D. dissertation to be reviewed, I was a farmer in Puerto Rico, cultivating medicinal plants, oranges, bananas and coffee in the mountains. I wasn’t always a teacher, you see.

I have been a workman, so I bring all of these experiences with me to the classroom, and I think they give me a wider perspective than someone who has never made a living outside of the white collar world.

IMTT: What personal strengths do you find especially helpful in your teaching?

M. D. : I am constantly in a process of trying to improve myself as a teacher. My training is never done and I don’t get too satisfied that I am already at the height of my career. So I think that my personal discipline is important because, as the authority in the class, I have to keep cool, be prepared and know what I am talking about. And it takes discipline to get to that point. Also it’s necessary to be sympathetic to the situations of students. I was a student for such a long time myself and often struggled, especially being in foreign languages. It was hard to learn Spanish and Portuguese, so I know how it feels to be sitting out there at the small desks trying to follow some guy you can barely understand; I put myself in the shoes of the students. I graduated only ten years ago and almost until the end I was enrolled in some compulsory lessons with undergraduates, so I’m not too far removed from the experience of IMT students.

I like helping people. That impulse sometimes makes me lose, or I don’t advance my own projects. But for better or worse, I’m somehow compelled to help people to improve themselves, to get better, to solve problems, and become better citizens. That’s more than just

a task for the classroom. Since I came to Marmara University, I've contributed in different ways to this faculty and other colleagues' projects. How I hope to teach is always by the example that a teacher must be someone who is selfless, giving from himself or herself for the benefits of those who need assistance to advance their lives with information, knowledge and of course intellectual products which I facilitate. Also I think having a good sense of humor and being positive are strengths I bring to this job. We should never take ourselves too seriously in here. Unfortunately, education is not what makes the world go around. I wish it were so, but as it is not we have to keep the proper perspective on what we are doing here and why.

IMTT: How do you motivate your students to become active learners in your classroom?

M. D.: It is a challenge to motivate kids in this place. But I try to engage the students by directly asking them to participate, to answer questions; I make them speak, like it or not. Always there are some people who try to hide. Frequently, Turkish students are used to sitting in large classrooms with too many kids and it is easy to hide and even expected to hide out until exam time, take the exam and remain silent. That's a handicap, a defect, especially in foreign language study. But I come from a very different academic culture. I'm constantly trying to impose my pedagogical style, but if I am just forcing the people to do things against their will this is not going to produce a positive result either. My goal is to bring kids to their own realization of why the lesson is important to them in their lives, why this education in English or Spanish is something practical, useful, something that will benefit them if they invest more time and more active participation in the educational process. There's more to it than reading or answering questions in the book or answering some stupid questions on an exam. Those are only means to an end.

I am not always successful. I'm still not satisfied I did my best. More and more I consider designing my own pedagogical materials in order to be more successful. But the idea is to make students see why the lesson is something important rather than just another task.

IMTT: How have you integrated technology into your teaching instruction?

M. D.: I use the computer like everyone nowadays and it is a useful machine. It helps me to produce some materials, especially for exams. I enter the grades into a computer occasionally. I bring a laptop to the classroom and project something on the screen to show students sentences or exercises that we can analyze together. And I take things from the Internet which I occasionally reproduce on paper and bring into the classroom.

However, I believe that technology in the classroom is overrated, and I have noticed some people, students and instructors alike, who hide behind technology and use technology to cover up their own incapacities. I am old-fashioned. And I believe that the teacher should walk into the classroom with everything they need in their head and maybe a blackboard/whiteboard, a few books, and this is enough. There will come a time, I hope, when technology will improve to the point where it becomes easier to use in the classroom.

IMTT: What are your expectations from your students?

M. D.: First, I expect students to show up to class. We can't take that for granted, and I believe it is probably the most important one. I have a friend, an older teacher who's now retired. She told me once, "Martin, anybody who comes to the lesson, you can't fail them. They shouldn't fail the lesson." I responded that there were some kids who were too bad and that they had to fail for incompetence. But Mrs. Gail said: "No, no, no. If they showed up to the lesson, they had to have learned something. Just because he was present in the classroom. And that is not a failure."

So that's the first thing that I expect from my students. Otherwise, I expect them to do their homework, come to the lesson prepared, and finally to show respect for me, show respect for their classmates, and respect the classroom itself.

IMTT: As a person whose second language is Spanish, what do you think are the advantages that knowing Spanish provides?

