Expanding Horizons Through Language Acquisition: My Philosophy for Effectual Language Learning

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"The limits of my language are the limits of my world." -Ludwig Wittgenstein, Philosopher

When I was first introduced to Spanish in high school, I detested having to memorize formulaic grammar rules and dry, impersonal verb charts. Learning languages transformed when I grew to see it, not as fragmented and formulaic patterns to be analyzed and learned, but rather a system that expresses genuine meaning. This passion to learn a second language through interaction and communication influences my approach to teaching. Based on my experience learning second languages and my understanding of how second languages (L2) are most effectively learned, there are three core beliefs that I feel are especially important to facilitate successful language learning, which I will proceed to describe in greater breadth, namely:
(1) establishing the relevance of language learning as a means of motivating students;
(2) exposing students to input, instruction, and interaction to maximize acquisition;
(3) and supporting learning by creating a safe environment and good rapport.

## Intrinsic and Integrative Motivation: Establishing the Relevance of Language Learning

Just as good education does not consider learning to be merely the transmission of facts nor the student as a receptacle of information, good language education does not view language as a set of grammatical rules to be imparted, but as an ability to manipulate structures to convey meaning. In that vein, a good language teacher arouses the curiosity and desire of students to want to actively discover the relationship between form and meaning, so that they can use the language to communicate with other peoples.

To inspire my students to be self-determined and responsible for their own L2 learning, I endeavor to tailor the course to fit the language goals of my students, so that the grammatical structures and thematic topics are easily transferable to their language needs. By administering a needs-analysis and learning-style survey to the students in advance (for examples of needsanalysis surveys, please see my "Evaluation and Assessment" section), I adapt my instruction to center around their interests, goals, and learning styles, thereby increasing their motivation and investment in the learning process and personalizing the medium of instruction to better suit their learning needs (i.e., visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile).

With a knowledge of their interests and goals in hand, I incorporate authentic texts and listening material and realistic interactive activities that appeal to them personally, so that what students are learning in class is relevant and interesting. For example, I assign readings from real newspaper articles on current issues and events that we then discuss together in class. Depending on the age, proficiency and interests, we might read about a recent soccer match and discuss the importance of sports in cultures or, for older students, we might read about plans for the building of the U.S. border and discuss the cultural, geopolitical, and even personal implications. I encourage students to find an online blog or articles about a topic they are passionate about and read not only the articles, but the comments to notice how language is being used. I ask them to bring questions about the language they read to class, and ask students to enter into the online
conversation by posting their own comments. Language texts and tasks revolving around the student's desires, goals, and learning styles can facilitate intrinsic motivation and hopefully further inspire them to continue learning English because it adds value to them personally and results in individual enjoyment.

To facilitate integrative motivation, I introduce my students to the language through the cultures associated with English. As new grammar forms are considered, we learn the pragmatics of the language specific to English-speaking cultures (the meaning and appropriate use of certain structures) especially when the pragmatics of the students' first language diverge from English. For example, I teach modal auxiliary verbs as hedging devices to make polite requests and demonstrate through video clips from popular American TV shows and movies that Englishspeaking cultures are generally low-context cultures, which require more direct speech. I also like to incorporate popular media into my lessons to teach certain grammar features, such as Justin Bieber's "Love Yourself" to teach reflexive pronouns or Ruth B's "Lost Boys" to teach direct versus indirect/reported speech. With a sensitivity to culture relativity (i.e., not comparing cultures or making stereotypical assessments), the teaching of language through culture can make the foreign language less foreign and inspire students to want to integrate and develop relationships with the L2 community.

Instead of pen pals, in $21^{\text {st }}$ century I utilize free online interchange applications such as Tandem and WeSpeke to initiate pathways to relationships with native speakers and provide students with opportunities to talk in the target language via both chat and video. This sort of interface increases naturalistic input, productive output, and a means of interacting with the L2 socialization community. Such an opportunity for contact with native speakers and exposure to their culture can spark a keen interest in wanting to learn the language in order to come closer and integrate into the L2 language community. As students develop relationships with native speakers, they are more likely to sustain their motivation and continue pursuing the language. Additionally, through the process of developing cross-cultural interactions and learning how meaning is organized by a different language system, students have the opportunity to see the world through a different perspective.

