



Foreign Language Module **Examining Target Language Use**

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Recent foreign language pedagogy research supports the use of a communicative approach to teaching. In an ideal classroom, stimulating and provocative instruction is delivered in the target language, and students are committed to interactive lessons conducted almost exclusively in the target language. Some foreign language students may simply need gentle encouragement to become invested in this practice; others seek explanation and justification of the value of target language use.

Pedagogically speaking, the term “communicative” learning suggests that the most important student outcome is an enhanced ability to communicate in the target language – to effectively convey a need or thought; to impart knowledge; to share opinions – with other speakers of that language. In order to develop these skills, a great deal of practice in both speaking and listening to the language is necessary.

Instructors should strive to provide opportunities for authentic exchanges in the target language. Diverse activity formats, such as surveys, interviews, role-plays and information gap exercises engage students in communicative exchanges. It makes perfect sense, given the difference in students’ backgrounds, skills, temperament and motivation, that not all students will show a positive initial response to this approach to learning the language.

For this reason, it is imperative that instructors themselves understand the importance of using the target language in the classroom, and that they take time to explicitly address students’ learning needs early in the course. There is an understandably strong intimidation factor involved for students who have not been coached in approaches to dealing with target language instruction. This module discusses many ways in which instructors can alleviate students’ anxiety and provide support in the target-language classroom.

Dispelling inaccurate assumptions

Alan V. Brown (2009), in his article titled, “Students’ and Teachers’ Perceptions of Effective Foreign Language Teaching: A Comparison of Ideals,” reports that “beginning-level students maintain unrealistic expectations and narrowly defined perspectives about [second language] learning.” One study cited by Brown (2009) shows that “almost 40% of the students believed that one could become fluent in another language in 2 years or less.” Given their attachment to this unattainable goal, it is no wonder that students feel internal pressure to speak the target language perfectly from the first day of class, and become discouraged when this does not, in fact, happen. Students need to hear that – in accordance with the principles of Universal Design for Instruction – their instructor will show a certain tolerance for error. Encouraging experimentation with the language and establishing a climate of acceptance will help students realize that the instructor does not expect immediate mastery of skills in the target language.

Brown (2009) also highlighted the mistaken notion that “learning was mostly a matter of translating from English.” Students may have previous experience in the classroom which supports this erroneous belief – in classrooms which relied heavily on presentation of material in English, rote drills, and assessments created primarily to measure translation skills.

In another study, Glenn Levine (2003) suggests that “instructors may perceive higher levels of TL-use anxiety among students (in general) than students themselves report.” Levine found that students who spoke more of the target language in class were, in turn, less likely to experience anxiety about its use. All students benefit from the reassurance that speaking in the target language gets easier as more time is devoted to the practice.

Communicating Realistic Expectations

Given the misinformation with which students often reach the higher education foreign language classroom, instructors must invest time and energy into a discussion of realistic expectations. Students need to hear that they are not expected to pronounce words correctly on the first try; that they may ask for a word, phrase, or question to be repeated; that it is perfectly normal for them, as first- and second-year foreign language students, to take a little time formulating an answer in the target language.

Another worthwhile exercise is to explicitly ask the question – within the context of a class discussion, or individual written responses – “What are your expectations for this course?” In this way, the instructor has an opportunity to hear or read answers, acknowledge students’ perceptions, and speak directly to any unrealistic expectations. This exercise recently produced a

revealing comment from a student of French 101, who explained her expectation of the 12-week, 4-credit course in the following way: “I hope to become fluent in French.”

It is the responsibility of the instructor, then, to spell out our pedagogical intentions. Our goal is for all students to achieve an appropriate level of proficiency – as proposed by ACTFL¹, and as defined by course descriptions – which can be transferred out of the classroom.

