# EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO USE THE TARGET LANGUAGE

## OVERVIEW by Alyssa Villarreal

The language acquisition process is not complete until we achieve meaningful output from students. Providing learners the support they need to excel in applying their language learning is as critical as the input the teacher provides. Below you will find an overview and introduction to creating an environment that *Empowers Students Use of the Target Language*.

### WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

Many teachers have heard or read the position statement from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) on Target Language Use many times. The focus of much discussion and even more teacher training however has always been on the teacher. Let's look at the statement one more time.

> "ACTFL therefore recommends that language educators and their students use the target language as exclusively as possible (90% plus) at all levels of instruction during instructional time and, when feasible, beyond the classroom."

What is striking in this statement is the phrase "and their students" because we don't hear much about helping students stay in the target language and it is just as critical as teacher input. Picture this; you have been working on presenting information to students so they can talk about what they did last year in their language class. You have meticulously planned each part of the lesson to ensure you provided comprehensible target language input. Now that the input process is complete, you are ready to let your students work. You stand in front of the class and model the partner work assignment. First, you demonstrate, then you call on a student to model with you, then another student and finally you have two students model one last time together. This is the moment you have been so carefully planning for: student performance! They pair off, turn to their partners and … you hear … mostly English. How could this have happened? Frustrated you begin searching your mind for what you could have done differently.

Among the many thoughts that teachers in this scenario may want to consider as they reflect: Have I created a safe learning environment where students are willing to take risks? Did I provide sufficient input before I asked for output? Do I provide supports that encourage students to stretch their application of learning?

### THE GROWTH MINDSET

#### Have I created a safe learning environment where students are willing to take risks?

Language learning involves students who take significant risks. We teach students in many of the most vulnerable days of their development. We must "collaborate with students to promote a safe and supportive learning environment", as outlined in the Environment domain of the Teacher Effectiveness for Language Learning (TELL) Framework. At the same time, we ask them to practice new language publicly, many times without sufficient practice time. Knowing that fitting in is often awkward or difficult for students of any age we must consciously create a safe and supportive learning environment in our classes if students are to be successful language learners.

One way to create this safe and supportive environment is to embrace a growth mindset. The growth mindset is the belief that the most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work—brains and talent are just the starting point (Dweck). Sharing this concept with students and embedding this belief system into our educational philosophy can help level the

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learning field in our classrooms. It is no longer about being the best in the class and creating competition between students but rather shifts the competition to be with themselves. Can I be better than me yesterday? As we embrace a growth mindset or the idea of one, we begin to embrace failure.

# GROWTH MINDSET FOR LEARNING

We need to learn to embrace failure as a gift of learning and choose to fail forward. Michael Jordan is a great example of failing forward. He says, "I've failed over and over and over and over again in my life. That is why I succeeded." Reading his story of how he was cut from teams and told no repeatedly seems like he would never amount to the player he dreamed of being. Instead of giving up he worked harder and through that hard work and resilience he became an icon. Helping students develop resilience is critical to success in learning, especially learning a language. The growth mindset offers a platform upon which we can help develop such resilience in our students.

To build an environment focused on growth, with appropriate risk-taking and creativity consider these three things. First, actively encourage **learning failures** in which teachers and students experiment with new ideas, such as innovative student engagement practices and alternative grading policies (Reeves). Focusing our assessment practices on a series of performances and feedback opportunities instead of a one shot opportunity is one example of how language classrooms can begin to integrate the growth mindset into their infrastructure. Encourage students to take risks with language. Behaviors such as recombinations and creating their own sentences are behaviors we have to reinforce with our grading and feedback processes. These are examples of the sorts of risks that are necessary to move along the performance continuum and while these risks may not be perfectly accurate are they comprehensible? Is it a good start? Consider what feedback you can provide to encourage student to continue trying to create with the language.

"Second, celebrate **disciplinary learning**. Too much of the rhetoric surrounding creativity creates a divide between disciplinary learning (the proverbial box) and creativity (outside the box)." (Reeves) Shifting our focus from the accuracy and of the language learning process to the comprehensibility and communicative nature of language will allow students to grow. Focusing students on the application of their learning instead of the perfection will lower the anxiety related to making mistakes because now mistakes are seen as opportunities to grow. This is not to say that we do not want students to be accurate

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speakers but rather than we focus on comprehensibility before accuracy. We need student performances before we can offer feedback that will make the performance more accurate. We need to exercise caution and care however as we fine tune so we do not extinguish the creative expressions that are a product of taking risks.



