

TEACHING GOALS AND METHODS

From The Essentials of Language Teaching
www.nclrc.org/essentials
A project of the National Capital Language Resource Center
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This section outlines the goals and methods that characterize language teaching in colleges and universities in the United States, and provides guidelines for implementing those methods in the classroom.

Two worksheets, attached at the end of this document, help language instructors assess their overall teaching approach and their ways of using current methodology in specific lessons. A third worksheet allows supervisors to provide specific feedback after observing an instructor in the classroom.

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Material in this section is drawn from the modules "Research and language learning: A tour of the horizon" by Ken Sheppard, and "Spoken language: What it is and how to teach it" by Grace Stovall Burkart in *Modules for the Professional Preparation of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages* (Grace Stovall Burkart, ed.; Washington, DC: Center for Applied Linguistics, 1998)

Goal: Communicative Competence

Language teaching in the United States is based on the idea that the goal of language acquisition is *communicative competence*: the ability to use the language correctly and appropriately to accomplish communication goals. The desired outcome of the language learning process is the ability to communicate competently, not the ability to use the language exactly as a native speaker does.

Communicative competence is made up of four competence areas: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic.

- *Linguistic competence* is knowing how to use the grammar, syntax, and vocabulary of a language. Linguistic competence asks: What words do I use? How do I put them into phrases and sentences?
- *Sociolinguistic competence* is knowing how to use and respond to language appropriately, given the setting, the topic, and the relationships among the people communicating. Sociolinguistic competence asks: Which words and phrases fit this setting and this topic? How can I express a specific attitude (courtesy, authority, friendliness, respect) when I need to? How do I know what attitude another person is expressing?
- *Discourse competence* is knowing how to interpret the larger context and how to construct longer stretches of language so that the parts make up a coherent whole. Discourse competence asks: How are words, phrases and sentences put together to create conversations, speeches, email messages, newspaper articles?
- *Strategic competence* is knowing how to recognize and repair communication breakdowns, how to work around gaps in one's knowledge of the language, and how to learn more about the language and in the context. Strategic competence asks: How do I know when I've misunderstood or when someone has misunderstood me? What do I say then? How can I express my ideas if I don't know the name of something or the right verb form to use?

In the early stages of language learning, instructors and students may want to keep in mind the goal of communicative efficiency: That learners should be able to make themselves understood, using their current proficiency to the fullest. They should try to avoid confusion in the message (due to faulty pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary); to avoid offending communication partners (due to socially inappropriate style); and to use strategies for recognizing and managing communication breakdowns.

Method: Learner-centered Instruction

In language classrooms in the United States, instruction focuses on the learner and the learning process. The instructor creates a learning environment that resembles as much as possible the one in which students learned their first language. Students participate in the learning process by establishing learning goals, developing and choosing learning strategies, and evaluating their own progress. In the classroom, students attend to models provided by the instructor (input) and then build on those models as they use language themselves (output). Classroom activities incorporate real-world situations.

Learner-centered instruction encourages students to take responsibility for their own language skill development and helps them gain confidence in their ability to learn and use the language. Teachers support students by devoting some class time to non-traditional activities, including teaching learners how to use learning strategies (see *Motivating Students*), how to use available tools and resources, and how to reflect on their own learning (see *Assessing Learning*).

Many U.S. students have had experience with learner-centered instruction and expect it to be used in their classrooms. Students who are accustomed to more traditional teacher-centered instruction may resist the learner-centered model at first because it expects them to be more involved in the learning process. However, when they discover that learner-centered instruction enables them to develop real-world language skills while having fun, they usually become enthusiastic participants.

For further discussion of learner-centered instruction, see *Models of Language Teaching in What Language Teaching Is*.

Guidelines for Communicative, Learner-centered Instruction

These ten guidelines will help you make communicative language teaching and learner-centered instruction part of your own instructional approach.

- Provide appropriate input
- Use language in authentic ways
- Provide context
- Design activities with a purpose
- Use task-based activities
- Encourage collaboration
- Use an integrated approach
- Address grammar consciously
- Adjust feedback/error correction to the situation
- Include awareness of cultural aspects of language use

1. Provide Appropriate Input

Input is the language to which students are exposed: teacher talk, listening activities, reading passages, and the language heard and read outside of class. Input gives learners the material they need to develop their ability to use the language on their own.

