

## ***Setting Priorities for Proficiency in the Foreign Language Classroom***

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The field of foreign language (FL) instruction has gone through considerable transformations over the past two decades. The role of FL teachers has also been in a state of flux. A study of methods by FL teachers trained in teacher education programs can be very valuable because it can broaden their perspectives on what will work in their classroom beyond what worked for them as FL learners. Methods serve as a foil for reflection that can aid teachers in bringing to conscious awareness the thinking that underlies their actions....When teachers are exposed to methods and asked to reflect on their principles and actively engage with their techniques, they can become clearer about why they do what they do. They become aware of their own fundamental assumptions, values, and beliefs.... A knowledge of methods helps expand a teacher's repertoire of techniques.... Moreover, effective teachers who are more experienced and expert have a large, diverse repertoire of best practices, which presumably helps them deal more effectively with the unique qualities and idiosyncrasies of their students (Larson-Freeman, 2000).

Many FL educators are aware of the shift in native language reading instruction in the United States from a code-emphasis approach, one which emphasized learning explicitly taught rules of sounds (phonics) and correlating these sounds (phonemes) with the corresponding letters (graphemes), to a whole language approach, one where learning to read is done primarily through guessing meaning through context clues. There has been a product-process debate surrounding writing instruction. Which approach is the most effective depends on who is asked. The great debate between these two major approaches to teaching English-language literacy is important for FL educators because a similar debate exists in FL instruction. There has been a shift from an explicit grammar approach to communicative competence models of instruction, such as *The Natural Approach* (Terrill and Kraschen) and *Total Physical Response* (TPR) (Asher) and *Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling* (TPRS) (Ray and Seely).

In the past, FL educators simply advocated the use of the same successful techniques they had been exposed to as learners or replicated approaches used in their teacher training methods courses. Over the past two decades, as the movement toward more communicative methodologies took hold, FL educators were presented with the choice of methodologies as an either/or proposition. Few had considered the need to differentiate their instruction for a diverse body of learners. Now, with greater emphasis on meeting the needs of all students, and federal mandates such as the No Child Left Behind legislation, rather than advocate a fanatical purism, FL educators are considering a fusion of more traditional explicit grammar

models, concerned with form and accuracy, with communicative approaches, more concerned with meaningful input and comprehensible (not necessarily accurate) output.

FL educators, in establishing their standards and goals, need to examine which elements from which approaches will be most effective for the students in their classrooms, including at-risk FL learners with language-based learning difficulties. Too often, needs of students have been homogenized and over simplified. In examining effective FL teaching approaches for at-risk FL learners, FL educators have turned to research in native-language learning, especially the research on reading and spelling. Researchers have clearly shown that learning to read and spell depends to a great extent on the strength of one's skills in phonological/orthographic processing... Unlike communicative approaches to FL learning that emphasize implicit acquisition of the sound/symbol and grammatical systems of a FL, a Multisensory Structured Language (MSL) approach focuses on teaching the FL in a direct fashion and emphasizes skill development (Sullivan, 2002). FL educators are now beginning to understand the diverse needs of their students. Despite current trends toward non-explicit instruction, many FL teachers are now modifying the way that they teach and are including some explicit instruction in pronunciation and grammar.

Below you will find a discussion of important considerations when designing a FL program, including student and teacher attitudes toward grammar instruction, as well as dramatically different methodologies for teaching FL.

### **Finding a Good Fit: Teacher/Student Perceptions of Success**

It is critical for FL teachers to consider the varying methodologies and approaches to teaching FL and to find a good fit between teacher and learner. Some instructional models rely heavily on developing oral communication skills, minimizing the importance of written accuracy. Others rely heavily on grammatical correctness in writing, minimizing the opportunity for developing speaking skills. Schulz, in her article on the role of grammar in the FL classroom, underscores the debate regarding implicit and explicit grammar instruction, as well as error correction. She explores different attitudes toward these approaches held by FL students and their teachers. Schulz rightly indicts the many FL methodologists, linguists, and psycholinguists who have joined in the fray for and against the focus on form, often generalizing from very limited data and simplistic theoretical frameworks that neglect to take into account the complex nature of language and language acquisition, as well as the complex nature of learners, i.e., the physical, cognitive/psychological, and social variables and processes interacting in FL and second language learning (Schulz, 1996).

