Walter & José: Conversation Summary

A Coaching Story Across Languages, Identity, and Golf

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Audio version: *https://www.walterfreiberg.com/joseph*

[00:00] Who Is José

José is a golf instructor from Texas with 19 years of experience. He started as a university golf professor and has been running private lessons for the past four years. He speaks English as his native language, Spanish, and German fluently, reads Latin, and studied ancient Greek for several years.

In his own words:

> "I am a golf teacher. I have been a golf teacher for 19 years. I started as a university golf professor and four years ago I dedicated myself to giving private golf lessons."

On the possibility of teaching golf in Spanish, something that had already started happening:

> "Normally I teach golf in English. But a few days ago I was also working in a golf shop one day a week and some Spanish-speaking clients came in. I spoke with the parents because they had a son who was looking for clubs. The parents speak English, but they speak Spanish much better. So I used my Spanish to communicate with them and I think that is why the mother is interested in me as a teacher for another one of her sons, because yes, I speak Spanish. So I want to use Spanish as a golf teacher and it is something I want to do and I did it in one form a few days ago."

[03:10] Identity Across Languages

José describes how each language brings out a different facet of who he is, without making him feel like a different person.

> "It is very interesting because I feel like myself, but a different form of myself. I think that in each language there is an aspect of my personality that is a little more pronounced. It is not that I am not José, but there is more emphasis on one aspect of who I am."

On what others notice:

> "People who know me say, for example, when I speak German, when I start it is like, you are a different person. Something changes. I speak in a different way. My intonation is different. I think that in German I am a little more serious, in a somewhat more academic way. And when people hear me in Spanish, people from Texas say, ah José, your voice is very sweet, very warm when you speak Spanish."

On what each language gives him access to:

> "In German I can speak well about music. Because I have a lot of experience with music, reading books about music, talking about musical topics. I also speak about grammar, linguistics in German, philosophy. In Spanish I can also speak in any language about daily life. That is normal, but in Spanish I can also speak about golf, about linguistics, philosophy, theology."

[07:45] The Road to Rioplatense

José explains how he moved from a neutral, Mexican-influenced Spanish toward the Rioplatense accent of Argentina, and how he found Walter.

> "Before I started with a more neutral accent, an accent maybe a little more Mexican, because I live in Texas and I hear Mexican Spanish all the time. I have many dear friends from Mexico. So I think my accent was a combination of a Mexican accent and a bit of neutral Spanish. And I realized I was consuming a lot of content from Argentina, that my favorite YouTube channels are

different Argentine channels, different topics. And I fell in love with the culture of Argentina, everything."

On the first moment he was perceived as having an Argentine accent, even before the coaching:

> "I have a friend from Mexico. And when I went to Hueco to visit some friends, I saw him. And I had not spoken with him in Spanish, because when I moved to the city where I currently live, the last time I saw him, before I moved, I had not yet started learning Spanish. So he, being Mexican, did not know I spoke Spanish. He realized obviously. I told him by message, but it was the first time we spoke in Spanish. And he said, José, you have a little Argentine accent. I think at that moment I did not have much of an Argentine accent, but he perceived me as someone with a little Argentine accent."

On finding Walter:

> "I was looking, or rather listening, to a YouTube podcast. And I had searched for the topic of the aspirated S, because I wanted to improve that sound. And I found an interview with you and other people. And you spoke about your coaching, what you do. And I thought, that is what I need, because I want to improve my accent in general, but one specific sound. And I sent you an email, I think through your website. And that was the beginning of everything."

[13:20] Technical Work

José breaks down the specific phonetic and prosodic elements they worked on together.

> "First, different sounds, like the aspirated S, the D, specific sounds. Also the aspect of nasality, because before I spoke in a very nasal way. And something interesting, when I was learning German, my trainer, pronunciation coach, accent reduction for German, also told me, José, in your German, your voice is a little more nasal than normal. So it is a tendency I have when I speak another language, I speak a little more nasally than in

English. So you identified it, and it is something we have reduced."