Language input has two forms. Finely tuned input

- Is matched to learners' current comprehension level and connected to what they already know
- Focuses on conscious learning of a specific point: the pronunciation of a word, the contrast in the uses of two verb tenses, new vocabulary, useful social formulas
- Is controlled by the instructor or textbook author
- Is used in the presentation stage of a lesson

Roughly tuned input

- Is more complex than learners' current proficiency and stretches the boundaries of their current knowledge
- Focuses on authentic use of language in listening or reading passages
- Is used "as is," with minimal alteration by the instructor or textbook author
- Is used in the activity stage of the lesson

Roughly tuned input challenges student to use listening and reading strategies to aid comprehension. When selecting authentic materials for use as roughly tuned input, look for listening and reading selections that are one level of proficiency higher than students' current level. This will ensure that students will be challenged by the material without being overwhelmed by its difficulty.

2. Use Language in Authentic Ways

In order to learn a language, instead of merely learning about it, students need as much as possible to hear and read the language as native speakers use it. Instructors can make this happen in two ways.

Teacher talk: Always try to use the language as naturally as possible when you are talking to students. Slowing down may seem to make the message more comprehensible, but it also distorts the subtle shifts in pronunciation that occur in naturally paced speech.

- Speak at a normal rate

- Use vocabulary and sentence structures with which students are familiar
- State the same idea in different ways to aid comprehension

Materials: Give students authentic reading material from newspapers, magazines, and other print sources. To make them accessible,

- Review them carefully to ensure that the reading level is appropriate
- Introduce relevant vocabulary and grammatical structures in advance
- Provide context by describing the content and typical formats for the type of material (for example, arrival and departure times for travel schedules)

Advertisements, travel brochures, packaging, and street signs contain short statements that students at lower levels can manage. The World Wide Web is a rich resource for authentic materials. Reading authentic materials motivates students at all levels because it gives them the sense that they really are able to use the language.

3. Provide Context

Context includes knowledge of

- the topic or content
- the vocabulary and language structures in which the content is usually presented
- the social and cultural expectations associated with the content

To help students have an authentic experience of understanding and using language, prepare them by raising their awareness of the context in which it occurs.

- Ask them what they know about the topic
- Ask what they can predict from the title or heading of a reading selection or the opening line of a listening selection
- Review the vocabulary (including idiomatic expressions) and sentence structures that are usually found in that type of material
- Review relevant social and cultural expectations

4. Design Activities with a Purpose

Ordinarily, communication has a purpose: to convey information. Activities in the language classroom simulate communication outside the classroom when they are structured with such a purpose. In these classroom activities, students use the language to fill an information gap by getting answers or expanding a partial understanding. For example, students work in pairs, and each is given half of a map, grid, or list needed to complete a task. The pair then talk to each other until they both have all the information.

5. Use Task-based Activities

Fluent speakers use language to perform tasks such as solving problems, developing plans, and working together to complete projects. The use of similar task-based activities in the classroom is an excellent way to encourage students to use the language. Tasks may involve solving a word problem, creating a crossword puzzle, making a video, preparing a presentation, or drawing up a plan.

6. Encourage Collaboration

Whenever possible, ask students to work in pairs or small groups. Give students structure in the form of a defined task and outcome. This structure will allow students to collaborate as they develop a work plan, discuss the substance of the task, and report the outcome. They will thus use language in a variety of ways and learn from each other.

Effective collaborative activities have three characteristics.

- Communication gap: Each student has relevant information that the others don't have
- Task orientation: Activity has a defined outcome, such as solving a problem or drawing a map
- Time limit: Students have a preset amount of time to complete the task

7. Use an Integrated Approach

Integration has two forms. Mode integration is the combination of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in classroom activities. By asking students to use two or more modes, instructors create activities that imitate real world language use.

Content integration is bringing content from students' fields of study into the language curriculum. University students often find it instructive to read, discuss, and write about material whose content they already know, because their knowledge of the topic helps them understand and use the language. They are able to scaffold: to build on existing knowledge as they increase their language proficiency. For students who plan to study and/or work in a field that will require them to use the language they are learning, integration of content can be a powerful motivator.

8. Address Grammar Consciously

University students usually need and appreciate direct instruction in points of grammar that are related to classroom activities. These students often have knowledge of the rules associated with standard use of their native language (metalinguistic knowledge) and can benefit from development of similar knowledge in the target language and discussion of similarities and differences.

Discuss points of grammar in the contexts where they arise. Asking students to think through a rule in the context of an effort to express themselves clearly is a more effective way of helping them internalize the rule than teaching the rule in isolation.

Two types of grammar rules to address when using authentic materials:

- Prescriptive rules: State how the language "should" or "must" be used; define what is "correct." These are the rules that are taught in language textbooks.
- Descriptive rules: State how the language is actually used by fluent speakers. The degree to which descriptive rules differ from prescriptive rules depends on the setting (casual/formal use of language), the topic, and the backgrounds of the speakers.