Interestingly, Schulz reveals that with few exceptions, students held more favorable attitudes toward formal grammar study than do the teachers as a group.... While the large majority of both students and teachers believed that the study of grammar helps in learning a foreign language, more of the students (85%) held that belief than did the teachers (74%) (Schulz, 1996). Similarly, Schulz found that more of the teachers (80%) than the students (69%) agreed that it is generally more important to practice a FL in situations simulating real-life than to analyze and practice grammatical patterns (Schulz, 1996). As a result of considerable differences between student and teacher attitudes toward the role of explicit grammar instruction and error correction in the study of a FL, Schulz concludes it might well be wise to explore the fit of learner and teacher beliefs and to take into account learner opinions of what enhances the learning process. While opinions alone do not necessarily reflect the actual cognitive processes that go on in language acquisition, perceptions do influence reality. Indeed, some would argue that perception is reality for the individual learner (Schulz, 1996).

It is important to understand that many at-risk language learners, i.e., those with native-language based learning challenges require more explicit instruction in sound production and the sound/symbol connection. A multisensory approach, using articulatory phonetics (teaching students how to feel the language by teaching them how to position their mouth, where to put their tongue, etc.), kinesthetics (movement) and writing helps students develop the various

skill sets of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing.

### **Techniques and Principles in FL Learning: Is Writing or Speaking More Important?**

There is an ever-growing body of research in second language learning that has helped to inform second language teaching. It is generally accepted that a common goal of all FL educators is to promote basic literacy in a second language; however, literacy means different things to different people. It is often a topic that generates strong emotional reactions and heated debates.... Definitions of literacy vary depending on the lens of the discipline from which a person is studying it (Sullivan, 2002). Should second language learners be able to comprehend, speak, read, and write equally well in their new language? Which skills are more important? Some models described below favor the development of one skill at the expense of another. Perhaps what is needed is a more balanced, less extremist approach to FL teaching, a balanced and flexible literacy diet.... the development of balanced FL curricula that place importance on form and meaning (Sullivan, 2002).

### **Communicative Competence Models**

Many popular communicative models of instruction, such as TPR and TPRS, de-emphasize the need for accuracy, particularly in the written language. Surprisingly, teachers who are jumping on the bandwagon of popularity of TPR and TPRS have given little consideration to the implications for FL learners moving on to upper-level programs in their own school or to a college-level program, where they will be expected to not only have oral communication skills, but have writing skills, too. Accuracy will be expected both with regard to spelling and grammar. In addition, purely communicative models of FL instruction have been criticized for not taking into account individual learner variables, such as native-language learning difficulties in reading, spelling and the mechanics of language. Students exhibiting these difficulties will require more explicit instruction in the sound/symbol connection and in the grammatical structure of the new language.

In addition to discouraging explicit instruction in spelling and grammar, the Natural Approach, TPR and TPRS also discourage explicit instruction in pronunciation. However, their commentary on how students acquire accurate pronunciation reveals a lack of awareness of students in the FL classroom who may have auditory processing deficits--a reality for many FL educators. Kraschen does not recommend any specific activities for pronunciation, especially in early learners, but rather concentrates on providing a good model with large quantities of comprehensible input before production is attempted. Again, simply modeling sound does not necessarily lead to comprehensible or accurate production, particularly with students who have auditory processing challenges. These students require much more explicit instruction. It is true that since the creation of TPRS, their creators have responded to the need for more explicit instruction, particularly with regard to grammar explanation. In the last few years, they have created what they call pop-up grammar, which are very brief grammar clarification units (suggested to still last no more than 15 seconds), that are usually done in question/answer format (e.g., a student would be asked what a particular phrase meant or what tense it was in). This kind of explicit instruction is often inadequate for students with significant language-based learning challenges.

Ray and Seely comment: pronunciation is a progressive thing. Students will improve as their exposure to the language increases. In TPRS, they hear the same word so many times before the need to produce it that they nearly always are able to pronounce very adequately...You rarely need to concern yourself with pronunciation. An early emphasis on pronunciation is usually counterproductive, because it make students focus on how the sounds are made instead of focusing on meaningful production (Ray and Seely, 2003). One must ask, however, if a student fossilizes errors of pronunciation, will it not be more difficult to correct those errors due to repeated misuse? Also, if a student does not hear the sound correctly and therefore, produces the sound incorrectly, how will their output be comprehensible to a native or to anyone else?