By demonstrating the relevance of English, adjusting my teaching around the interests, goals, and learning styles of my students, and providing opportunities to use the language meaningfully with native speakers, students can more easily see the pertinence of learning an L2 and are more likely to invest the effort required to continue learning the language.

## See, Hear, Use, Know: Teaching Languages Through Input, Instruction and Interaction

With this strengthened motivation, we can embark together on the pursuit of greater mastery of English. How can I best facilitate this process? From my study of theory and research in SLA, I can most effectively teach second languages by surrounding my students with input, drawing their attention to forms and patters through instruction and corrective feedback, and facilitating opportunities for students to use the language through meaningful interaction.

## Introducing Students to Input

Vital to learning any second language is the opportunity to listen and read the language. Because of the integral importance of input in the acquisition process, I try to capitalize on inclass opportunities and out-of-class resources to surround my students with as much spoken and written language. To increase spoken input in class, I model the language, adjusting my speech to the students' proficiency level. Where the listening dialogues and written language are contrived or scarce from the textbook, I record myself and incorporate authentic materials or literature (magazines, news articles, or even language from social media posts).

In second language contexts, I adjust the assignments to take advantage the language spoken outside the classroom. If my students are living with a host family, I assign tasks for them to implement the structures we are learning in class around the dinner table. After learning how to form open WH-questions, for example, we brainstorm specific questions students might want to ask their host family members, modifying the grammar and looking up appropriate words. When students return to class, they present what they learned and describe any "learning lightbulbs" they discovered or any language questions that arose through the interaction. In foreign language contexts, where the course is the only source of input and students do not have immediate access to input, I instead assign students tasks where they interact through technological mediums. For example, I might ask students to brainstorm different aspects of their culture and, choosing one that particularly interests them, research and write about that topic (such as tapas from Spain, lei from Hawaii, or origami from Japan). Next, students choose a country that they want to visit and prepare questions they have about that culture. Finally, students use webhosts such as Tandem (as mentioned previously) and find a friend from that country to ask questions they have prepared in English to inquire and learn about another country and culture.

To increase exposure to written language outside of class, I provide my students with physical and online resources such as graded readers that are slightly below their level for pleasure and overall understanding. Through extensive reading, students build new vocabulary in context, extend the meaning of words they already knew, examine and foster generalizations about the construction of the grammar, and in turn build their automaticity and reading fluency. Hopefully, because students are reading for pleasure and not for accuracy, they use their imaginations and enter into a "flow experience" (fully enthralled in the storyline and enjoying the activity of reading in their L2).

Recognizing the importance of input, I model the language, integrate authentic material into my classes and design tasks that expose students to input and facilitate listening and reading.

## Drawing Students ' Attention to Grammatical Forms

Grammatical forms that cannot be easily deduced from input are important to highlight through classroom instruction. My experience teaching grammar to a variety of proficiency levels and types of students with different ages and purposes for learning has taught me the value in varying my approach to grammar instruction. I teach younger students through kinesthetic activities that engage both body and mind and through which they can implicitly learn the L2.

For example, I might teach imperative commands by playing 'Simon Says’ or organize an obstacle course and asking students to direct their blindfolded peer using the language. For older learners, after some instruction on how to form imperative commands, I might provide maps and task students with creating directions from point ' A ' to point ' B ' in pairs. So that the task is cognitively challenging, I would introduce difficulties like road closures and water main breaks, so that students have to use the language to come to an agreement of the best route and list of commands.

Taking into consideration variable like purpose or context, I might rely on more traditional teaching approaches in academic contexts by presenting grammatical rules, practicing the form with structured exercise, and facilitating freer practice, whereas I would rely on more role play or task-based activities in conversation classes. Not only do we cover how to construct the form, but what meaning that form expresses and how it is used. To understand the latter two aspects essential to grammar, we analyze the grammatical form in the context authentic texts, such as the pragmatic differences in use and meaning of positive/negative yes/no questionsusing authentic academic articles for academic English classes and dialogues from conversational corpus data.

Equally important in helping the student notice features is providing students with corrective feedback. Too much feedback can interrupt the flow of conversation and inhibit students from wanting to try and make mistakes, so I prioritize correcting those errors students produce that are highly frequent and commonly cause misunderstandings. If I know students know how to produce the right form, I might try to elicit self-correction by asking for clarification ("I'm sorry, what was that?") or stress the error with greater intonation, such as "He goed?" If I predict the student cannot produce the right form, I might reformulate the student's statement or provide metalinguistic instruction. In addition to providing my students with corrective feedback, I also teach communicative strategies, so that students can learn to ask for and give clarification, confirmation, repetition, and recap summaries within their own conversations.

