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# How Should Language be Taught?

Amanda Gaunt

**A primary function of language is for communication.** At first glance this appears to be a simplistic statement. If we apply it to the many approaches of teaching a second (ESL) or foreign (EFL) language that are in use today, it is evident that this primary use of language is often not considered. This simple sentence should be an integral part of any approach to the way language should be taught.

To seriously consider the question “how should language be taught?” I must look at the long and short-term goals that I feel are important in a second language teaching program. My long-term goal is for students to be able to continue to learn after they have left the classroom. It has to be a continuing process because the classroom alone is not sufficient for complete language acquisition. My short-term goals are to get students actively involved in the learning process, and develop the attitude, skills and abilities necessary to continue to learn and grow on their own.

The majority of my experience is in teaching in an EFL setting. Within that setting there is a wide range of students, from the absolute beginner to the near native speaker, and an equally wide number of reasons for studying English. As most of my teaching experience in Japan has been with young adults within the realm of English as a Foreign Language, I shall confine my remarks to second language

acquisition.

In writing a paper of this nature I feel it is important to begin with my background, both before and after I chose teaching as my profession. I have included people, readings, and experiences that I feel helped shape the way I approach education. In this way I hope to give some coherence to my thoughts and beliefs about how language should be taught.

My interest in teaching was sparked while I was involved in the Environmental Studies (E. S.) Program at the University of Victoria. The style of teaching used by one professor for the E. S. 300 course, was an approach I had never encountered before, at any level of education. It *really* took the students interests, needs, creativity, ideas, abilities, and strengths into account. It also made them more responsible for their own learning. It was a pleasant shock to experience such a student-centered approach. I found that the atmosphere was relaxed, but stimulating and cooperative, rather than competitive. I got to really know the people in my class, of whom some still remain good friends. My motivation was high, I learned a lot, and I thoroughly enjoyed the class.

I had the good fortune to become the Teaching Assisant for this professor, and so I was exposed to what went into the organizing and structuring of the course. It was a revelation to me to see the amount of hard work, stringent organization of time, and careful step by step planning necessary to create the atmosphere that made the course, and therefore the students, so successful.

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I was intrigued by a teaching method that could motivate students to such a high degree. It was not until a few years later that I read about an approach that seemed to fit. It is called Humanistic Education. According to Moskowitz (Irons, 1988) this approach combines the subject matter to be learned with the feelings, emotions, and lives of students, with the underlying goal being to help students reach their fullest potential. Learning is affected by how students feel about themselves, so enhancing self-esteem is a primary goal of Humanistic Education. I decided I enjoyed teaching and chose the EFL route.

As a training teacher, I was indoctrinated into the Audiolingual Method with overtones of the Notional-Functional approach. As listed in Richards and Rodgers (1990) some of the major distinctive features of this method are:

1. It attends to structure and form more than meaning.
2. It demands memorization of structure-based dialogues.
3. Language items are not necessarily contextualized.
4. Drilling is a central technique
5. Communicative activities only come after a long process of drills and exercises
6. The use of the students' native language is forbidden.
7. Reading and writing are deferred until speech is mastered.
8. The sequence of units is determined solely by principles of linguistic complexity.
9. Errors are to be avoided and accuracy is the primary goal.

This is a very teacher-centered method. The students have no control over input, content, or learning style. The feelings, life experiences, and interests of the students are virtually ignored. The text-

books also covertly teach certain values and beliefs. Upon embarking on my teaching career I realized there was a lot more to teaching than drills and accuracy! Unfortunately, these kinds of teacher-centred methods are still prevalent today.

When looking at the question “How should language be taught?” I think it is wise to put myself in the shoes of the learner. What do I look for in a language class or teacher? What do I find helps or hinders my acquisition of a language? What creates stress and makes me defensive? In what kind of situation do I learn easily?

As a student of a second language, I want a course and a teacher tuned into my needs as a learner. I want to have a learning environment that is not stressful, but comfortable; one that I feel is safe to make errors and try out new things. I want to be treated as a person with intelligence and feelings, who has brought a lot of life experiences with me and has something to offer the class. I want the class to be interesting and relevant to me. I want to have input into my learning. Now, having examined what I feel I need as a student to create a good learning environment, how do I use this information as a teacher?

Having laid out my goals as a teacher at the beginning of the paper I would like to establish the classroom objectives I feel are important. My main objectives for the course would be:

- 1) To provide a safe, low stress environment for students so they feel comfortable taking risks, making mistakes, and generally experimenting with the language. A low stress environment lowers the students' affective filter, allowing more input to be comprehensible. (Krashen 1982)

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2) To provide students with large amounts of comprehensible input. Krashen's input hypothesis (Krashen 1982) relates to acquisition, not learning, and states that students acquire by understanding language that contains structures a little beyond their current level of competence. He calls this  $i+1$ . Students do this with the help of context or extra-linguistic information. When the input is understood and there is enough of it,  $i+1$  will be provided for automatically, and finally, the ability to produce language emerges over time as the students hear and understand more input.

3) To provide lots of opportunity for social interaction/real communication, allowing students to use the language they are acquiring in ways they find creative and interesting, creating the motivation for language use.

4) To develop in students an awareness of themselves and their world.

5) To build self-esteem and a feeling of responsibility to themselves and the world around them.

6) To deal with the whole person.

I lean very heavily towards the subject matter/thematic approach, because in my EFL teaching experience I have found it to be the most successful in achieving these stated goals. Within this framework, I will draw on anything that I find is useful from other approaches, methods, theories or teachers. Simply put, if it works, I will use it.

The discussion will now focus on a one-month course that incorporates the goals and objectives that have been discussed. The steps I would use in setting up and instituting a one month course, and the time necessary include: a needs analysis (ongoing); melding the individuals

into a group (minimum of a week); establishing a theme (a day or two); creating lots of comprehensible input using materials and activities (up to three weeks depending on the students interest); a group project (up to a week), and finally, evaluation.

In setting up this course the first item necessary is some form of needs analysis covering general background, interests, needs, and preferred learning styles. Students are not always aware of their own learning style, but it will become evident as the class progresses. Yalden (1989) suggests that information can be collected through questionnaires, interviews, and observations from the first moment of class, and discussion and negotiation, also carried out in class. This kind of analysis would be ongoing.

The questionnaires would give me an idea for the focus of the course with regards to possible thematic units, language level, and skills needed. I would start to assemble written and taped (audio and video) material appropriate to their level. Teachers would need to have resource files that are constantly being added to, as a coursebook would not be used. This stage would remain quite fluid, as the solidifying would not happen until the students had met as a class, and were ready to give some input. After the class started collaboration would be a continuing process throughout the course.

My initial task would be to have students establish themselves as a cohesive group. This would be accomplished through interactive games and activities, with no win-lose situations; a short, simple, probably visual, group project in which they could discover things of interest about each other; a class outing; a picnic, or activity like skating, or

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visiting a place of interest. I consider this stage critical as these activities help bring about the goal of creating a comfortable, low stress environment, and they set the tone for the rest of the class. I would take an active part in most of these activities as I think it is important for students to feel comfortable with the teacher as well as with the other students. This phase could easily take a week to complete. The next step would be to establish the topic for the thematic unit.

Once students were at ease with each other, I would introduce a number of topics, and elicit some. Then we would discuss each topic: what it is about; how it applies to us individually and to others, and on a broader local, national, and global scale; if and where we could get information about it. This could be done very informally, in groups or all together, and students would not be forced to speak English at this stage as this might inhibit the process. This would, of course, depend on their level of English. After the discussion, I would leave it up to the students to choose a topic that we would use as the basis for the unit for the month. As an example let's choose 'environment' as the theme.

Once the theme has been chosen I would bring out large sheets of newsprint and colored pencils and in groups of four or five, have them draw their ideas about the word 'environment'. This phase can take a large chunk of time, but I would let it continue to its natural conclusion. Besides being a fun group activity it really gets students thinking and talking about the topic, again not necessarily in English. The pictures could be displayed in the classroom for explanation and comments.

The next step would be a brainstorming session in which students would be asked to fill the board with ideas, words, and phrases they



associate with 'environment'. The students would have control of this exercise, with the teacher on the sidelines. Do not expect orderliness, but coming after the picture exercise there are sure to be lots of ideas.

After the brainstorming session, students would have to choose a manageable number of ideas to work with. This process could start with pairs picking their favorites, then small groups deciding, and finally the whole class. The first time students go through this process it can be expected to take an inordinate amount of time. That is fine, because the process is teaching them to make choices in English, and to work together cooperatively. They will get better and faster at it with practice.

The next step takes the bulk of the time and requires the most energy from the teacher. It provides lots of comprehensible input on the theme using a variety of materials and activities. Any skills or functions that are needed are introduced and taught within the context of the theme. Most EFL situations do not have access to the wealth of authentic materials and information that ESL situations do, simply because the information available is in a language other than English. In this kind of teaching situation the teacher must always be collecting usable material, because without the material it will not work. It is the teachers' responsibility to provide the materials necessary, with student input welcome and encouraged, but not depended upon.

There are an incredible number of ways of providing comprehensible input if we use our imagination. Following, are a sample of materials, activities that can be used, and the skills that might need to be taught.

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### Materials:

- pictures
- newspapers, local national and international
- magazines, general (Newsweek), specific (New Internationalist, The Economist, an assortment of EF/SL magazines)
- books, fiction, non-fiction, poetry, including bits and pieces from language textbooks and tapes that contain relevant material
- materials from organizations (Greenpeace), and government agencies (Ministry of the Environment/Forestry)

Initially some of these materials would have to be graded to the students level, but that becomes less necessary as the course continues and the students gain confidence, and English ability.

