

## Feature Article

### *Creating A Learning Environment Where Target Language Is “Standard”*

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*[Editor’s note: This is an abridged version. A link to the full version is at the end.]*

How can teachers create and sustain a learning environment in which students expect and become “used to” target language (TL) input and output? ... Teacher use of TL is crucial as it often serves as the significant, and sometimes only, source of authentic, scaffolded input. ...

An immersion style learning environment requires significant preparation of a curriculum that represents best practices and promotes a respectful and risk-taking community within the classroom. In order to develop language and cultural proficiency, meaningful communication and interactive feedback must be provided in the target language. To accomplish this, instructors must use a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and support meaning making. The following principles stem from a review of the research literature and effective practices observed among teacher practitioners who make nearly exclusive use of the TL in their language classrooms. These teaching and learning strategies are designed to assist language teachers to introduce and sustain the TL while creating an engaging learning environment which approximates authentic language communication.

#### **Use comprehensible input (visualization, gestures, non-verbals, prior knowledge)**

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When introducing vocabulary, or telling a story, teachers should use images, preferably culturally authentic images. By using visual input to enhance the text, recall and recognition is enhanced by presenting information in a multiple sensory form (visual and verbal). This eliminates the need for L1 as learners use background knowledge and visuals to decode meaning. For example: When introducing new vocabulary or grammatical concepts, use a story. The story should make use of images as well as text. While reading, or acting out the story to the students, the teacher uses gestures to illustrate key/new words and to accompany the image. Using such a strategy presents new material in context making the input more comprehensible to students. This technique also helps students understand that they have the ability to understand a message without previously having mastered the vocabulary.

#### **Create a respectful community of learning that promotes risk taking**

A community based on mutual respect among students and between teacher and students promotes a comfortable and low affective environment in which students feel free to produce language without fear of being mocked. [See full version of article for a useful acrostic.]...

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Building a respectful, risk-taking environment will not happen overnight. The students should be taught about the importance of demonstrating respect for their peers at all times. It is often helpful to explain Krashen’s Affective Filter Hypothesis which will help students realize the

nature of respect and its importance. Also, the students should be fully aware of the importance of taking risks and making errors during the language acquisition process.

### **Employ “Meta Moments” that encourage learner reflection**

Using “meta moments” allows *learners to see clear purpose and rationale behind the strategies and approaches used by the teacher* in the classroom. ...

For example, after a teacher has introduced a story using PPT in which the vocabulary comprehension is enhanced through visual images, the teacher can pause and ask,

- How did this vocabulary become comprehensible?
- Why do you think I used an image rather than the English translation to communicate the meaning?
- How did this help you to decode the meaning of the story?

Grammar structures can be introduced inductively as the teacher provides students with four sentences that illustrate the usage of a particular structure (e.g. preterit). After studying the four sentences in pairs, students are asked to create a rule that explains the verb formation. The teacher asks the students,

- Why did I do it this way rather than give you the rule?

Once students internalize that teachers are experts/professionals who understand how to increase learning and that teachers clearly have purpose in what they do in the classroom, *trust builds between the student and teacher*. Students begin to realize there is purpose to each activity and a clear rationale for how the learning is introduced. This results in a growing relationship of trust between the teacher and student and students relax in knowing the teacher is there to guide them toward accomplishment of the learning goal through the tasks in which they participate. As Graham declares, "For learners, a vital component of self-directed learning lies in the on-going evaluation of the methods they have employed on tasks and of their achievements" (p. 170).

### **Teach concrete learning strategies that improve learning (e.g. circumlocution, chunking, graphic organizers/mind mapping, context, mnemonics)**

Learning strategies are defined as "the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p.1).

Language research suggests that *training students to use learning strategies can help them become better language learners*. ...

One effective way to promote circumlocution, for example, is to integrate a learning task based on the \$20,000 Pyramid TV game show. Students are divided into teams of 4-6 students. All but one member of a team is physically set up to face the classroom audience while the remaining student faces an overhead screen with his/her back to the classroom audience. The screen contains a list of six vocabulary words related to a story that was read. The team has 60 seconds to correctly guess the vocabulary words based solely on the description by the student who can see the projected vocabulary words on the screen (audience can see this as well). Students are encouraged to use the story to provide a context for the vocabulary words to assist in identifying the word quickly and efficiently, e.g. “this animal says cockadoodledo.” When students participate in such task-based games, the anxiety is significantly reduced and the students

become so engaged in the task that they are willing to take risks to communicate their message. The ability to talk around a word that they may not know explicitly is a strategic tool that promotes authentic interpersonal communication in the language classroom.

### **Reward errors and celebrate self-correction**

Errors are seen as developmental and are rewarded by the teacher and peers by lauding students when they self-correct or when a classmate makes an error and it is noticed by a peer. Students need to *understand that making an error is not only a natural and frequent occurrence while learning a new language but also a critical part of the acquisition*. An explanation of such, along with celebrations of self-corrections should be acknowledged and celebrated as a major learning indicator.