M. D.: I am happy to that our new department chairwoman has recognized the importance of Spanish. Similar to the new IMT students, I also learned Spanish as my second language. The

biggest advantages are that many countries and cultures open up to you, especially if you are someone who is interested in America. And I guess that for English Translation & Interpretation students, one of the reasons why they are attracted to English is because of American culture. In the United States of America, Spanish, as many of you already know, is the second most spoken language by far above all others. And then once we look beyond the borders of the United States and you go into Latin America, almost everywhere they speak Spanish. With English and Spanish you are going to be able to communicate with lots of people over there and really have some adventures. We can't deny the supremacy of English. No, we can't do that, but these two languages in combination are a double whammy throughout America. The Latin American population is growing and they have now overtaken Blacks; they are officially the largest minority in the United States of America.

For those people who plan to remain here in Europe, the Middle East or just in Turkey, Spanish is important. Let's take my students from the time when I was exclusively a Spanish teacher in another institution. Almost all of them are currently working in jobs here, even in Istanbul, speaking and using their Spanish. They are particularly active in the textile industry, a significant economic sector in Turkey. Between Turkey and Spain there is a lot of textile trade. I think this is going to continue to grow and be an important sector. So Spanish is pragmatic because in this country Spanish language education has been neglected for many years. Only now, maybe in the last decade I guess, there is some sort of curiosity about Spanish. So you all have an advantage in the job market with Spanish, instead of German or French. Although these are important languages too, so many people already learn them or speak them well because of historic ties between those two countries and Turkey. Spanish is still in demand. I mean we can help Spanish speakers find jobs relatively easily. That is going to become a greater asset as the job market continues to constrict in Turkey.

And of course it's a clear advantage for those who have more adventurous souls and want to travel in Latin America and the United States. If someone wants to explore and get to know those cultures, traditions and the fun-loving spirit that comes together with everything that is Hispanic, then I cannot recommend Spanish strongly enough. From the stories I've heard from students who studied abroad in places like Argentina and Colombia, Turks are warmly welcomed in Latin America. Turkish boys have especially happy experiences. I will always be ready to help IMT students to improve their Spanish, and I look forward to working on that in these next years.

IMTT: What can be done to reinforce foreign language learning? / What did you do to reinforce your Spanish learning?

M. D.: There are so many methods for improving in a foreign language. However, I would like to talk about the students' attitudes and opportunities. Attitudes and opportunities trump methods, in my opinion. The student himself or herself can be shy or nervous about really going gung-ho for a language. But you have to look for opportunities to speak and practice. Join clubs, find out the foreign people who know that language, try to engage with them rather than hide behind exams, workbooks or homework assignments. Of course, academic discipline is fundamental. But that is not enough.

The language learner has to seek out opportunities to speak and listen. They should watch movies and series in that language. Now you have much greater resources than I had when I was a language learner. First, there's the Internet, which I didn't have when I was growing up and learning Spanish or even later for Portuguese.

Everyone cannot get the chance at Erasmus, let alone go as far away as Mexico or someplace, but studying abroad is the keystone of foreign language learning. You have got to find a way to immerse yourself in the native language in the country where the people speak it daily, where you can practice, hear and interact, even if it lasts only two months in summer. Total immersion in the culture which is behind the language: that's the fastest and most efficient way. That is what I mean by opportunities. I was very lucky to win scholarships that allowed me to go to Spain for a year. And I was very lucky to have contacts who were able to send me to Puerto Rico, Panama, and Brazil, where I could actually study, live and interact with native speakers. I did my fastest and the best language learning on the streets of San Juan, Panama City, Madrid and my favorite, Rio de Janeiro. You can't help but learn. And especially as a 19-20-21-year-old person. When all you have to do is study and have fun, you will learn it and you won't even realize you became fluent. That's how fast it is to learn the language when you are there meeting new friends, having adventures, laughing and finding the joy of changing your whole perspective on life.

But even when I could not do all that, I was an intense reader, and I was grateful for my teachers in Spanish and Portuguese who made me study texts. Reading is how I acquired vocabulary, how I internalized structures; that's how I could establish a foundation of knowledge without the pressure of needing to quickly respond or react in daily situations. Reading is a way to meditate on the foreign language that you are learning. Have your

dictionary at your side. Hopefully you will get books and magazines and stories that are interesting. And for any foreign language learner, if you think that you're going to learn the language only by going to the lessons and listening to me or listening to Señor Pablo or whoever is up there, then you go home and forget about it, you won't improve. You won't learn; it's a waste of time.

Those of you readers, who are studying German or French, please take advantage of the excellent teachers that are also in those departments (German and French). They are well-organized professionals. These classes are electives for some people, in addition to the compulsory Spanish. For those who choose German or French: please take them seriously. We have helpful staff like Madame Aytül in the French Translation and Interpretation Department, and of course my friends like Sine Hoca, Andreas Hoca, Manuela Hoca and Christine Hoca in the German Department.

You have got to dedicate yourself while you are full-time students. I know some people have to work; not everybody's parents can afford to pay for them, but if you are fortunate enough that all you have to do is study and learn, then do it now while you have the resources.