- audiocassettes, songs stories, self-made tapes
- videos from documentaries to newscasts, or movies (Star Trek V — dealing with the extinction of whales)

With videos I would start with two-minute segments and work up from there, again as confidence was gained.

Activities and Skills: In keeping with the theme here are examples of what could be done with the materials discussed above, specifically about rainforests:

Books: (with pictures) Solely for input, storytelling by the teacher would be done at a set time each day and could include, locations of the rainforests, the kinds of plants and animals, and the people that inhabit them, reasons for cutting trees, and products made from them. I would also include fictional stories for their entertainment value. The skill: listening.

Pictures: Storybuilding based on a single picture or different sets of

pictures dealing with the theme. As a class, and then in pairs have students build and practice a story. Then in groups they can orally share their stories. The skills: sequencing, building a story cooperatively, telling a story, dramatizing, listening.

Newspapers and magazines: Using a headline only, create a story around it to be displayed on the walls for other students to read.

The skills: sentence building, news story writing, reading.

Information-gap exercises: This activity can be used any number of times, with written material as well as audio and videotapes. Using a story 'A Day in the Life of a Forest Dweller', divide the class in half (*A*, *B*) and give each, one half of the story. Individually students read and summarize the important points of their half of the story. Then with someone else with the same half (*A1*, *A2*) they check each other's work and practice telling their summary. Now they get together with a person from the other half (*A1*, *B1* and *A2*, *B2*), *A*'s tells their story while *B*'s takes notes, asking questions as needed. When they have finished they change partners (*A1*, *B2* and *A2*, *B1*) and *B*'s tell the story they just heard, using their notes, while *A*'s check for accuracy. This information could then be used for a role-play, perhaps an interview, with some students as the dweller and some as the reporter. Reporters get together and brainstorm questions, while dwellers are brainstorming gaps to fill in the story. The interviews could be taped and played back for the students' enjoyment.

The skills: reading, summarizing, note taking, telling, retelling, creating questions, interview skills.

Throughout these activities the teacher must be tuned into the

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needs of the class. Whenever a skill, or function, or grammar point needs addressing it should be done within the context of the subject. If students are doing interviews, then that is the time to teach about appropriate questions, register, making interested noises, tactics for keeping a conversation flowing, and so on.

In all of these activities there is a place, either part way through or at the end, for personal feedback. It could simply be a question posed for students to think about but not answer orally, or a more demanding exercise requiring input from the whole group about how the exercise affected them, how they thought it affected others, how they could use what they had learned, and what was the importance of it. There is also the need for evaluation.

In evaluating the students, it is necessary for them to understand the criteria used. Developing the criteria in conjunction with the students would fulfill this need. Evaluation is part of the process of improving communication. Understanding it helps students see the process more clearly, and to self-monitor their own performance and improve it. Ongoing evaluation also provides the teacher with important information about student progress and can highlight areas where further intervention is needed. Marks are an integral part of the Japanese school system, and therefore of importance to the students. I feel that if the criteria can be collaboratively arrived at, and students are clear about what is expected, then the final grading should ultimately rest with the teacher.

There would be a group project component to this thematic unit that could be done two ways. It could come near the end and be

worked on exclusively for about a week, or it could be started during the last step and time made for it over a number of weeks. The one requirement for the project is there be a substantial oral component to it. Students have complete freedom to use any medium they please as long as they meet this requirement. As a group the class can decide on further criteria it would like to add.

If students have not participated in a group project before, I would lead them through the process, having them work on a small class project within the theme, although in this class alone they should have completed a number of projects in pairs and small groups by now. At this point in the course, after all the input students should have a good idea about their areas of interest. They organize themselves into groups according to interests and begin the process.

For this stage of their work, I would remain in the background as much as possible, giving input only when it is requested. I think it is important for students to feel the project belongs to them, that they really own it.

As groups decide what they are going to do and begin work, the teacher's role becomes that of a resource person. The teacher must be aware of what new skills will be necessary to introduce, and to teach them according to the need. It is also up to the teacher to provide materials needed. Students might do written reports to present, interviews, plays, make videos, the list can go on and on. The teacher needs expertise or access to expertise to enable the students to do the best job they can.

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I believe that this kind of approach to second language learning and teaching incorporates the view that a primary function of language is for communication. It accomplishes my goals of getting students actively involved in the learning process, and helps develop the attitude, skills, and abilities to continue to learn outside the class. I feel that my objectives of providing a low-stress environment, lots of input, lots of opportunities for interaction, and developing student awareness of themselves and their world can all be reached within this framework. As I continue to teach and learn, I am sure I will modify my ideas, keep some, throw others away, and I hope, continue to hone my own philosophy. As a teacher I have a responsibility to my students and myself to help them achieve the success they deserve.

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