On the rhythmic and prosodic dimensions:

> "Also the rhythmic aspect. What rhythm patterns do I use? Also intonation. Different types of intonation. And connecting words. Because I think a little more in Germanic languages, we pause more, we separate words a little more. Maybe it is perception, but it is something I feel. And if one separates words in a Germanic language, it is a bit more refined, it is speaking in a more elegant way. But in Spanish it is more about joining words, being a language with more vowels and with fewer very long consonant clusters in a Romance language. So we have worked on individual sounds, rhythm, intonation, word groupings."

[17:00] The Identity Shift

José describes the decision to fully commit to one variety of Spanish and what that meant for his sense of self.

> "Before I used different forms of conjugation. So I am talking about a long time ago, but if I spoke with a Mexican friend, I would say something like cuénteme and not contame. I used tuteo with Mexican friends and voseo with Argentine friends. And you told me something. At one point, José, one has to decide what varieties one is going to use because maintaining two varieties is something very complicated and it is not ideal. And I totally agreed. And I decided and started only using voseo and I also switched to another sound. Before I said playa or playa and now I only say playa. I use the sh sound."

On what that commitment meant internally:

> "It was something important because there were people who knew me before the change. And at one moment I had doubts about what it would be like if someone noticed, now José speaks differently. I met him two years ago and suddenly he uses slightly different grammar or his voice changed. But I thought, it does not matter. And I feel good. And I have not had any

problem with any person after making the change. There has been no kind of negative comment. But for me it was something important to decide and to have the self confidence to do that. To say, this is my new identity, it is something chosen but I can do that at any moment. And I truly feel better. I feel more José being Argentine, or the Argentine version, than the neutral Spanish version."

[21:30] The Moment of Proof

José shares the experience in southern Chile that confirmed something had genuinely changed.

"I was traveling through Chile. I was traveling with my girlfriend, who is Chilean. And we were in the south of Chile. Where we were, it was very close to the border with Argentina, very close to Bariloche, for example. But in Chile. So there is a presence of Argentines and we were in an area of closeness to Argentina. And we entered a shop and started talking with a woman who worked there. And I said a few things and she said something like, Ah, you are Argentine? And more. And I told her, no, I am from the United States. But from having heard me, she confused me with an Argentine. It was the first time in my life. I thought, ah, that is progress. It made me feel very good that that happened."

[24:00] Golf and Language: The Performance Pressure Parallel

José draws a precise and detailed parallel between the gap between practice and performance in golf, and the same gap in language learning.

"In golf we talk about something called performance pressure. Let me give you an example. Say we are trying to make a change in a golfer's swing. And I ask the golfer to make a practice swing or a low pressure swing demonstrating the new position. Most golfers are capable of producing that new position in a practice swing. But then, when I put the ball there and the golfer has to hit a ball with that new position, typically it is not there because we need a certain number of repetitions

> to create a new motor pathway. And the body is capable of producing that motion. And it is a progression."

On the language equivalent:

> "I can be practicing something, even a grammatical aspect or in particular an accent. If it is pronunciation, rhythm, but especially individual sounds. I can practice it and read a text and the sound comes out perfect. Like with the aspirated S. If I read a text, I can produce it almost perfectly every time. But then, when I start speaking, under that pressure, like with the golfer, it falls back."

On what changed through the coaching:

> "What I have noticed after working with you is that what I can produce when I speak with other people is closer to my practice than before. There is always, in any activity, going to be a difference between our practice and the actual performance experience, but now I notice that the gap between my practice and my performance in Spanish is much smaller. And I feel a confidence that I had never felt before."

On a specific breakthrough moment:

> "Last week I was involved in a group at my church. It is a Spanish speaking church. I was in the group and I have been part of that group for two years now. And I used to be afraid to speak in our meetings in front of the group. And I started making comments, interjecting multiple comments, not just short one word responses, and I thought, I am speaking and I am comfortable. And I always felt comfortable with the people. It was never the people. They are wonderful people, good friends, but with Spanish I never felt natural. And this happened last week. It was the first time in that group where there are multiple people and not just a small group. And I thought, this feels like when I speak English. And it was a great experience."

[30:15] Three Types of Practice

José lays out a three tier model of practice that mirrors his thinking as a golf instructor.