"Third, **require collaboration** – both modeling by teachers and active practice by students […] The "lone genius" myth has been widely dispelled, but we have failed to replace it with a conscientious effort to help students learn to collaborate." (Reeves) In a proficiency driven classroom collaboration is a natural extension of the growth mindset because it takes two to communicate and when communication happens, feedback takes center stage. With common goals evidenced in a grading rubric and communicative performances almost anyone familiar with the rubric and performance expectations can provide feedback. Everyone is growing toward or beyond the same targets and feedback is focused on the same criteria whether a student is giving himself or herself feedback, providing feedback to a peer or receiving feedback from the teacher. The process of language learning must be collaborative as it is a communicative endeavor. Building ownership in their creative communicative work is a positive outcome of a feedback loop that includes self and peer assessment. These practices keep students at the core of the linguistic development process both in regard to the actual language learning but also in the metacognitive reflection on how languages are learned and it helps students learn the academic language of our content area, such as proficiency levels and descriptors.

Focusing students on growth and building a collaborative environment that celebrates creativity and risk-taking is a first step in focusing on helping students stay in the target language.

# THE INPUT TO OUTPUT CONTINUUM

**Did I provide sufficient input before I asked for output?**

The input to output continuum is a second opportunity we have to design learning opportunities in which all of our students succeed. The TELL Framework indicates the importance of comprehensible input as seen in Learning Experience domain: "I ensure that students receive comprehensible input." (LE4) and encourages teacher to provide student "adequate opportunities to process language (input) before being expected to produce language (output)."

It is important to acknowledge that our understanding of language is embedded in mental representations that are implicit. We know what a concept is, but accurately explaining it is another highly abstract task. This is important to understand as we look to teach new language chunks and vocabulary to our students. We are not only seeking to transmit the meaning of each sentence frame or vocabulary term, ultimately we are looking to create the mental representations for each of the new stems/terms for our students. Bill Van Patten (2014) explains this notion for us.

> "Input cannot be equated with the staple of much traditional language teaching: explanation about grammar, presentation of vocabulary lists, practice, fill-in-the-blanks, and so on. For mental representation to develop, learners have to hear and see language as it is used to express meaning. There are no shortcuts; representation cannot be taught in the traditional sense of teaching."

While we cannot guarantee acquisition of the new language on the part of the learner we do know that acquisition is impossible without input. The second piece to this equation is output. If output requires us to present language as it is used to express meaning, then the input must be presented in a communicative real-world context.

We must present language that has real-world connections. While trying to draw attention to language by creating fanciful contexts, we lose the opportunity to impress the utility of what we are teaching upon our students which affects student motivation. There are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic. Defining intrinsic motivation as "when an activity is related to a person's needs, values, interests and attitudes" David Sousa (2011) supports a long-held belief about learning that many of us have long held and that is "focus and learning occur best when the learner is intrinsically motivated". That is when the learning is related to our students needs, values, interested and attitudes or when it occurs in a real – world context.

A real-world context provides students with the opportunity to practice their learning with the explicit goal of creating and reinforcing that mental representation. This practice is the output. "Communicative ability also develops in only one way: through engaging in communication. That is, people learn to communicate by engaging in acts of expressing and interpreting meaning in many varied contexts. **Communicative ability cannot be "drilled".** It cannot be practiced in the traditional sense of practice. Communicative ability develops because we find ourselves in communicative contexts." (Van Patten 2014). The key to moving from input to output is how we allow students to practice and demonstrate learning before asking them to produce the language.