This lack of emphasis on accurate sound production or pronunciation misses the point of the

connection between speaking and writing. If students learn the sound/symbol (phoneme/grapheme) connection early, they understand that how they say something can be an effective guide to how they write it. Even in non-phonetic languages like English and French, students can sound words out and learn to spell predictable patterns. Students of French and English can learn patterns for difficult letter combinations and silent letter rules (in English, e.g., ight [ite]--fight, sight, light, night, and in French, e.g., eau [oh]--beau, leau, bateau, gâteau or the silent ent for third-person plural conjugations: parlent [parl], chantent [chant], vendent [vend]).

### **Explicit Grammar Instruction Models**

Traditional grammar instructional models have been criticized for being too artificial, for not facilitating communication in authentic situations, and for relying too much on memory and written testing. Grammar-based approaches value a broad definition of literacy and place greater emphasis on developing reading and writing skills. Critics of explicit grammar instruction distinguish between second language learning and acquisition. Language acquisition, according to Krashen, is distinctly different from language learning. Language acquisition is using language for real communication, while language learning is knowing about language... Learning refers to explicit knowledge of rules, being aware of them, and being able to talk about them.... [With] grammar-based approaches, which emphasize explanation of rules and corrections of errors, it appears that teaching is directed totally at learning and not acquisition (Krashen and Terrell, 2000).

Krashen discourages teaching for learning and instead, through the use of his Natural Approach, promotes teaching for acquisition. He offers a FL course design with goals that develop basic communication skills--both oral and written not a course design with goals developed specifically to teach academic learning skills such as in the traditional FL courses, that try to develop the four skill sets of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing. The Natural Approach does not organize the activities of a FL class around a grammatical syllabus, but rather around communicative goals that identify situations in which students must use the target language.

While Krashen touts research claims that boast greater communicative competence in students taught with his approach as compared to those taught with a traditional explicit grammar instructional model, his research references are very limited and dated. Nearly all of his bibliographical citations are based on studies from 1981 or earlier. Krashen writes: at the time this book was written (1983), our confidence in the Natural Approach was based primarily on underlying theory (itself supported by considerable empirical evidence) and the enthusiastic reactions of students and instructors (Krashen and Terrell, 2000).

Let us remember that Schulz research revealed that more students than teachers were comfortable with learning with explicit grammar instruction. It is important to fuse students' needs with teachers attitudes about the role of grammar. Perhaps the proverbial baby has been thrown out with the bath water. It is possible to draw from various instructional models, using elements that enhance oral communication (communicative competence approaches) and using other elements that aim to refine writing skills (grammar-based approaches).

### **Methodologies and Principles: A Review**

There are a number of articles and publications which provide excellent background on different approaches to FL teaching. One such article, *The Emerging Foreign Language Teaching/Learning Paradigm* (Cubillos, 2001), presents an excellent overview of a number of relevant issues in FL teaching and learning today. Cubillos discusses, among other things: 1) the role of formal classroom instruction; 2) the implications for grammar instruction; and 3) Second Language Acquisition (SLA) principles.

*Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching* (Larson-Freeman, 2000) offers useful observations of actual classes taught with various approaches (TPR, not TPRS is included in this work). Below are principles and goals of five popular methodologies discussed in the

Larson-Freeman publication that will aid in your design of a FL program. It is critical to consider the breadth of a program and whether or not you want to focus on form OR meaning or on form AND meaning. One must consider what kind of competence that you will expect students to attain, particularly those who continue with their FL study through the upper levels of the program. If the fourth year program expects full literacy, i.e., speaking, reading, and writing, the lower-level programs must build competence at each stage with the appropriate methodologies. If the objective of a four-year high school program is communicative competence and meaning (rather than accuracy and form), teachers of the lower-level programs can use methodologies that primarily focus on communication in context rather than on the learning of skills.