Strategies toward Inclusion

Students’ previous exposure to the target language varies greatly, depending on personal opportunities – such as exchange programs or family vacations to areas in which the target language is spoken – as well as the comfort level and ability of former target language instructors. Students with disabilities are asked to master skills which become even more daunting when paired with anxiety, slow auditory processing, or poor memory recall.

One simple way to reduce student anxiety in the target language classroom is to establish a rhythm to the typical hour of instruction. Instructors should formulate, communicate, and employ a series of easy-to-anticipate steps within the instruction time. Students, in turn, must think about their experience in a foreign language class in the same way that they might approach an exercise class: participants will not get the most benefit from a workout for which they are not adequately prepared. For courses taught in the target language, students need to arrive in class primed for communication. First, *before arriving in class*, students should complete homework exercises which correspond to material to be used the following class period. That way, they are familiar with, and better able to utilize, new vocabulary and structures as they are discussed in class. Second, students should be able to rely on an engaging warm-up conducted in the target language. Among other possibilities, this could be a series of questions posed by the instructor or conducted as an interview between students. Third, students should expect to tackle new material – to try out the formulas, sounds and ideas that they met in the previous day’s homework. Fourth, the instructor winds down the time with review, reinforcement, and teasers for the next class meeting. When students can anticipate what is to come in the class hour, they are less likely to feel intimidated. A predictable structure to class also supports and provides scaffolds for students with attention or organizational difficulties.

Another requisite pedagogical tool, the use of visual aids, provides clear support for students struggling to interpret the sounds of a new language. According to one student’s comments, “. . . you don’t have to break out of character and speak English [,] but I would think a class could be

¹ ACTFL is the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, a national organization dedicated to the improvement and expansion of the teaching and learning of all languages at all levels of instruction throughout the U.S. Among other pedagogical tools, their literature includes guidelines for standards by which to measure student achievement in speaking the target language.

taught mostly speaking Spanish . . . if they incorporated enough aids” (Hildebrandt, Scott, & Edwards, 2010). All students, but especially those students who experience difficulty with the sound and symbol correlation, such as students with learning disabilities, auditory processing difficulties, or mild hearing impairment benefit from visual reinforcement of vocabulary or concepts. These students’ understanding can be supported by simply showing in its written form any word or phrase which is unrecognizable in its spoken form – then modeling pronunciation and having the whole class repeat. The student quoted in the above-cited interview goes on to suggest, specifically, “using writing to assist . . . on the board while talking” as providing excellent help.

Visual aid tools can also include any sort of image which represents the word or idea in question. Instructors should keep a “picture file” which offers electronic or hard-copy visual references showing the nouns, verbs and adjectives relevant to the lesson. A magazine photo of Arnold Schwarzenegger, for example, could be used to illustrate the nouns, “actor” or “father,” the verbs, “to lift weights” or “to govern,” as well as the adjectives, “strong” and “famous.”

Students with slow phonological or auditory processing are supported by any word or idea which can be represented with an image, and tangible items which can be touched and handled provide further connections for tactile learners. Many sets of vocabulary in the first and second year of language learning lend themselves to representation by actual objects. Students become engaged in tiny cases filled with doll clothes, bathroom items or school supplies; they enjoy handling miniature plastic hamburgers and old, clunky telephones. The obvious meaning of these items aids comprehension, and eliminates the need for explanations in students’ native language.

When the use of visual aids is impractical, instructors can also rely on cognates to explain a new idea. Cognates are words from other languages which have the same meaning as in English, with nearly or exactly the same spelling. Students who may not recognize the word “*potage*,” for example, will have little trouble deciphering “*soupe*.” When setting up a communicative class survey, why direct students to “*enqu  rir*” when any number of cognates, including “*demander*,” “*examiner*” or “*informer*” would give a directive that students could better understand?

Another way to interact in the target language is to use circumlocution, or rephrasing, to draw out the meaning of a word or phrase. If students are not catching on to the sense of a “*lyc  e*,” for example, an instructor can further explain that this is an “*  cole pour les plus ag  s*,” “*  cole s  condaire*,” or “*o   les adolescents apprennent*,” thus relying on the scaffolding of information upon previously learned vocabulary.