Total Participation Techniques (TPT) by Himmle and Himmle provide us many strategies that allow all students to engage in the input process and prepare for output. "TPTs are strategies that allow for all students to demonstrate at the same time, active participation and cognitive engagement in the topics being studied." (Himmle & Himmle 2011) Some of these strategies are hold-ups such as whiteboards or flash cards, on the spots such as thumbs up/thumbs down or quick writes/draws, and movement such as line-ups and appointment agendas. As students practice language within meaningful contexts they build confidence. This confidence will translate to improved communicative performances, or output, as we continue to scaffold in language learning. TPTs provide all students with the opportunity to participate without putting any one person on the spot. This often translates to increased confidence and more successful output. For teachers, the best part is the data. With TPTs you know who gets it and who needs more time. Ultimately you also know how successful the input was and thus what you should continue to do or tweak when moving forward.
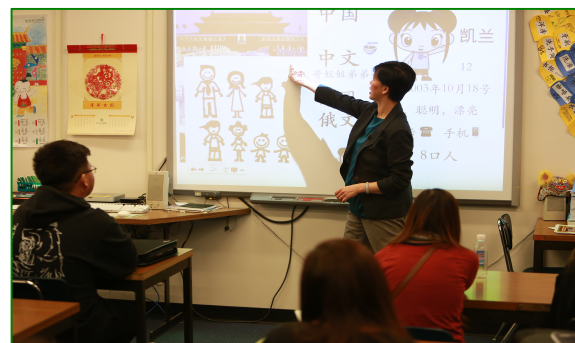
# STRATEGY 1: BUILDING STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING OF PROFICIENCY AND PERFORMANCE

**Do I provide supports that encourage students to stretch their application of learning**

As the teacher, we create the climate and the opportunities in which students practice their learning in order to develop their communicative ability. We are responsible for creating a safe and supportive learning environment with our students within which communication can occur. Next we provide comprehensible input within a meaningful context so that ultimately we provide opportunities for our students to become more effective communicators.

The TELL Framework indicates that as we endeavor to produce effective communicators in the target language there as several key actions we need to take to ensure student growth. Students must use language at levels of accuracy consistent with their proficiency; they must encounter language structures that are necessary to meet the performance objectives which can be accessed through functional chunks of language and transition words. Finally, we must provide a variety of learning tools to help learners access and produce language to meet performance objectives if we are to expect students to use the target language.

Language growth happens most efficiently when learners themselves understand performance and proficiency as the academic language of second language learning. We learn a lot of vocabulary in second language classrooms, but what about the academic language of language learning? If our goal is to focus on developing proficient users of a language, then we must share the language learning progression with the learners. The World Language field is fortunate to have not only the what defined via the World Readiness Standards for Language Learning but also the how well via tools such as the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements. It is not enough however for the teacher to understand these proficiency and performance standards; the language learners need to understand them as well.

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Two years ago a Shelby County (TN) Schools world language curriculum writing team developed a now widely shared pre-unit on teaching proficiency and performance to students.

After teachers implemented the unit, they shared an optional survey to which 900+ students voluntarily responded to provide feedback. Student responses unanimously provided positive feedback with the most frequent comment from students being "I finally know what my teacher wants". Teachers in classrooms that have fully integrated information about performance and proficiency into their daily routines report seeing increased motivation and performance. Students encourage and challenge each other to grow.

There are a variety of reasons to build learners understanding of proficiency and performance in every aspect of the language learning process. When done effectively it allows teachers and learners to:

1. have clear expectations for each performance level.

2. provide descriptive feedback.

3. facilitate self and peer assessment.

4. support the development of critical thinking skills.

5. focus on what's most important.

## 1. Clear Expectations

**TELL Framework Connection**
My students use language at levels of accuracy consistent with their proficiency. (LE7c)

The key characteristics of each proficiency level should be used as guidance for designing learning experiences that lead to students' use of the target language. Without this proficiency information in mind, a teacher may tell students to use complete sentences but then ask a question that doesn't require a full sentence answer. For example, a teacher may ask: "What do you wear on weekends?". It is completely realistic and acceptable for a student to reply "shorts, a t-shirt". Unfortunately, the answer is demonstrating performance only at the word level put together as a list; behaviors that exhibit themselves in the novice range. If we shift the prompt to "describe a typical outfit you wear on Saturday and why" or "Tell me about how you choose what to wear on the weekend." learners would respond with sentence length discourse that begins to exhibit itself in the intermediate range. When we set clear and consistent expectations student performance will increase. At the very least it levels the playing field but in the best-case scenario, learners become motivated to "level up" and begin to engage in taking risks when using the language.

