

How to Teach a Language

Teaching your language to a group of foreigners may be a lot easier than you think. The human brain has the innate ability to process language and understand it. Your students will begin learning from the very first class. Still, it never hurts to know what you're doing. Here are some useful tips for making the learning process easier.

1 Breaking the Ice

Imagine that you enter your first class. Twelve pairs of eyes are fixed on you. Other than the nervous swallows you can literally hear the crickets chirping. The students don't know you, they don't know one another, and they don't know the language. They're tense and they're not ready to learn, at least, not yet. You need to make the class fun, help the students relax, help them meet each other, and help them get to know you. This is accomplished with an icebreaker. There is no single perfect icebreaker to use. It depends on the teacher, on the type of students, on the level of the students, on whether the students know one another, and many other factors. If the students don't have the same native tongue (L1) and know basically nothing in the language they're trying to learn (L2) it can be difficult just to get them to follow the directions.

If the students have the same native language (L1) and know very little you can get them to write down all the L2 words they know. Have them work in groups and give only one of them a pen. The other students will call out words and the writer will write them down. Students will naturally start to ask what the words mean in their own L1 and may remember some of the words. That will make your job easier.

If the students have different L1s then you may have to just resort to having a large ball. Calling out your name you then throw the ball to the next student. He or she will (hopefully) say their name and pass the ball around. Once that's done the ball will come back to you. You will have remembered one of the names of the students and you can toss the ball to the student (saying his or her name) and encourage her to pass the ball to someone else while calling his or her name. This can be hard to do if your class is a room full of executives, but what else is there?

If your students speak some English you can have a simple exercise like, "Guess the Question." Write on the board (or provide the student[s] with handouts) that tell your

name, where you live, your job, etc. and have them guess the questions. Once they accomplish that have them interview one another, asking the questions or (in a one-on-one class) you can simply say, "Now you know something about me, tell me something about you."

2 Having Objectives

Now that your students are relaxed you want them to learn something. You should set objectives for each class and objectives for the entire course. Each class objective should move you closer to the course objective. For example, if you want the students to be able to watch and enjoy a Disney movie or read and enjoy a simple book by the end you will want them to learn the vocabulary and grammar structures of the book. Each lesson should move them closer to that objective. If the students know little or nothing your first objective may be to teach them pronouns (I, you, he, she, we, you, they) or the appropriate form(s) of the verb(s) "to be" in the new language (L2) they are learning. In English, for example, you might want them to know: I am American/Mexican/French along with You are..., He is..., and She is... by the end of the class.

3 Vocabulary Instruction

The first thing a student needs to know is words. Words can be presented by a translation method, but this is not generally used for the following reasons:

A. The students may not have the same L1. B. The teacher may not know the student's L1. C. The teacher may incorrectly translate the word or otherwise give a false impression of the word. D. The students may come to rely on translation to learn new words. E. The students are more likely to forget the new words. F. The students may be discouraged from speaking the L2 in class. G. Words do not always directly translate. They often have subtle connotations in L1 which does not come over in the translation or vice versa.

Generally, therefore, the students are taught words with pictures and their L2 words. The following pitfalls need to be observed and avoided:

A. Certain words cannot be taught by pictures, e.g., trust, shame, jealousy B. The teacher cannot always have pictures available to teach every new word that comes up. C.

Teaching words in a written manner may cause the students to mispronounce the words based on the phonetic system of their own language. D. The students may have an L1 written form (Chinese, Japanese) that is completely different from the written form of the L2. E. If the exercise is too easy (just showing pictures with the words next to them) the students may readily forget the new words.

Accordingly most low-level vocabulary learning exercises show a variety of pictures and require the students to match the pictures up with the words in the L2. Students can use bilingual dictionaries or rely on other students in the class to try to work out the right combinations. Students should normally work in pairs or small groups to pool their knowledge. Higher level vocabulary learning can be spontaneous or planned. During any reading or listening exercise a student is likely to encounter one or more words that they do not know. When that happens and when the students notice the word as an unknown word they will attempt to learn the word. Teachers can help the students to notice new words by using a highlighter, a different font or by underlining the words. Students will adopt a variety of strategies to help them learn a new word. Some may ask the teacher what the word means while others will consult a dictionary. Some students may ignore the word or try to guess it from the context. Once the meaning is located the students may adopt a variety of other strategies. They may repeat the word aloud several times, underline it, highlight it, or make notes in the margin of the meaning or translation of the word. Other students may actually copy the word into a notebook or try to make a sentence with the word. Each strategy may or may not be effective. Students should be encouraged to try a variety of strategies and use the methods they find most effective. Obviously a vocabulary notebook is a good strategy, but many students may not be motivated enough to take that step.