> "In golf we need two things. In language it is the same. We need practice at home or in golf, like practice at the driving range, the area where you are not on the actual course. And those types of repetitions create a base. And we need a certain number of repetitions before creating that new motor pathway. But we also need repetitions when we are actually hitting the golf ball, not just making practice swings, but actually hitting the ball."

On the middle step between private practice and real conversation:

> "You told me I should listen to audio messages I send to people on WhatsApp in Spanish and listen to myself. Because an audio message is not like a totally spontaneous conversation, but it is a step toward it. It is not just my personal practice. It is a more natural step. And listening to audio messages has been a transformative experience because I hear the things you recommended I work on and I can hear my progress. And if I am doing well, it gives me confidence. And if it is something that is not exactly what we want, it confirms that, ah yes, I still need to practice it."

On what happens when all three levels come together:

> "The reason I have confidence now is that I have had all three steps with you. I have had that private personal practice in my language laboratory. I have listened to my messages that I send to people, audio messages. And then I have seen that these things work in real conversations with other people. And when something comes out well in a real conversation, that truly cements my confidence."

[37:40] What Confidence Actually Is

José shares his philosophy on confidence, which applies equally to language, golf, and music.

> "I think that for many people maybe they do not realize that confidence can be acquired. Maybe they think of it as, I start with confidence. That is my personality. And yes, we can be more or less confident in a general sense, but I think confidence is, in some way, a choice to accept ourselves in the moment in which we are living. In other words, to be confident, I have to say, today, this is the Spanish I have. I am not finished with the process. I want to continue getting better."

On the relationship between acceptance and growth:

> "Today is today. And I have to say, I accept who I am today before I can be confident. I am not the person I want to be tomorrow. I have to accept that this is who I am today. And it is good. It is not a bad thing. And I am on a journey that is a wonderful, beautiful journey. But today, this is the place I am on that journey. And I can begin to have confidence when I have this kind of self acceptance in the moment where I am on that journey."

On how confidence and technical progress are connected:

> "You could not have told me, Joseph, you have to be more confident in your Spanish! If you had not helped me with the technical side, I would not have been able to build the confidence. So it is a pair. It is a framework between your technical help and then teaching me the psychological side of being a better language learner."

On what he discovered through the process:

> "When I met you, I did not have confidence. One of the most serious problems I had was the lack of confidence. And I do not know if I would have been able to articulate that at that point. Because I think working with you I discovered that I needed to acquire confidence. And I can say it can be acquired because now I have confidence and before I did not. So definitely I can say it is something that can be acquired. And sometimes people do not realize they are missing it."

[44:00] What He Is Most Excited About

José answers the closing question in both English (golf) and Spanish (language), switching fluidly between them.

On his golf business and teaching:

> "I have made a number of changes in how I am teaching, different approaches to things. And I have seen that my business has grown a bit as a golf instructor. And I am excited because with the changes I have made, I feel that on one hand it is going to attract more clients, I am going to have more people I can work with. But I feel I am a more effective teacher. I am seeing bigger changes in the technique of my students, but I am also seeing my students gaining that confidence we talked about."

On a specific example from the day before:

> "Someone I taught yesterday, we made a critical change in his impact position. In golf, you want something called forward shaft lean, which means that at impact your hands are in front of the ball. And I know this is a little technical, but it is something that is critical, it is something all professionals do and that most amateurs in golf do not do. And when this person yesterday started with me, at the beginning of the day he could not do it and by the end of the session he was doing it very well. And it was incredible because he told me the sound, the sound is so different."

On his Spanish goals:

> "In truth there are so many things, I still have goals, there are things I want to change, I am happy with what I can do but I think in one month, two months, three months I will see different aspects, a type of more Argentine intonation, word groupings, things I am still working on. And my goal in Spanish is to be able to pass as Argentine more often. Right now sometimes it happens but I want to be able to pass as Argentine frequently. And it is something I think is going to happen within a few months because I see a trajectory of

> progress and I am happy with what I do but I see a future with the capacity to present myself as more Argentine."

On the transformation overall:

> "I have recordings of myself from 2022. Before meeting you, in Spanish. And when I listen to recordings from 2022 I do not recognize myself either. So in truth it has been a transformation in many senses."

Conversation conducted in Spanish and English. Quotes translated into English and lightly edited for readability while preserving José's voice and meaning.

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