## **1) Grammar-Translation Method (writing-based approach)**

### *Description*

The Grammar-Translation method is not new--it has been referred to by many different names, such as the Classical Method, because it was used in the teaching of Greek and Latin. It was hoped that, through the study of the grammar of the target language, students would become more familiar with the grammar of their native language and that this familiarity would help them speak and write their native language better... It was thought that foreign language learning would help students grow intellectually... It was recognized that students would probably never use the target language, but the mental exercise of learning would be beneficial anyway (Larson-Freeman, Chapter 2, 2000)

### *Principles and Goals*

a) a fundamental purpose of learning a FL is to be able to read literature written in the target language; b) literary language is more important than spoken language; c) students study of the culture is limited to literature and fine arts; e) successful language learning is determined by students' ability to translate from one language to the other; f) the ability to communicate in the target language is not a goal of FL instruction; g) the primary skills to be developed are reading and writing; little attention is given to speaking, listening, or pronunciation; h) deductive application of explicit grammar rules is useful; i) having students get the correct answer is considered very important and overt error correction is encouraged; and j) conscious knowledge of grammatical rules of the target language provides good mental exercise, a goal of FL learning. (Larson-Freeman, 2000)

## **2) The Direct Method (oral-based approach)**

### *Description*

The Direct Method is not new--it has been used by language teachers for many years. Most recently it was revived as a method when the goal of instruction became learning how to use a foreign language to communicate. Since the Grammar-Translation Method was not very effective in preparing students to use the target language communicatively, the Direct Method became popular (Larson-Freeman, Chapter 3, 2000)

### *Principles and Goals*

a) reading in the target language should be taught from the beginning of language instruction; b) the reading skill will be developed through practice with speaking; c) language is primarily speech; d) culture consists of fine arts, geography and cultural attitudes; e) realia, pictures, objects in the classroom environment--all should be used to help facilitate meaning; f) translation and native-language use in the classroom is discouraged; g) the teacher should demonstrate, not explain or translate; h) the purpose of language learning is communication (i.e., question asking and answering should be taught); i) pronunciation should be an integral part of instruction from the very beginning; j) error correction is done by offering students a choice of possible answers, leading to student self-correction; k) students should be encouraged to speak as much as possible; l) grammar rules should be taught inductively, e.g., by filling in blanks, not deductively, by explicit instruction; m) vocabulary acquisition is facilitated through exposure to use in authentic situations; and n) writing is an important skill, to be developed from the beginning of instruction. (Larson-Freeman, 2002)

### **3) Audio-Lingual Method (oral-based approach)**

#### *Description*

The Audio-Lingual Method, while an oral-based approach like the Direct Method, is very different because it drills students in the use of grammatical sentence patterns rather than emphasizing vocabulary acquisition through exposure to its use in situations (Larson-Freeman, Chapter 4, 2000). This approach has a strong theoretical base in linguistics and psychology.

#### *Principles and Goals*

a) language forms do not occur by themselves but within a context; b) the native and target languages have separate linguistic systems and should be kept separate to prevent interference; c) a major role of the FL teachers is that of a model of the target language; d) mimicking of sound is encouraged; e) language learning is a process of habit formation, facilitated through repetition; f) errors lead to the formation of bad habits; when errors do occur, they should be immediately corrected by the teacher; the purpose of language learning is to learn how to use the language to communicate; g) single-slot and multiple-slot substitution drills of parts of speech are used; h) positive reinforcement (e.g., saying very good for correct answers) helps students to develop correct habits (this method has a strong theoretical base in behavioral psychology); i) picture and word cues are used to facilitate student communication; j) pattern practice drills help students to form habits which enable students to use the patterns; k) students should overlearn, i.e., learn to answer automatically without stopping to think; l) the objective of FL teaching should be the acquisition of structural patterns, not vocabulary; m) explicit rule instruction is discouraged; rules will be figured out or induced from examples, like in native-language learning; n) speech is more basic to language than the written form; the natural order of learning native language--listening, speaking, reading, and writing, should be followed; o) the teacher does a contrastive analysis of the target language and the students' native language in order to identify problem areas; and p) culture includes the everyday behavior of the people who use the target language and a responsibility of the teacher is to teach about culture (Larson-Freeman, 2000).

### **4) The Silent Way (cognitive approach)**

#### *Description*

The idea that learning a language meant forming a set of habits was seriously challenged in the early 1960s. Linguist Noam Chomsky argued that language acquisition could not possibly take place through habit formation since people create and understand utterances they have never heard before. Chomsky proposed instead that speakers have a knowledge underlying abstract rules, which allow them to understand and create novel utterances....Accordingly, language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes, or cognition, to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring (Larson-Freeman). Gattegno's Silent Way shares a number of principles with the Cognitive Approach, established in 1991. Learners were viewed not only as responding to stimuli in their environment, but rather as much more actively responsible for their own learning, engaged in formulating hypotheses in order to discover rules of the target language (Larson-Freeman, Chapter 5, 2000).

