

LEARNING TARGETS



OVERVIEW by Greg Duncan

Developing Learning Targets that guide standards-based learning experiences and indicate what students will be able to do and what they need to know by lesson's end are an essential part of an effective language learning process. Below you will find an overview to *Developing Learning Targets* and its role in the language classroom today.

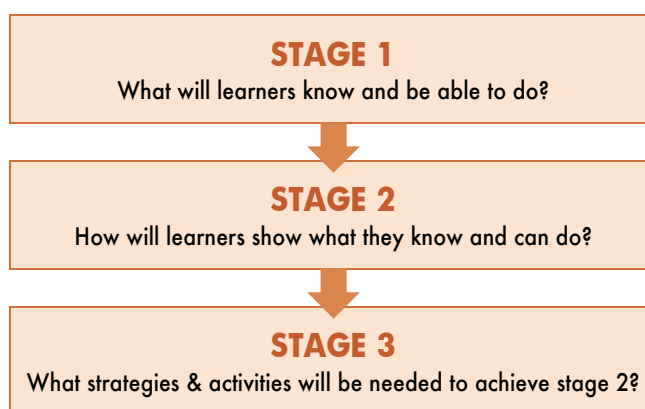
Current research suggests that all good lessons contain learning targets, which are statements that indicate the focus of learning for a particular lesson. These targets are written in student-friendly language that is direct and free of jargon, and the targets should connect to knowledge or skill that students will perceive as interesting and relevant to them. Can-do statements can serve as learning targets for lessons. Examples include the following, which come from the NCSSFL-ACFTL Can Do Statements (2013):

- I can ask for help at school, work or in the community.
- I can ask for information, details and explanations during a conversation.
- I can write about a movie or television show that I like.
- I can understand what is asked for in a simple, popular magazine questionnaire.

LEARNING TARGETS AND LESSON PLANNING

Planning to teach happens at a number of different levels. There is course planning, which might involve the setting of course goals and the selection of specific instructional units and assessments that make up the arc of learning for the course. Unit planning involves the creation of unit learning objectives, the identification of content (vocabulary, structures, culture), the development of summative assessment measures and the identification of strategies and perhaps some activities that will make up the learning path. And then there is lesson planning, perhaps the most important of all the different ways planning happens. While course and unit planning are important to teachers in the identification of what is to be learned and how it will be assessed, it is through lesson planning that students get the real picture of what this is all about. In reality, students do not see our plans; rather, they experience them. The quality of their learning experience is enhanced when a teacher takes the time to seriously think about the focus and purpose of a lesson and how, in detail, it will unfold.

The backward design process, which is a standard for course and unit design, can be very helpful in designing lessons (Duncan and Met, 2010). Backward design implies three stages of planning:



It is in Stage 1 where the identification of learning targets occurs and becomes central to the remainder of the lesson's design.

LEARNING TARGETS AND STUDENT MOTIVATION

Motivation matters in learning. While a compliant learner can still learn, the amount of his learning is not equal to that of a motivated learner. Gardner (in Shrum and Glisan, 2000) proclaims that motivation is the most essential element of learning a new language. According to Keller (1983), motivated learners need to (1) find interest in what they are learning, (2) believe the learning to be relevant to their lives, (3) feel that they can be successful at learning what is being asked of them, and (4) leave the learning experience with tangible outcomes of their work.

How do learning targets connect to the research on student motivation? Most students learn early on how to "do school." Among other things, that involves doing what you are told to do in class when and how you are told to do it.



DEVELOPING LEARNING TARGETS

It is not uncommon to observe students coming into class, sitting and doing what they are told to do and then leaving class with little to no understanding of the purpose of the day's lesson. At worst, such conditions create disconnected, and sometimes off-task learners, and at best, the result is compliant learners. But when students know (1) the purpose of the lesson; (2) when they value that purpose and find it relevant to their lives; (3) when they know what they will be able to do as a result of the lesson; and (4) when they have an overall idea of the basic activities they will do to get there . . . they are more motivated learners.

The cultivation of motivated students yields learners who learn more, who take more interest and a more active role in their learning and who learn longer. They are more successful learners and are more inclined to take risks, which leads to even more learning as they profit from their mistakes.