## 2. Providing Descriptive Feedback

**TELL Framework Connection**
I provide my students with frequent descriptive feedback. (PF2a)

Providing meaningful feedback to every student regularly can be quite a challenge. What if your rubric inherently provided feedback to your students? Descriptive feedback is critical to the development of language. Few things in life are based on one shot chances but often in school one shot chances are frequent due to the frenetic pace of schooling and assessment. Language learning however is not a one shot opportunity. We continue to spiral and scaffold previously learned information with new information. Providing students multiple opportunities to refine performances based on a variety of feedback is the key to improving performances. That feedback needs to be frequent and descriptive, close in time to demonstrated performance, supported by evidence from the student performance, and provide students with opportunities to compare their current performance to previous performances.

## 3. Facilitate Self & Peer Assessment

**TELL Framework Connection**
My students engage in self-assessment & peer review to monitor progress toward the targeted performance objectives. (PF3a)

Providing opportunities for students to self-assess using the same performance rubric as the teacher is a powerful strategy to enable students to dig deeper into the descriptors. The reflection process of students analyzing their performance against the performance rubric provides feedback on their own practice as well examples of the criteria in the rubric based on the student's own performance. This can be a powerful tool for students to use throughout the unit to practice before a summative performance. Likewise, students can partner with peers and provide feedback allowing another opportunity to engage with the rubric content. Each time students engage with the rubric content the clearer expectations become and the more in control of their own performance they become.

## 4. Develop Critical-thinking Skills

**TELL Framework Connection**
My students use feedback from self-assessment and peer review to improve future performance. (PF3c)

The role of reflective practice has been embraced for educators for many years but has predominately been focused on adults. Kathleen Murphy however offers several benefits of reflection for students: "Reflection on what they know and do not know helps students to appreciate that … learning is individual, and that only they can make the connections to existing knowledge" (UK Centre for Legal Education, 2010).

## 5. Provide Focus

**TELL Framework Connection**
My students determine their next steps toward improvement of performance. (PF3d)

Using a rubric based on performance scales focuses students on what is most important at each stage of development. Knowing which level students perform at most consistently provides the current level of performance. Looking at the next level clearly demonstrates to teachers and students what is needed to move to that level. Additionally, we see that at the early stages of proficiency the focus is on comprehensibility rather than accuracy, which becomes more important at the later stages of proficiency.

# STRATEGY 2: INTEGRATING FUNCTIONAL CHUNKS & TRANSITION WORDS

As we work to equip students with language structures necessary to meet the performance objectives, we must examine the role of functional chunks of language. Well before students can master many grammatical concepts they are able to accurately or at least comprehensibly express themselves – even without grammatical mastery. This is facilitated through the use of functional chunks of language. Functional chunks of language are memorized and unanalyzed phrases of high frequency (Curtain). These prefabricated chunks of language in predictable contexts enable communication. Some examples of functional chunks of language are "How are you?" or "What is your name?" or "what do you like …?" Curtain and Dahlberg outline five ways that functional chunks enable communication. Those are to socialize, exchange information, get things done, express attitudes, and establish or maintain communication. These chunks allow students to produce language causing them to process the language at a deeper level than when the just see or listen to the words. "The evidence on using student talk as a mechanism for learning is compelling; in classrooms with higher rates and levels of student talk, more students excel academically." (Stichter, Stormont, & Lewis, 2009).

Curtain and Dahlberg outline several strategies for integrating functional chunks of language into classroom practice. Let's look at three: passwords, language ladders, and sentence frames.

## PASSWORDS

"Passwords are useful phrases of the teacher's choosing, such as 'Please may I sharpen my pencil?' that are learned as memorized chunks" (Curtain & Dahlberg). Passwords are often taught one per week and embed patterns that will be used in future instruction. Passwords offer functional chunks of language that may not be included in daily instruction but are still useful in daily life. How are passwords selected? The best advice is to listen to the expressions you hear students using most frequently in class as a starting point. You can also consider asking students to make a list of phrases they'd like to know how to say in the target language. Passwords can be required as the key to enter or exit the room, as a transition, or in any other novel way that meets your class needs.