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This draws attention to the methods, especially the more implicit techniques, and will result in more noticing and therefore self-correction by students. Such an approach to error correction promotes risk taking and lowers the affective learning environment.

### **Exhibit enthusiasm for *your students' learning*—celebrate each “oh” and “aha”**

Oftentimes non-verbal actions communicate more than language. Effective ways that inherently communicate enthusiasm are behaviors such as *varying voice speech, making eye contact, using body language, using facial expressions and providing constant encouragement*.

Encouragement is characterized as teaching behaviors which express supportiveness and that communicate an "I am on your team attitude." Encouragement is a way of attempting to motivate students to continued participation in an activity and is best transmitted to students in the form of feedback. Stimulation, or a sincere compliment, instills confidence in your students and draws on your belief in them.

### **Use extrinsic motivation strategies and move toward intrinsic motivation**

Building an effective communicative-based learning environment requires a great deal of comprehensible input by the teacher but it is also essential that students become producers of the language as well. The students may need some incentive at the onset of the course. One effective strategy is to reward participation for the use of the TL. This can be in the form of a tangible token of sort, for example the use of *Euros* for using complete phrases in the TL during class, asking and answering questions, or sharing ideas and opinions. The students collect the *Euros* which the teacher collects after each unit. A minimum number of *Euros* have to be achieved by the end of a unit of study. Euros that exceed the required number are placed in a drawing for prizes at the end of the quarter, or semester. The goal should be set high to encourage discourse between students and between the students and teacher. These points may also be earned for spontaneous conversation outside of class. An explanation of the importance of the production of the language will help motivate the students to earn the points. Soon, the

students will notice their own improvement in regards to their output and will feel a sense of pride and accomplishment and in turn motivation will move from extrinsic to intrinsic.

### **Teach grammar inductively --“cracking the code”**

In order to overcome the temptation to resort to L1 when teaching grammar, approach it inductively and present it in a context that will allow students to discover rules of grammar on their own, thereby processing deeper and enhancing comprehension. This results in a greater sense of accomplishment and promotes self-efficacy, the realization that with effort they can achieve their goals. This technique also *encourages students to be actively engaged participants in their own learning via a problem solving task.*

One way to apply this inductive approach when introducing a grammar concept is to select a story, or very short text, that introduces varied forms of one new grammar structure, such as the use of pronouns such as I, he/she/it, we, and they. The teacher narrates a story as students focus on interpreting the auditory input for meaning. The teacher then provides the students with a textual version of the story asking them to focus on the grammar structure. In pairs, students work in a think/pair/share mode dubbed “cracking the code.” They talk aloud and work to decipher the rules of the new grammar concept solely by its use in the story. The teacher facilitates this task by moving about the room asking questions and supporting ideas, but not providing the answer. When a pair has “cracked the code,” ask them to share their ideas, or rules with the class. They explain how they came to the conclusion allowing the teacher to identify misconceptions for later review. This activity is a great discovery learning task that promotes cognitive engagement and collaborative learning and empowers students as they realize their own skills and abilities.

### **Professional Community**

Building a professional community (peers, administrators, parents, students) where inquiry and continual development are valued and encouraged is key to sustaining a vibrant school environment where teachers and learners are actively engaged in teaching and learning. It is important to establish a “community of inquiry” with peers in your language department that is *grounded in a common philosophy of teaching and learning.* This will promote a sharing of ideas and resources and create a vibrant and organic environment of learning. This will also ensure horizontal and vertical articulation for students as they move from one language level to the next to ensure a trajectory of growth in language proficiency.

Communicate with administrators about what you do (language teaching), how you do it (pedagogy,) and how you are assessing the progress and achievement of your students. Invite them to observe, participate, and unpack a lesson with you to provide a first-hand view of standards-based teaching and learning. Moments invested in such efforts are well worth the reward when languages are seen as an integral part of the school curriculum. These efforts allow others to see the important role language learning plays in building students’ academic success (strategies, motivation, and persistence) and the important connections and contributions of foreign languages to other disciplines (content based language learning).

## Conclusion

Maximizing the TL in the classroom will ensure a lively and engaging language experience that can approximate authentic language use and make language learning meaningful to learners. Too often, language learning is regarded as a sea-time experience with little connection to the everyday world in which learners live. When students cross the threshold of your classroom and expect to understand and respond in the TL, language learning becomes real and the ability to communicate in another language becomes a highly valued skill that can be shared with others.

[Link to full article, including references.](#)

[http://nclrc.org/about\\_teaching/topics/PDFs/Feature-Moeller-TLEnvironmentIsStandard-original.pdf](http://nclrc.org/about_teaching/topics/PDFs/Feature-Moeller-TLEnvironmentIsStandard-original.pdf)

## References

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