USING THE TARGET LANGUAGE & PROVIDING COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT

OVERVIEW by Helena Curtain

If the central task for the language teacher is to create a climate focused on creating the context within which language acquisition can occur, then it is critical to infuse the learning environment with the target language. Below you will find an overview to "Using the Target Language and Providing Comprehensible Input".

WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

As we learn more about language teaching we know that maintaining a target language atmosphere is an important key to student learning and is an essential part of effective instruction in the language classroom. The central task for the language teacher is to create a climate focused on meaningful communication and to surround learners with their new language 90 to 95 to 100 percent of the class time so that language acquisition can take place naturally, similar to the environment in first language acquisition. Rod Ellis explains that language instruction requires extensive target language input and that language instruction should focus predominately on meaning (2005). When teachers use the target language for all classroom purposes, the language is used for real communication and there is more motivation to learn. It has often been said that if teachers are speaking the target language 50 percent of the time students will be learning the target language only 50 percent of the time. During the other 50 percent of the time when the teacher is speaking English, the students will be learning about the target language. Students do not want to learn grammar rules and isolated vocabulary words; they want to speak in the target language! One of the most powerful ways to let students know that the teacher believes they can successfully learn the target language is by speaking to them in the language!

Language is the key to the culture If we spend much of classroom time in English, we are actually denying students access to the language and 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.

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) in its 2012 position statement on the use of the target language recommends use of the target language for a minimum of 90-plus percent of the time. It is especially important that the teacher use the new language for regular classroom tasks, such as giving directions, organizing activities, and managing behavior. It is these regular classroom tasks that demonstrate that the new language "works"—that it can be used for all the important business of the classroom (and by natural extension—of life). We know from research in second-language acquisition that teaching in the target language implies that the target language input be comprehensible, otherwise the brain is not likely to engage with either the language or the information it carries. LeLoup, Ponterio & Warford in their article on overcoming resistance to 90 percent target language use (2013), say that ninety percent is not a magic number, but it does help give the profession a clearer idea of what "extensive" target language use means.). They suggest that ACTFL's position statement can help to support the teacher who is meeting resistance from the students, parents, administration, or even other instructors.

In order to meet the 90+ percent target language use goal, there are several support systems that need to be in place. First of all, the program and the curriculum must be a) standards-based, b) proficiency-focused and c) prioritize communication of meaningful messages rather than completion of textbook chapters. Secondly, instruction must focus on meaning rather than on grammatical rules. Thirdly textbooks must be treated as a tool or resource rather than as the primary source of curriculum. And finally, the classroom must be a learning community that creates a safe environment for risk taking and making mistakes.
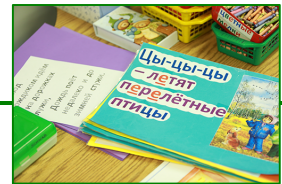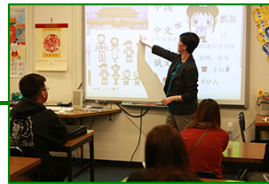
USING THE TARGET LANGUAGE

Note: In immersion programs there is 100 percent use of the target language for the entire instruction period devoted to the immersion language and students learn content area subjects such as mathematics or science through the new language. There are several types of immersion program models ranging from full or total immersion in which students spend their entire day in the immersion language, to partial immersion in which they spend approximately half the day in the new language. In full or total immersion programs students learn to read first in the immersion language and then transfer their skills to English at a later stage. In partial immersion programs students develop literacy in both languages at the same time.

WHAT IS COMPREHENSIBLE INPUT?

Getting the message across relies on more than just speaking the language. In order to help students understand what we are saying, we must use a variety of means to make the language understandable for the students. We know from research in second-language acquisition that learners need to be surrounded with comprehensible language—or input—in order to facilitate the acquisition of the new language. This input should be both meaningful and interesting to the learner. Otherwise the brain is not likely to engage with either the language or the information it carries. Teachers must provide this input consistently, from the very first day and throughout every class period.

Input is comprehensible when it is used in a way that the message is interesting, worth listening to, and understood by the student, even though every word may not be familiar. Simply deciding to use the target language is not enough. Further underscoring the importance of comprehensible input, the Teacher Effectiveness for Language Learning (TELL) Project states "I ensure that students receive comprehensible input." as a criterion in the Learning Experience domain. Only as a support to that criteria on comprehensible input does TELL reference ensuring "at least 90% of what I say and/or materials I share with my students are in the target language (LE4a)".

Making input comprehensible helps students understand the main points of what the teacher is saying even if they do not understand every word. Older students sometimes feel insecure because they believe that they must understand everything word for word. We must let them know that at the beginning stages, the gist or essence of the communication is our goal. We can explain to them that as they advance in language proficiency, they will be able to understand more and more details.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF ENGLISH?