Any motivated learner, whether young or old, invests more of himself in the learning enterprise and derives more success and satisfaction in the process. Learning targets, when properly conceived and worded, play an inestimable role in attracting the attention of the learner and potentially tapping into his motivation and the energy which he is capable of adding to the learning process.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES VS. LEARNING TARGETS

Educators often use a variety of words or terms to convey the same concept. Upon reading what learning targets are, teachers sometimes conclude that they are the same thing as learning objectives, but there is a difference. Learning or lesson objectives are written from a teacher point of view whereas the audience for learning targets is the student (Frey and Fisher, 2011; Moss and Brookhart, 2012). Learning targets are intended to clearly speak to students about what they will be able to do as a result of their investment in learning. Adapting information shared by Clementi and Terrill (2013), an example lesson objective aimed at a high school class of students who are in the Novice-Mid to Novice-High range of proficiency might be this: Students will use authentic sources to determine how to create balance in daily life and will use this information to make personalized choices. The audience for this information is the teacher, and the language used to communicate it mirrors that. From that objective, the teacher might craft two lesson learning targets for students: (1) You will be able to list obligations and activities that make for a

balanced life based on *Ma Vie au Soliel* (My Life in the Sun) and (2) You will be able to ask and answer questions about what you do to create balance in your own life. Written in student-friendly language, learners receive very focused information that clearly frames for them what they will be able to do as a result of their lesson today, and it, hopefully, taps into their own interests and, by extension, their motivation.

HOW TO USE LEARNING TARGETS

Each lesson should have its own learning target(s). While students benefit from an overall understanding of the unit's goals, their daily lessons should comprise the stepping stones of the path. A daily focus for learning allows students to frame their energies and personal resources and allows for learning, in some students, to feel more attainable.

We have already established that learning targets are intended to inform learners about what they will learn to do, but how do they access the targets? Learning targets should be visible to students throughout the lesson. For most teachers, this means posting them somewhere in the classroom. Some teachers "narrate" their lessons through the use of Power Points, Keynotes or Prezis. Often these teachers will place the learning targets on opening slides. But once those slides have passed, students no longer "have sight" of the targets. Embedding the target slides at various strategic points during the presentation allows both teacher and students to remind themselves of the purpose of what they are doing. It is not unusual that some language teachers "float" from room to room. While these teachers do not have their own classrooms in which to post the learning targets, they can still achieve the same purpose by either using a small white board that they carry from room to room on their cart or by using the technological means described earlier.

As Brookhart and Moss (2014) point out, it is not enough for a teacher to write the target on the board. Learners need to be invited into the process of learning. Teachers should view the opening of class as an opportunity to "revv up" learners to what will transpire in the space of the next 45 minutes or 90 minutes. Sharing the learning targets at the beginning of class and helping students make personal connections to the target is essential to access the motivation of learners and the energy they can contribute. As teachers are sharing learning targets with students, they should help learners make connections to what was learned the day before, and savvy teachers also use today's learning target as an opportunity to mention where this will lead learning tomorrow (Dean, et al., 2012).



DEVELOPING LEARNING TARGETS

In real life, most people like to know where they are going on their journey and a few of the turns along the way. This added shared information contributes to learners being more invested and active in the learning process.

Another powerful feature of learning targets is the opportunity they provide for teachers and students to check for learning at the end of the lesson. Book-ending the lesson by stating what students will be able to do today at the start of the lesson and then returning their attention to the targets and verifying that they did, indeed, learn to do what was intended can contribute to more meaningful and longer lasting learning.

LEARNING TARGETS & OTHER STAKEHOLDERS

The sharing of learning targets between teachers and students is an enhancement to learning. But others beyond those two groups can also benefit from knowing learning targets. When parents know what their children are learning how to do, and when they especially see how that learning has relevance to the lives of their children and their futures, they have the opportunity to also become partners in the overall learning environment and to contribute to its success (Dean, et al., 2012). Enhanced understanding of the nature and products of learning by members of the community-at-large can also lead to broader and deeper buy-in and support from others for language learning. Sadly, many Americans do not place high value on language learning. Perhaps this stems from their own experiences, which might have been perceived as disconnected to their lives. Seeing that students are focusing on learning that has relevance to their lives and their future can lead to greater overall support for languages among those outside the education profession.

References

- Brookhart, S., & Moss, C. (2014). Learning targets on parade. *Educational Leadership*, 72 (2), 28-33.
- Clementi, D. & Terrill, L. (2013) *The keys to planning for learning: Effective curriculum, unit, and lesson design*. Alexandria, VA: ACTFL.
- Dean, C., Hubbell, E., Pitler, H., & Stone, B. (2012). *Classroom instruction that works. Research-based strategies for increasing student achievement* (2nd ed.). Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.
- Duncan, G., & Met, M. (2010). *STARTALK: From paper to practice*. College Park, MD: National Foreign Language Center. Retrieved January 8, 2015.
- Frey, N. & Fisher, D. (2011). *The formative assessment action plan practical steps to more successful teaching and learning*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.
- Keller, J.M. (1983). Motivational design of instruction. In C.M. Reigeluth (Ed.), *Instructional design theories and models* (pp. 386–433). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Moss, C. & Brookhart, S. (2012). *Learning targets. Helping students aim for understanding in today's lesson*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.
- NCSSFL-ACTFL *Can do statements. Progress indicators for language learners*. (2013). Alexandria, VA: ACTFL
- Shrum, J., & Glisan, E. (2000). *Teachers handbook: Contextualized language instruction*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

