

## **Teaching in the Target Language**

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As we focus on learners and what they need from their teachers during language classes, one of the most important elements is their need to access the new language through the language itself and not through English. Janice Erickson, ACTFL past president, compared using English to teach another language like teaching kids how to swim without water. We know from research in second-language acquisition that learners need to be surrounded with input that is meaningful and interesting in order to acquire a new language.

### **How Much Target Language Use is Appropriate?**

We must provide this kind of input consistently, from the very beginning and for every class period. Many teachers speak exclusively in the target language; others recommend use of the new language 95 to 100 percent of the time. ACTFL in its position statement on this topic (<http://www.actfl.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=4368> - targetlang) recommends that the target language be used a minimum of 90% of the time. It is especially important that the teacher use the new language for regular classroom tasks, such as giving directions and managing behavior because this demonstrates to the students that the new language is useful and works for all the business of the classroom.

### **Teacher as Culture Bearer**

Language is the key to the culture. Even though not all teachers are native speakers, all teachers serve as culture bearers--the representatives of the culture in the classroom. When students have the feeling of being surrounded by the language, they also have the feeling of what it might be like to actually be in a place where this language is spoken. If we spend much of classroom time in English, we are actually denying students access to the language and the culture.

### **Why Do Some Teachers Resist Using the Target Language?**

Since using the target language is such a vital part of actually learning the language, why do some teachers resist using the language and use English? Some thoughts on possibly explaining this are:

- They worry that the learners won't understand and won't know what to do.
- They worry that they themselves sometimes do not know enough of the language to be able to be effective users.
- They worry that the language is too difficult and that they must explain it in English.
- They worry about losing control of the class if they speak the target language.
- They may have inherited a class whose previous teacher spoke mostly in English.

### **What is the Role of English?**

Under some circumstances it may be necessary to use English. There may be an emergency in which the welfare of the students is at stake or there may be emotional upsets in which individual students need a private conversation in English. There may be extremely important concepts in a teachable moment that absolutely may not be communicated in the target language.

The use of English should be intentional and be a conscious decision, not just something the teacher slides into without thinking. The following series of questions can be helpful in deciding when and if using English instead of the target language is appropriate.

*Shall I Use English for a lesson segment?*

- Can I find a way to communicate the new idea in the new language with visuals, gestures?
- Can I simplify?
- Can I substitute a different concept?
- Can I delay this topic until we can deal with it in the target language?
- Could this be part of the lessons I leave for a substitute teacher?
- Could this be a homework assignment using English language resources?
- Is an English explanation essential to further progress toward my goals for this lesson?

*Shall I Use English to clarify vocabulary?*

- Have I already tried using visuals, gestures, or other strategies to get the meaning across?
- Will failing to understand this vocabulary item interfere with the progress of the lesson?

Of course, if after all these deliberations, the teacher finally makes the decision to use English for a specified purpose, it is still important to stay within the guidelines of target language use 90 to 95 to 100 percent of the time.

## **How Do We Keep the Classroom in the Target Language?**

Use the Target Language Consistently.

Make the Language Comprehensible

- Use simple, direct language and choose vocabulary and structures that incorporate a large amount of material that is familiar to the learners.
- Break down directions and new information into small, incremental steps.
- Use concrete materials, visuals, gestures, facial expressions, and movement.
- Model every step of the process or the directions being presented.

Monitor and Assess Target Language Use.

- Keep track of student language use
- Make sure that oral language use is part of student assessment
- Make target language use a part of the classroom management system and an integral part of the classroom culture. Possibly use a reinforcement system to reward students for a short period of time to get them in the habit of using the language.

Check for Comprehension

- Students can use signals to indicate their response to a comprehension check. They can hold their thumbs up or down for “yes” and “no,” and wiggle their thumbs for “I’m not sure.”
- They can draw pictures to signal their comprehension or write on small whiteboards. Students can act out the behavior or imitate the performance that the teacher has demonstrated.

#### Separate the Native Language from the Target Language—Avoid Translation as a First Resort

- If the students know that the teacher is going to use both languages, they will not engage with the target language and will patiently wait for the English.
- If the teacher plans to repeat or clarify in English, he or she may not expend as much effort to make the target language comprehensible.
- Sometimes students who have understood directions or new vocabulary may call out the English, either as a way to help their classmates or to show the teacher that they have understood. It is important not to encourage or reinforce this practice because if it becomes a habit, the language lesson can turn into a translation game.

#### Separate the Native Language from the Target Language—Use a Sign

- Using a sign on which one side indicates English and the other side indicates the target language reminds teachers and students to stay in the target language.
- The sign can help the teacher make a transition to using the target language more frequently by keeping the teacher and the students focused on using the language for longer periods of time each day.
- Of course, beginning students cannot always conduct themselves entirely in the new language. Teachers can respond in the target language by rephrasing what students said in the target language and then responding in the target language.

### **Conclusion**

The central task for the language teacher is to create a communicative climate focused on meaning, within which language acquisition can take place naturally. The key to creating this climate is using the target language! When learners are surrounded with their new language 90 to 95 to 100 percent of the class time, and when teachers use the language for all classroom purposes, language use has a purpose and there is motivation to learn.