9. Adjust Feedback/Error Correction to Situation

In the parts of a lesson that focus on form (see Planning a Lesson), direct and immediate feedback is needed and expected. Encourage students to self-correct by waiting after they have spoken or by asking them to try again.

Feedback techniques:

- Paraphrase a student's utterances, modeling the correct forms
- Ask students to clarify their utterances, providing paraphrases of their own

Avoid feeding students the correct forms every time. Gradually teaching them to depend less on you and more on themselves is what language teaching is all about.

In the parts of a lesson that focus on communication activities (see Planning a Lesson), the flow of talk should not be interrupted by the teacher's corrections. When students address you, react to the content of their utterances, not just the form. Your response is a useful comprehension check for students, and on the affective level it shows that you are listening to what they say. Make note of recurring errors you hear so that you can address them with the whole group in the feedback session later (see Planning a Lesson).

10. Include Awareness of Cultural Aspects of Language Use

Languages are cognitive systems, but they also express ideas and transmit cultural values. When you are discussing language use with your students, it is important to include information on the social, cultural, and historical context that certain language forms carry for native speakers. Often these explanations include reference to what a native speaker would hear or say, and why.

Culture is expressed and transmitted through magazines and newspapers, radio and television programs, movies, and the internet. Using media as authentic materials in the classroom can expand students' perspectives and generate interesting discussions about the relationships between language and culture.

Resources

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Instructor Self-evaluation Worksheet: Overall Language Teaching Approach

Use this worksheet to think about your overall approach to teaching language and to identify ways you can adopt a more learner-centered methodology.

1. I talk ____ percent of the time in my classroom. My purposes for talking are:

2. My students speak individually _____ percent of the time in my classroom. Their purposes for speaking are:

3. My students talk with one another _____ percent of the time in my classroom. Their purposes for talking with one another are:

4. My students have a say in the material we study in these ways:

5. My students evaluate their own progress in these ways:

6. My students evaluate each others' progress in these ways:

7. My approach is more teacher centered than learner centered in the following situations:

8. My approach is more learner centered than teacher centered in the following situations:

9. I want to make my approach more learner centered in these ways:

10. I have the following concerns or reservations about learner-centered instruction:

Instructor Self-evaluation Worksheet: Specific Lesson

Use this worksheet to think about a specific lesson that you have taught. It can also help you think through a lesson that you plan to teach.

1. What finely-tuned input did I provide? How much? How did I determine that it was finely tuned?
2. What roughly-tuned input did I provide? How much? How did I determine that it was appropriate for my students?
3. Was my use of oral language authentic? Did I distort sounds by slowing my speech? Did I use repetition and restatement to help students understand?
4. How did I provide context for the material that we covered in class?
5. What was the purpose of the activities we did in the classroom? How did I convey that purpose to the students?
6. What task-based activity did I use? What information gap was involved? What was the required product or outcome?
7. How did students collaborate during different parts of the lesson?
8. Which language modes were integrated in classroom activities, and how?
9. When did we address specific grammar topics? Who asked questions? Who provided answers?
10. When did students ask for feedback? What kind of feedback did they request? How did I provide it?
11. When did I provide feedback that students had not requested? How did I provide it?
12. How did I include awareness of cultural aspects of language use in the lesson?

Supervisor Observation Worksheet

Use this worksheet when observing a teacher's classroom performance to provide feedback on specific teaching styles and behaviors. Whenever possible, give specific examples.

1. What finely-tuned input did the teacher provide? How much? Was this input appropriate for the students?
2. What roughly-tuned input did the teacher provide? How much? Was this input appropriate for the students?
3. In what ways was the teacher's use of oral language authentic? In what ways was it not authentic?
4. How did the teacher provide context for the material that was covered in class?
5. What was the purpose of classroom activities? How did the teacher convey that purpose to the students?
6. What task-based activity was used? What information gap was involved? What was the required product or outcome?
7. How did students collaborate during different parts of the lesson?
8. Which language modes were integrated in classroom activities, and how?
9. When did the class address specific grammar topics? Who asked questions? Who provided answers?
10. When did students ask for feedback? What kind of feedback did they request? How did the instructor provide it?
11. When and how did the instructor provide feedback that students had not requested?
12. How did the instructor include awareness of cultural aspects of language use in the lesson?

13. The instructor talked _____ percent of the time. Individual students spoke _____ percent of the time. Students talked with one another _____ percent of the time.

14. The percentages listed in #13 were appropriate because

15. The percentages listed in #13 could have been changed in the following ways:

16. This instructor's teaching method is teacher centered in these ways:

17. This instructor's teaching method is learner centered in these ways:

18. Suggestions for making teaching more learner centered: