WHAT LANGUAGE TEACHING IS

Good teaching happens when competent teachers with non-discouraging personalities use non-defensive approaches to language teaching and learning, and cherish their students.

> *Dr. James E. Alatis*
> *Dean Emeritus, School of Languages and Linguistics, Georgetown University*

Section Contents

- Models of Language Teaching and Learning
- Reflective Practice
- Teaching Portfolios
- Be Prepared: Survival Tips for New Language Teachers
- Resources

Models of Language Teaching and Learning

New language instructors at the university level in the United States are often in one of three situations:

- They are graduate students who have extensive knowledge of language, literature, and culture but are not trained as language teachers
- They are professionals in other fields who are native speakers of the language but are not trained as language teachers
- They are language instructors with experience teaching in their countries of origin, but little or no training in the teaching approaches commonly used in the United States

These instructors often must begin their work in the classroom with little or no guidance to help them appreciate which methods work, how, and why. In response, they may fall back on an outdated model for understanding language teaching and language learning.

> Older model: Language learning is a product of transmission. Teacher transmits knowledge. Learner is recipient.

This teacher-centered model views the teacher as active and the student as fundamentally passive. The teacher is responsible for transmitting all of the information to the students. The teacher talks; the students listen and absorb (or take a nap).

The teacher-centered model may be attractive to new language instructors for several reasons:

- It is the method by which they were taught
- It makes sense: The teacher should be the focus of the classroom, since the teacher knows the language and the students do not
- It requires relatively little preparation: All the teacher needs to do is present the material outlined in the appropriate chapter of the textbook
- It requires relatively little thought about students or student activities: All students listen to the teacher's presentation, then do related exercises

However, experienced language instructors who reflect on their teaching practice have observed that the teacher-centered model has two major drawbacks:

- It involves only a minority of students in actual language learning
- It gives students knowledge about the language, but does not necessarily enable them to use it for purposes that interest them

To overcome these drawbacks, language teaching professionals in the United States and elsewhere have adopted a different model of teaching and learning.

> Newer model: Language learning is a process of discovery. Learner develops ability to use the language for specific communication purposes. Teacher models language use and facilitates students' development of language skills.

In this student-centered model, both student and teacher are active participants who share responsibility for the student's learning. Instructor and students work together to identify how students expect to use the language. The instructor models language use, and students then use the language themselves in practice activities that simulate real

communication situations. The active, joint engagement of students and teacher leads to a dynamic classroom environment in which teaching and learning become rewarding and enjoyable.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN TEACHER-CENTERED AND LEARNER-CENTERED INSTRUCTION

TEACHER CENTERED	LEARNER CENTERED
Focus is on instructor	Focus is on both students and instructor
Focus is on language forms and structures (what the instructor knows about the language	Focus is on language use in typical situations (how students will use the language)
Instructor talks; students listen	Instructor models; students interact with instructor and one another
Students work alone	Students work in pairs, in groups, or alone depending on the purpose of the activity
Instructor monitors and corrects every student utterance	Students talk without constant instructor monitoring; instructor provides feedback/correction when questions arise
Instructor answers students' questions about language	Students answer each other's questions, using instructor as an information resource
Instructor chooses topics	Students have some choice of topics
Instructor evaluates student learning	Students evaluate their own learning; instructor also evaluates
Classroom is quiet	Classroom is often noisy and busy

Language instructors who have never experienced learner-centered instruction can find it daunting in several ways.

- It requires more preparation time: Instructors must consider students' language learning goals, identify classroom activities that will connect those with the material presented in the textbook, and find appropriate real-world materials to accompany them
- It is mysterious: It's not clear what, exactly, an instructor does to make a classroom learner centered
- It feels like it isn't going to work: When students first move into small groups, they may be slow to get started as they assess the assigned task and figure out group dynamics

- It feels chaotic: Once students start working in their groups, the classroom becomes noisy and the instructor must be comfortable with the idea that students may make mistakes that are not heard and corrected
- It sounds like a bad idea: The phrase "learner-centered" makes it sound as though the instructor is not in control of the classroom

This final point is an important one. In fact, in an effective learner-centered classroom, the instructor has planned the content of all activities, has set time limits on them, and has set them in the context of instructor-modeled language use. The instructor is not the center of attention, but is still in control of students' learning activities.

This site is designed to help new language instructors become comfortable with learner-centered instruction and put it into practice in their classrooms. The pages on Teaching Goals and Methods, Planning a Lesson, and Motivating Learners provide guidelines and examples for putting learner-centered instruction into practice. The pages on Teaching Grammar, Teaching Listening, Teaching Speaking, and Teaching Reading illustrate learner-centered instruction in relation to each of those modalities.

For a set of learner-centered instruction techniques, see Teaching Goals and Methods.
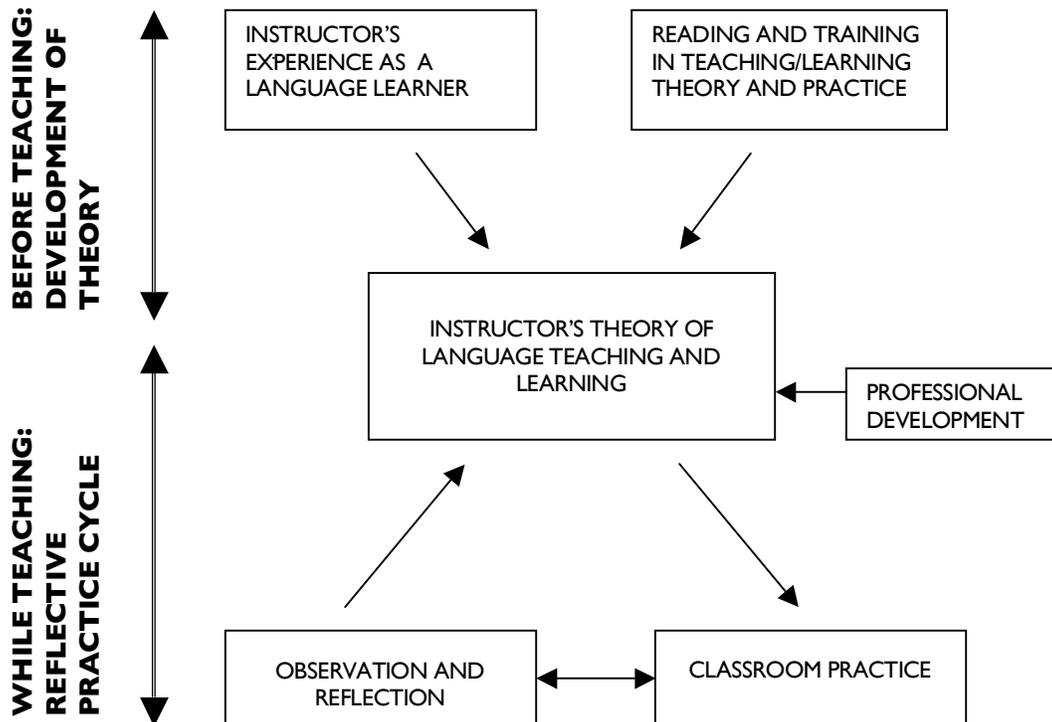
Reflective Practice

To move from the teacher-centered model to the learner-centered one, new language instructors need to think about what they do and how and why they do it. Reflective practice allows instructors to consider these questions in a disciplined way. Reflective practice asks:

- Which teaching model am I using?
- How does it apply in specific teaching situations?
- How well is it working?

Every instructor starts with an initial theory of language teaching and learning, based on personal experiences as a language learner and, in some cases, reading or training. In reflective practice, the teacher applies this theory in classroom practice, observes and reflects on the results, and adapts the theory. The classroom becomes a kind of laboratory where the teacher can relate teaching theory to teaching practice.

The theory provides a unifying rationale for the activities that the instructor uses in the classroom; classroom observation and reflection enable the instructor to refine the theory and adjust teaching practice. Concepts that the teacher acquires through reading and professional development activities are absorbed into the theory and tested in the reflective practice cycle.

This cycle of theory-building, practice and reflection continues throughout a teacher's career, as the teacher evaluates new experiences and tests new or adapted theories against them.

We suggest that you adopt a reflective approach to the material presented in this website. Consider which teaching model underlies the definitions, techniques, and applications presented here. Try the ideas we suggest in your own classroom, and compare them with your own experience. Doing so will help you integrate this material most effectively into your own teaching philosophy and practice.

Teaching Portfolios

Reflective practice is aided by the use of a professional portfolio. A teaching portfolio is a record of an instructor's classroom performance, development as a teacher, and building of coherence through reflective practice.