Raising students' awareness through grammar instruction, practice exercises, and corrective feedback provide foundational explicit knowledge, which help learners notice, internalize, and correctly produce those forms in their own production.

## Facilitating Meaningful Interaction to Produce Communicative Competence

Input and instruction alone are not sufficient. For students to transform that input into fluid output and incorporate the patterns they see and hear in their developing grammar, students must use the language to learn the language. I am convinced that production produces comprehension, specifically interaction that facilitates meaningful communication. Often within my previous language classes, activities that elicited "interaction" did not necessarily generate active, cognitive language processing; when I noticed my partner had stopped talking, I would regurgitate the phrase or grammatical structure we were reviewing that I had prepared. In my time abroad, however, as an interlocutor within the community and with my host family, I was constantly having to comprehend the input and generate an appropriate response to not only
continue the conversation, but demonstrate interest, concern, or empathy to develop the relationship. How did I respond to my host sister who had been dumped by her boyfriend, my grandmother who told me stories of her gruesome memories of the civil war, or my host father who had a bad day at work? Because language is chiefly communicative, language classes should be about developing this ability.

One way I endeavor to facilitate this is through the use of debates about somewhat controversial topics (i.e., Should children be able to play violent video games? Should the legal driving age be increased or decreased?). Such activities elicit students' opinions, thereby promoting opportunities to think critically and use the language to consider the topic from a variety of perspectives. Rather than regurgitating linguistic forms, as students try to formulate and articulate their opinions and understand each other by negotiating for meaning, they are doing something meaningful with the language. As part of the debate, I teach students how to respond using sympathetic language, such as "From my perspective..." or "I understand your point, but I disagree, because...". Following the conversation facilitated in class, in the environment with their host family, or through webhosts, I highly encourage my students to "play" with the language in their head, out loud, or on paper: rehearsing a conversation, correcting the errors they might have made, repeating newly-acquired phrases, making up sentences, and trying out new words and structures.

All four language skills are important in my classroom. Exposure to input (listening and reading) and opportunities to produce the language (speaking and writing) play an active part. By facilitating opportunities for naturalistic input and engaging learners interactively, through meaningful communicative tasks, learners are actively engaged in the acquisition process, transforming the input they receive developing their mental grammar into meaningful output.

## Classroom Rapport and Management: Building a Safe Environment

This type of student-centered interaction that increases proficiency can only occur in a safe, supportive environment, where students feel comfortable using the language and making mistakes with their peers. In my previous language classes, class participation was graded, which hindered me from speaking; I did not want to be wrong nor humiliated. If students are inhibited to speak and make mistakes amongst their peers, how much more will they be inhibited when confronted with a native speaker?

Through humor and compassion, I create a warm classroom environment and friendly atmosphere to increase my students' motivation and confidence in using language. For example, on the first day of instruction, I use silly icebreakers, so that students begin to feel comfortable. I make it a point to try to get to know my students as individuals, starting by learning their names the first week of class and showing heartfelt interest in their likes and dislikes, their pursuits, and even their history and home situation. At the start of every class, I like to take roll by asking the students to respond to a question like "If money were no object, where would you travel to?"

In my teaching, I create an atmosphere where fluency and communication take preeminence (even over accuracy), where it is okay to make mistakes when attempting to use the

L2, especially for beginning second language learners. To decrease students' inhibition, I give students time individually or in pairs to formulate responses to questions I ask to the class, giving them the opportunity to come up with the vocabulary and grammatical structures needed before responding in front of their class. I praise correct answers and provide an observation as to why it was correct. By making students feel comfortable, they can get the most out of every class.

As a second language teacher, I bring my years of experience in learning languages and a firm foundation in pedagogical and theoretical knowledge to the classroom. By approaching motivation as a central key to effectual L2 acquisition, learning through an interactive, communicative manner, and the classroom as an amiable learning laboratory, I show my students the relevance and beauty in learning multiple languages, so that they do not spend years loathing language classes as I once did. Being monolingual is, as the famous philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein so eloquently articulated, a limit to our world. Ultimately through my teaching, I want to awaken in my students an itching for new languages and expanded horizons that go beyond the language classroom.

## References

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