4 Grammar Instruction

Grammar instruction normally follows the deductive method, because it is considered by its followers to be the fastest way. ^[1] Inductive methods of grammar instruction are also used and its proponents would argue that it is the most effective in terms of learning outcomes. One example of an approach that uses this approach is called The Silent Way.

The deductive method is sometimes known as PPP (Presentation, Practice, Production). Briefly a new grammatical structure or usage is presented in a reading or listening, the rules governing that structure are explicitly revealed to the student, and the student is given a very controlled practice to give them a chance to apply the rule, to aid them in seeing more examples of the structure and to prevent them from going wrong. Finally the students are given an uncontrolled practice to allow them to use the structure in a freer and more natural way. A brief

example is given below.

Presentation A: Hello Eric! What are you doing here? B: I work here. A: Really? I didn't know that. B: That's strange. I've worked here for three years.

Eric says: "I've worked here for three years." That's the present perfect. We use the present perfect to talk about things that started in the past and are still true now, e.g., I've been married for 5 years. I've had this car for 2 years. I've been here for 30 minutes.

We form the present perfect with the auxiliary verb have and the past participle. A list of irregular past participles can be found on page....

Practice Fill in the blanks below.

I _____ (live) here for 1 year. I _____ (know) John for 3 years. I _____ (work) in Seattle for 6 months.

Production Ask your partner the following questions.

Do you have a car? How long have you had it? Where do you live? How long have you lived there? How long have you been studying _____ ?

5 Teaching Speaking

There are many ways to teach speaking. How it is taught would depend upon the language level of the students.

One way to teaching speaking is through games or activities based on an information gap. The classic information gap exercise has students work in pairs. Each student is given a picture that is slightly different. Through descriptions and without showing the picture to each other the students are expected to communicate to solve the problem of identifying a certain number of differences. Other information gap activities may be to have students read different stories on related issues and have them tell what they remember to their partners. At lower levels students may simply repeat after the teacher or the tape. At higher levels the students may engage in debates on controversial subjects. Questionnaires with open-ended questions may also work well, e.g., Who's your favorite singer? Why do you like him/her?

Another way of teaching speaking, especially at the lower levels is to talk about what is being done in the class. This way students can match the language with an instruction, an action, a request or a description.

6 Teaching Listening

Teaching listening is basically a matter of practice. Listening activities can be divided into levels based on their difficulty and can be given to the student in various orders. Students will normally hear the teacher speak and

the other students and so they will have some listening abilities. Students must be encouraged to engage in active listening. Most people passively listen to whatever is around them, but without paying a lot of attention. An example might be a person listening to a news program. When an interesting tidbit is played a person's ears will perk up and they will pay close attention until they've learned what they wanted to know at which point they will go back to passive listening. Students should be given a task to complete to help them listen actively. A simple true/false question that isn't answered until the middle or end of the program can be enough. Alternatively the students can speculate before the audio is played about what the speaker may say and then listen to see if they were right or wrong. Audio recordings should generally be played at least twice. It can be helpful to listen a final time while the students read along with the tape script. If the students cannot understand the listening it's either too difficult or it wasn't properly set up.

7 Teaching Reading

Reading comprehension is directly proportional to vocabulary knowledge. Studies have shown that a person should know between 95 to 98 percent of a reading text for maximum effect.^[2] Students should be provided with Graded Reader books to let them progress at their own rate. Most language teaching books contain a certain number of reading passages in them, as well. Students should not read aloud as this only distracts the other students from their reading process and the students may well anticipate when it will be their turn to read and stop listening in order to practice their paragraph to avoid potential embarrassment. If the teacher reads aloud the reading exercise will probably turn into a listening exercise (see above). Like listening, reading should be set up to promote interest in the subject. Students can speculate about the content, be assigned specific tasks, or given true/false questions to give them something to do. Studies have shown that second reading provides the greatest increase in reading comprehension. Accordingly most books have a pre-reading task coupled with a post-reading (re-reading task) to encourage the students to read the text twice. A student's chance of learning and retaining the vocabulary is proportional to the number of times the new word(s) occur in the text. It has been shown that reading the text more than once can be an effective method to increase the number of exposures to the new word(s).^[3] Two to three times seems to be the optimal number.

8 Teaching Writing

A full discussion of how to teach writing is beyond the scope of this work. Generally speaking the more vocabulary a student possesses the better he will write. Stu-

dents should be assigned periodic writing assignments, which the teacher should correct for them. Systematic or class wide errors can become the subject of future lessons. Writing exercises can often be presented by the teacher writing a letter and the students imitating the letter to write similar versions based on their own life, or by having them reply to an opening letter from a pen pal.

9 References

- [1] <http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/think/methodology/grammar.shtml>
- [2] <http://content.grin.com/data/6/31684.pdf>
- [3] <http://www.er.uqam.ca/nobel/r21270/cv/Casterbridge.html>

10 See also

- Authoring Foreign Language Textbooks

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