#### *Principles and Goals*

a) teacher starts with known information and builds to the unknown; languages share a number of features, sounds being the most basic; b) language learners bring with them experience of already learning a language; the teacher should give only what help is necessary (teaching should be subordinated to learning--Caleb Gattegno, the creator of the Silent way); c) language is not learned by repeating a model but by students developing their own inner criteria for correctness--to trust and be responsible for their own production of the target language; d) students' actions indicate to the teacher whether or not they have learned; e) students should rely upon each other and themselves, not on the teacher; f) the teacher works with the students while the students work on the language; g) learning involves transferring what one knows to new contexts; h) reading is worked on from the beginning but follows from what students have learned to say; i) silence is a tool which fosters autonomy and initiative; it removes the teacher from the center of attention and frees the teacher to closely observe

students' behavior; h) praise or correction from the teacher is discouraged; errors are important and necessary for learning; i) progress, not perfection is the goal; j) meaningful practice, issuing, and responding to commands is more effective than repetition; k) student reactions to lessons provide meaningful feedback to the teacher; students take greater responsibility for their learning; l) elements of language are introduced logically, expanding from what students already know; m) there is no homework; some learning naturally takes place as we sleep; n) linguistic structures are continually recycled and are not presented in a linear fashion; and o) students will practice writing the sentences they create; the skills of speaking, reading, and writing reinforce one another. (Larson-Freeman, 2000)

## 5) Total Physical Response (comprehension approach)

### *Description*

Total Physical Response (TPR) is one of many comprehension approaches, called this because of the importance that they give to listening comprehension. Many of the other approaches reviewed by Larsen-Freeman have the student speaking from the first day of class. In the 1960s and 1970s research gave rise to the hypothesis that language learning should start first with understanding and later proceed to production. After the learner internalizes an extensive map of how the target language works, speaking will appear spontaneously.... This is exactly how an infant acquires its native language. A baby spends many months listening to people around it long before it ever says a word (Larson-Freeman, Chapter 8, 2000).

### *Principles and Goals*

a) meaning in the target language is often conveyed through actions, not translation; b) the right hemisphere of the brain, the part which controls nonverbal behavior, should be activated; b) student understanding of the target language should be developed before speaking; c) students learn commands rapidly, through action; the imperative is a powerful linguistic device which can be used to direct student behavior; d) overt student error correction is discouraged; teachers act out corrections; e) language learning is more effective when it is fun; using humor is motivating; f) spoken language should be emphasized over written language; g) students should not be forced to produce language before they are ready--usually not until several weeks after class has begun; and h) students are expected to make errors and teachers should be tolerant of them; work on the fine details of the language should be postponed until students have become somewhat proficient (Larson-Freeman, 2000).

## Conclusion

It is critical for FL teachers to consider how teaching methods link thoughts and actions, because it is important for FL teachers to become aware of the thoughts that guide [their] actions in the classroom.... FL teaching methods are a coherent set of links in the sense that there should be some theoretical or philosophical compatibility among the links. If a teacher believes that language is made up of a set of fixed patterns, it makes little sense for him or her to use techniques which help learners discover the abstract rules underlying a language to enable them to create novel patterns (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

How is a teacher to choose the best method? There are some characteristics which are complimentary and some which are contradictory, particularly with regard to use of students' native language and error correction (ranging from doing everything to prevent them in the first place--Audio-Lingual Method, to ignoring them when they are made under the assumption that they will work themselves out at some future point--for example, TPR) (Larsen-Freeman, 2000).

Learning about new and different methodologies will challenge teachers to identify and perhaps question their values and to experiment with new techniques:

By confronting the diversity of methods...and by viewing their thought-in-action links, I hope that you will be helped to arrive at your own conceptualization of how thoughts lead to actions

in your teaching, and how, in turn, your teaching leads to desired learning in your students....In order to move from ideology to inquiry, teachers need to inquire into their practice. They need to reflect on what they do and why they do it, and need to be open to learning about the practices and research of others. They need to interact with others, and need to try new practices in order to continually search for or devise the best method they can for who they, who their students are, and the conditions and context of their teaching.

(Larson-Freeman, Conclusion, 2000)

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