Functions of a teaching portfolio:

- To allow a teacher to track personal development
- To document teaching practice for performance review
- To illustrate teaching approach for potential employers

Content of a teaching portfolio:

Section 1: Background and philosophy
- professional biography: a narrative description of your professional history and the major influences on your teaching
- teaching philosophy: a description of how you teach and why, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of your approach
- information about the environment(s) where you have worked and any relevant details about courses you have taught

Section 2: Documentation of performance
- classroom materials and assignments
- syllabi
- assessments
- professional development activities
- teaching-oriented professional service

Section 3: Evaluations
- student evaluations
- supervisor reports
- letters of support about your teaching

A teaching portfolio can be a valuable tool for you as a new language instructor. The reflective work that goes into producing it will encourage you to clarify for yourself what you are doing and why. It will also help you understand the professional value of teaching.

Your teaching portfolio will allow you to present both your language teaching philosophy and the best or most interesting examples of its application in the classroom. Your portfolio should not be a static collection that you develop once and never revise; you should review and update it every year so that it reflects your growth as a language teaching professional.

Be Prepared: Survival Tips for New Teachers

Effective teaching depends on preparation. Here are eight things to do at the beginning of the semester to help yourself have a rewarding and enjoyable teaching experience.

1. Content: Find out what the department expects you to teach and what materials you are expected to use. Review the curriculum or textbook to get a roadmap of the semester as a whole. Working through the curriculum should be a process of discovery for the students but not for the instructor.

2. Method: Find out what teaching approach you are expected to use. Are you expected to stick closely to the textbook, or bring in outside materials to supplement? Is your teaching practice expected to be more teacher centered or more learner centered? Are you expected to teach grammar overtly, or just explain it as it comes up in various contexts?

3. Students: Find out what level your students will be. If they are "second year" or "intermediate," ask what that means. What have they studied previously? What materials have they used? This will let you know what to expect from them.

4. Plan: Outline a plan for the semester, even if the department has given you a plan. Know when and how you will introduce new material and when and how you will review. What will you do when you get behind? It always happens.

5. Orientation: Find out what facilities are available for students and where they are: language lab, computer lab, library. Make a reference card for yourself with the hours when labs are open. Then, when students ask, you won't look like a doofus.

6. Relationships: Learn the names of your students as soon as you can. Use their names when talking with them and when giving language examples in class. Attending to your students as individuals will help you assess their progress more effectively. Also, if students believe that you care about them, they will care about you.

7. Expectations: Ask how much and what kind of homework is usually given to students at the level you are teaching. Find out what expectations the department has for frequency and type of testing. Let your students know what the expectations are in these areas.

8. Guidance: Ask your supervisor or another experienced instructor to serve as your mentor. A mentor can review your plan for the semester before classes start to be sure you're on the right track, and can meet with you on a regular basis throughout the semester to answer questions and give you support when you need it. Having a mentor is especially important toward the end of the first semester of teaching, when many teachers begin to feel overwhelmed, discouraged, or frustrated.

Resources

Brown, D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy.* Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall Regents.

Bullough, R.V. (1990). Supervision, mentoring, and self-discovery: A case study of a first-year teacher. *Journal of Curriculum and Supervision, 5,* 338-360.

Chamot, A.U. (1995). The teacher's voice: Action research in your classroom. *ERIC/CLL News Bulletin, 18*(2).

Feiman-Nemser, S. (2001). From preparation to practice: Designing a continuum to strengthen and sustain teaching. *Teachers College Record, 103*(6), 1013-1055.

Hammadou, J. (1993). Inquiry in language teacher education. In G. Guntermann (Ed.), *Developing language teachers for a changing world* (pp. 76-104). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Company.

Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1995). Embracing conflict versus achieving consensus in foreign language education. *ADFL Bulletin, 26*(3), 6-12.

Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1992). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Richards, J., & Lockhart, C. (1994). *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Sandrock, P. (1995). Foreign language education at the crossroads: Bringing coherence to the journey of a lifetime. In R. Donato & R. M. Terry (Eds.), *Foreign language learning: The journey of a lifetime* (pp. 167-188).

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action.* New York: Basic Books.

Seldin, P. (1991). *The teaching portfolio: A practical guide to improved performance and promotion/tenure decisions.* Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing.

Vélez-Rendón, G. (2002). Second language teacher education: A review of the literature. *Foreign Language Annals, 35*(4), 457-467.

Wallace, M. J. (1991). *Training foreign language teachers: A reflective approach.* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Winitzky, N., & Kauchak, D. (1995). Learning to teach: Knowledge development in classroom management. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 11*(3), 215-227.