## LANGUAGE LADDERS

Language Ladders are like passwords, but group like functional chunks together. A language ladders demonstrate different ways express the same sentiment such as various greetings, exclamations or questions. Language ladders are grouped and sequenced, usually vertically, to show the relationship between the phrases. The grouping helps students make to internalize the phrases or chunks of language. The functional chunks included on the language ladder are not necessarily required vocabulary but rather allow students to differentiate their responses and questions based on interest and personal choice.

## SENTENCE FRAMES

Sentence frames provide an opportunity for students to use key vocabulary while providing a structure that may be higher than what they could produce on their own. Sentence stems such as "I like"; "I have", "I went", etc. provide guidance to allow students to express themselves while leaving the answer completely open ended and up to the student and the topic at hand. Sentence frames allow students to apply learning while using structures with which they may not be familiar or comfortable. Thus it provides a model for performing at a higher level than where their proficiency may actually be. It is through these guided performances that students rehearse and begin to integrate the language into their speech and writing so they can grow toward a higher proficiency level.

Transition or linking words are a great way to assist students in linking together functional chunks. There is a variety of transitional words students can employ simple words such as "and", "but" or" to link functional chunks but they can also use words that further develop their thoughts such as "because", "however", or "for example". Whether transition words are explicitly added to each unit or on a language ladder or word wall, accessibility and instruction on how to use these words can improve both the length and quality of student utterances.

# STRATEGY 3: EXPLOITING LEARNING AIDS

Exploiting Learning Aids can help promote student use of the target language. We have all had those moments in which the word we want is on the tip of our tongue but we can't get it out. Learning Aids such as graphic organizers, word walls, or grammar walls can help students be prepared to maintain the target language use in those moments and remind them of important functions, structures or even vocabulary that they previously learned.

## GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

Graphic organizers are a pictorial way of constructing knowledge and organizing information. How many times have we asked students to practice an interpersonal exchange and they begin to write a script? While their diligence is appreciated, there are no scripts in the real world! Employing graphic organizers as a tool to help students organize their thoughts in the target language and help facilitate the language use we desire from our students. Encouraging students to write bullet points or key concepts in the target language will help students learn to organize their thoughts, reduce anxiety, and allow them to confidently express themselves when the time comes. Through consistent implementation, students learn the process and depend less and less on the graphic organizer and are able to rely more on their memory or spontaneous conversation skills.

## WORD WALLS

Word walls can be considered word banks displayed on the wall. Using current vocabulary that relates to the unit, teachers can build a word wall to be a visual reminder to students. It is important that in second language classrooms the word be accompanied by a clear visual to explicate its meaning instead of merely the translation. The visual accompanied by the target language word help the learner build the necessary mental representation. The accessibility of the word wall provides additional input as each time the students look over the word wall (planned or spontaneously) it is added input. When students are applying learning they always have the concrete referent of the word wall when they get stuck. Word walls provide an option to switching to English when learners get stuck.

## GRAMMAR WALLS

Grammar walls are similar to word walls except they post grammatical information for reference. The grammar wall information should be related to what you are currently learning in context and does not necessarily need a whole class explanation. Many times we have students who ask how to say something we have not learned yet. Those students are probably ready for the next step. Instead of showing the entire class put it on the grammar wall and explain it to the person who asked. The positive affects of peer pressure often emerge for those learners who need a push as they want to keep up with more advanced peers. Nonetheless grammar walls allow us to make grammatical information available for those who need it without taking class time to get into the details of nonessential applied grammatical concepts.

## CONCLUSION

There are many strategies we can use to encourage, engage and equip students with the tools they need to use the target language. First and foremost, we must create a learning environment with our students that is safe and supportive so students are willing to take linguistic risks in class and beyond. Next we must plan unit and lessons that are balanced with sufficient input before we solicit student output. Finally, along the way we must build a common vision for language learning and growth via the performance and proficiency guidelines ensuring we embed functional chunks of language, transition words and learning tools that support our learners' success. When we have these supports in place, students will be more successful and will be open to attempting to stay in the target language. This will build not only proficiency but also life long language learners.

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