The beauty of using these strategies to teach is that the instructor is modeling ways of avoiding reliance on the native language which can be mirrored by the students as they improve their own

skills in communicating. A very effective way to introduce a *learning* strategy to students is to actually employ the given strategy while *teaching* material to the students. These very skills may also allow a student with a significant speech articulation difficulty to be an equal participant in class target language use.

Creating inclusive target-language exercises

How can instructors create communicative activities which respect both the pedagogical goal of target-language driven interaction, and inclusion of all students? With both factors in mind, let's look at two sample activities to be conducted by students in the target language:

Activity#1


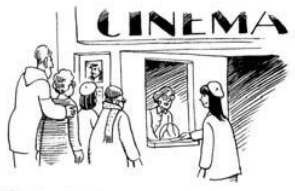
Sondage <u>Les participes passés irréguliers</u>		
1. Circulez dans la salle de classe. 2. Trouvez une personne différente pour chaque boîte qui a fait les choses suivantes:		
Modèle : écrire une composition le weekend passé Échange : Est-ce que tu as écrit une composition le weekend passé ? Oui, j'ai écrit une composition. / Non, je n'ai pas écrit de compo.		
lire un journal ce matin	pouvoir faire de la bicyclette à l'âge de 5 ans	suivre un cours d'anglais le semestre passé
ne pas naître en Virginie	boire du café ce matin	offrir un cadeau à ta mère pour son anniversaire
recevoir une bonne note sur un examen la semaine passée	mettre une photo à « Facebook »	venir à l'Université en 2008

Notice that the top of the page gives a compass of sorts, telling the student both the type of interaction necessary (*sondage* = survey), and the pedagogical goal of the activity (practicing use of irregular past participles). Instructions are included in written form – with reliance on cognates to scaffold understanding – for reference and clarification. Students with short-term working memory issues benefit from this reinforcement. Also included at the top of the page is a pair of sentences which model the exchange expected between students. This is especially important for those students who perhaps understand spoken instructions, but then struggle to hold and act on the information in some way. Students are able to formulate answers while

working independently, and feel better-prepared when the time comes to share with the class. Instructors should also consider the expectation for student mobility that is inherent in this exercise. The physical arrangement of desks may need to be considered in order for all students to circulate freely.

Activity #2

The following are elements which might be included in an activity referred to as “information gap,” which often includes two different versions of the same scene or grid; pairs of students must work together to share information which is unique to their own page, thereby collecting details necessary to address the given topic as a whole.

<p>Étudiant(e) A samedi matin:</p>  <p>Les Chevallier . . .</p>	<p>Étudiant(e) B samedi après-midi :</p>  <p>Isabelle . . .</p>
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Students might be asked to compare the Saturday activities of the given families, illustrated in the sketches. Typically, instructors are looking for specific verbs, structures, or vocabulary, but an exercise like this provides many elements which help to make it inclusive. First, students are given the support of visual reinforcement of concepts. Second, even within the boundaries of pedagogical goals of the exercise, students have many options in terms of how they might describe the above scenes. Third, as a pair activity, students are working with one other person, thereby limiting the anxiety associated with immediate recall in front of the entire class.

Summary

Target language interaction in the foreign language classroom is a pedagogical necessity. Given the various learning styles, experiences, and comfort level of students, it is imperative that instructors create an environment where all students are encouraged to participate in the target language with as little anxiety as possible. As suggested above, this can be accomplished by first speaking directly and honestly about expectations for the course, then modeling for students – within the framework of lesson delivery and activities – the best practices to stay engaged in the target language.

References

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- Levine, Glenn S. (2003). Student and Instructor Beliefs and Attitudes about Target Language Use, First Language Use, and Anxiety: Report of a Questionnaire Study. *The Modern Language Journal*, 87(iii), 343–364.