So, 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. Also, for novice level learners, teachers may want to explain proficiency levels and goals in English.

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. (Curtain and Dahlberg, 2016 p.97)

> Can I find a way to communicate the idea in the target language?
> _____
> Can I simplify the concept or the information?
> _____
> Can I add concrete materials, visuals, or experiences to enrich the context and to make the concept or the information comprehensible in the new language?

If the answer to these questions is "no," there is another series of questions to consider:

> Can I substitute a different concept?
> _____
> Can I delay this topic until the students are ready to do it in the target language?
> _____
> Could this be part of the lessons I leave for an English-speaking substitute teacher on the days I am absent?

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

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Since using the target language is such a vital part of actually learning the language, many teachers share concerns about implementing this practice. Some of those concerns are:

- **I worry that the learners won't understand, and will resist the target language.**

  Of course, as teachers use the target language they must ensure that students understand by using techniques that make the language concrete and comprehensible. Students sometimes feel insecure because they believe that they must understand every word. Knowing that at the beginning stages understanding the gist or essence of the message is the main goal will help them to overcome this insecurity. The teacher can explain that as students advance in language proficiency they will be able to understand more and more details.

  Some teachers use translation in order to make sure that students understand, however, it is very difficult for pupils to be confident in their language learning if the teacher is constantly translating and switching from one language to the other. If students become used to translation it often happens that they wait for the translation rather than making the effort to try to understand. Of course, when speaking in the target language, teachers must use a variety of strategies to help students understand.

  Also important in helping students to be comfortable in the target language classroom is creating a classroom community where risk-taking is encouraged and where students understand that errors are part of the learning process.

- **How will we have enough time to be able to "cover" all the material in the textbook if I speak only the target language?**

  Teachers What do we really mean by "covering" material? "Covering" material implies a linear and superficial process that does not necessarily provide for the deep learning that occurs when the focus is on communication. "Covering" material does not necessarily mean that students will learn it, especially if the material being "covered" is focused on abstract grammatical knowledge. It is true that speaking in the target language means that more time is needed for lessons since we must use variety of strategies and we must take time to scaffold understanding. But the very fact that the teacher is taking time for the students to process meaningful information through the target language, helps the students to move this information into long term memory and to truly learn it. Helping students process meaningful information implies that instruction is proficiency- and communication – based and focuses on what students are able to "do" with the language

rather than on what students "know" about language. If they are engaged in processing meaningful information through the target language, there is a much better chance that the information will be lodged in long term memory.

- **Won't I lose control of the class if I only speak the target language?**

  Teachers sometimes feel that they must use English to deal with behavior problems and to maintain control of the class. In order to avoid behavior problems, teachers must plan for every single moment and visualize exactly how they will model and give directions without using English. It is extremely important to maintain a positive environment and to establish procedures for all classroom routines, most or all of which can be done in the target language.

- **If I only use the target language how do I explain grammar?**

  Many teachers feel the need to explain grammar in English. Teaching in the target language does not mean that grammar explanations will come to an end, but it does mean that lessons change from focusing on an abstract grammar point to using the grammar within meaningful structured experiences. Rather than being the focus of a lesson, grammar is the underlying support and may or may not be explicitly taught while the communication is happening. Instead of focusing a lesson on a discrete grammatical concept such as present progressive tense or certain counter or measure words in Asian languages, the lesson instead focuses on communicative tasks that challenge the learner to apply grammar concepts. Students need many opportunities to use grammatical structures over and over again. This can be done, with activities such as games, songs, chants, stories and partner and small group work in which the learners can repeatedly use the language structures. Mini-grammar explanations can take the place of lessons in which the bulk of the time is focused on grammar.

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- **How do I talk about the intricacies of culture if I only use the target language?**

  It is sometimes assumed that culture must be taught in English because it is too complex for novice learners to understand in the target language. Focusing on target language use means rethinking the approach to culture by providing experiences that can be carried out in the language rather than in English. This means limiting the number of cultural topics to be addressed at the early stages and postponing some topics for higher levels when students have more language proficiency. Some teachers leave English cultural activities for a substitute teacher, or have students read cultural information in English for homework and then build on the material in the target language during class.

- **I'm worried I do not know enough of the language to be able to be an effective user.**

  A teacher's language proficiency is always a concern. Teacher preparation programs are changing in order to require certain levels of proficiency, but without opportunities to continue to immerse themselves in the language that proficiency can decline. It is important that language teachers find ways to maintain or to improve their language proficiency.

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- **How do I explain a complicated task without using English?**

  When answering this question, we need to think about some other questions such as: are the tasks too complex? Are the tasks appropriate for the proficiency level of the students? Has the teacher taken enough time and done sufficient modeling so that students can understand the directions?

CONCLUSION

The most important technique for helping students to acquire the new language is keeping the classroom in the target language and at the same time ensuring that those target language interactions are comprehensible. We must ensure classroom interactions are of the highest quality and based on authentic and meaningful communication. There are a variety of strategies that help teachers stay in the target language but using the target language is the only way students can build proficiency. When teachers provide comprehensible input, target language use in the classroom becomes a representation of what it feels like to be in the place where that language is spoken. Most importantly, students gain confidence and feel a sense of efficacy in their developing proficiency and their ability to access the world in a new and important way. goals in English.

Strategies for Teaching in the Target Language and Making Input Comprehensible

There are several key strategies that help to make the new language comprehensible. These strategies are also the elements of good teaching. It is vital that all of these strategies be used in the language classroom since they provide the foundation for successful learning.

1. Linking New Concepts to the Background Knowledge of Learners

TELL Framework Connection
I plan learning experiences that address the unique needs and interests of my students. (P2)

Background knowledge is a key ingredient in ensuring comprehension since the process of understanding language involves drawing on experiences and information already stored in memory. By tapping into background knowledge teachers can help students relate what they already know about a topic to the process of gaining new information.

2. Ensuring That Learners Know the Learning Target for the Lesson

TELL Framework Connection
I use units based on proficiency targets and backward design principles. (P3)
I use the daily performance objectives to capture my students' energy and commitment. (LE2)

Setting a learning target written as a "Can-Do" statement focuses the lesson and the input both for the teacher and the student since it gives students an advance organizer.

3. Providing a Meaningful Context for All Classroom Language Use

TELL Framework Connection
I provide opportunities for my students to acquire language in meaningful contexts. (LE5)

Creating a meaningful context ensures that the language tasks are purposeful. A meaningful context is the basis for comprehensible, authentic, real-world learning experiences that may range from the simple to the complex. The context could be very basic, such as providing visuals, or songs, or the context could be very complex, such as organizing all activities around an integrated thematic unit.

4. Using Concrete Linguistic and Non-Linguistic Strategies

TELL Framework Connection
I use a variety of strategies to make language comprehensible. (LE5c)

Props, manipulatives and visuals: Novice level learners learn best in concrete situations; the more frequently the manipulation of objects can accompany language use, especially objects representing the cultures being taught, the greater the impact of the language itself.

Gestures, body language, demonstrations: Linking language with actions can provide additional context and increase appeal for some learners.

Circumlocution, "caretaker speech": "caretaker speech" is language we use with learners should be similar to the language directed at children as they acquire their native language or w language used with non-native speakers as we establish mutual comprehension of what is being said.

Repeated predictable activities & routines: Predictable activities and routines make students feel safe and comfortable in our classrooms because they know what to expect. The more relaxed or comfortable students are in our classrooms the fewer obstacles to comprehensible input exist.

Basic classroom "survival" phrases & instructions: providing students with language basics that assist in the running of the classroom and basic classroom instructions also helps to lower anxiety and create an atmosphere where students feel safe and comfortable.

5. Monitoring and Assessing Target Language Use

TELL Framework Connection
I provide opportunities for my students to become more effective communicators. (LE7)

Keeping track of student language use and building it into student assessment helps to ensure a climate of target language use. The target language must become a part of the management of the classroom and an integral part of the classroom culture.

6. Separating English from the Target Language and Avoiding Translation

TELL Framework Connection
I minimize my use of English by carefully and deliberately determining when and if I use English in the classroom. (LE4b)

Using a sign to indicate which language is being spoken is a tangible reminder for both teachers and learners that they should stay in the target language. Signaling the transition to the other language also helps to avoid constant switching of languages or translation. Using translation as an English "shortcut" robs students of the opportunity to construct meanings and take advantage of the target language gestures, visuals, and experiences that make the new language meaningful. Translation should be a last resort rather than an ongoing strategy.

7. Providing Multiple Scaffolds, Breaking Learning into Small Incremental Steps, and Modeling Every Step

TELL Framework Connection
I use a variety of strategies to make language comprehensible. (LE4c)
I clarify what I say in a variety of ways. (LE4d)

Scaffolding refers to the constant support provided by the teacher and involves segmenting a complex task into easier, more manageable steps to facilitate learning. Teachers usually provide scaffolding in the earliest stages of teaching a new concept or strategy and then gradually decrease the amount as the learners acquire experience through multiple practice opportunities. Continuous modeling and breaking learning into small steps are all part of scaffolding.

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