

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMY  
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# Teaching other languages

*by Elizabeth B. Bernhardt*



United Nations  
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Cultural Organization



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of Education

EDUCATIONAL PRACTICES SERIES-20

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Editor of booklets 18 and 19 in this series and author of the first booklet, Jere Brophy passed away in 2009.

## Series Preface

This booklet is about teaching students languages other than their first or primary language. It has been prepared for inclusion in the Educational Practices Series developed by the International Academy of Education and distributed by the International Bureau of Education and the Academy. As part of its mission, the Academy provides timely syntheses of research on educational topics of international importance. This booklet is the twentieth in the series on educational practices that generally improve learning.

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The officers of the International Academy of Education are aware that this booklet is based on research carried out primarily in economically advanced countries. The booklet, however, focuses on aspects of language learning and instruction that are universal. The practices presented here are likely to be generally applicable throughout the world. Indeed, they might be especially useful in countries that are currently less developed economically. Even so, the principles should be assessed with reference to local conditions, and adapted accordingly. In any educational setting or cultural context,

suggestions or guidelines for practice require sensitive and sensible application, and continuing evaluation.

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## Introduction

Being able to use other languages is an essential tool for the modern world. While the image of the world as 'a global village' is indeed popular, it does not always correspond to reality. A village would tend to be relatively homogeneous in terms of culture and language. Surely, this monocultural, monolingual picture does not reflect the complexities, the complications and the richness of the modern world. Mass communication has brought all peoples into closer contact, but it has not eliminated the need to be able to talk to others in their language and on their cultural terms.

Modern views on language teaching reflect this situation. The old notions of language as a school subject that had to be taught by a teacher and tested by an examination are no longer true. The current view puts cultural practice and cultural values squarely in the middle of language teaching by focusing on the individual's interest in using another language and its potential as a tool. While language teaching in earlier times emphasized grammatical form and accuracy of spelling and pronunciation, a newer view places the emphasis on what learners can accomplish with the language they are learning. Can they ask and answer questions in a socially appropriate manner? Are they able to listen to the language in its authentic form and obtain useful information? Can they read with comprehension and understand the cultural meaning? Can they use the language to gain new information? These are questions for all teachers to consider so that their students are able to interact with people who speak other languages and contribute on a global stage.

We also rely on research-based knowledge to improve teaching and to ensure its efficiency and effectiveness. Research has thrown light on the process of language learning itself, indicating that the process is not about adding one new form on top of a previous one, but that learners acquire grammatical forms over time making errors along the way. Errors themselves are viewed as part of language learning rather than as mistakes to be corrected. Research also shows teachers how to organize their classes in new ways. A classroom where the teacher does all the talking while the students listen is not now considered effective. Other methods have greater impact on learning, such as forming the students into groups, allowing them to complete language tasks by working together, and relying on each other for information and support. Research on literacy offers teachers new ways of providing learners with the tools to comprehend and to practise language at a level well beyond basic survival needs. Research into how learners learn to read and write in other languages focuses

on the role of first-language literacy and how it assists reading and writing in a second language. There is also the critical role that vocabulary plays in comprehension.

One cannot think about modern life and learning without acknowledging the impact of technology. The first resources for language teachers remain books, pens, pencils and paper, but digital technologies, if available, increase the materials available in a way that teachers from the past could never have imagined. Technology allows teachers to acquire an almost infinite array of audio- and video-based materials that enable learners to see and hear a wide variety of speakers of a language in action.

On a final and critical note, technology plays an equally important role in the professional life of each teacher. Given that most language teachers across the globe are not teaching their primary language, but a language that they too have learned, technology enables teachers to maintain contact with the language and culture that they are teaching.

# 1. Characteristics of learners of other languages

Teachers should focus on their learners and not on some abstract notion of the other language.

All teaching should be based on a concern for learners—what their knowledge is; what their motivations, interests and anxieties are; and what they intend to do with the learning. As noted in the introduction, language learning should not be viewed as a school subject that learners have to master in order to pass a test. In an earlier world that had little exchange and contact with other cultures and people, the notion of a school subject was perhaps reasonable. Nowadays, in contrast, learning another language is a crucial part of an educated person's tool box. Modern learners and their teachers understand this. Effective language knowledge is the tool that enables learners to take their knowledge and skill into the world. A key part of this concept is that learners are not being asked to take on a new cultural identity; they are increasing their already acquired knowledge and skill with additional knowledge and skill—not replacing them.

There is a myth that younger learners can learn new languages faster than older ones. It is true that younger learners achieve higher levels of accurate pronunciation. But most language skills are within reach of all learners. One way in which older and younger learners are different is in the area of anxiety. Younger learners are risk-takers and are relatively unimpeded by thoughts of accuracy. The older learners become, the more they react to what their peers and other people think of them, and the less willing they are to participate in many activities due to fear of embarrassment or humiliation.

As a result, teachers should be aware of the affective dimensions of language learning and understand that their learners may feel self-conscious. Young children relate well to games and songs that help them experiment. Older learners may need more time to feel comfortable with experimentation and will need to maintain some personal space around them. Small group work is particularly helpful for older, more anxious learners who need to try things out, perhaps revealing some of their errors in a small group before participating in large-group activities. Older learners might need to write the language down on paper before they try to speak it in a more public setting.



Learners naturally base their new learning on what they already know. This is a particularly important concept with regard to older learners. Older learners (age 10 and beyond) will want to use the most powerful knowledge tool they possess—their first language. Indeed, this natural tendency has some negative consequences: learners will impose their own grammar and pronunciation on the language they are trying to learn. They might reject new language patterns that do not correspond to what they already know. Yet, this natural tendency also has many positive dimensions. It is much easier to learn something of which a learner already has experience. Learners should always be encouraged to make comparisons between the language(s) they know and the language they are learning and to express in class the comparisons they are making. Learners will also build their understanding of the new culture they are learning on the basis of their own cultural understandings and values. While most instruction should be in the language that students are learning, teachers might encourage students to use their native language to describe their understanding of the culture and values of the language they are learning. Helping students to interpret another culture, while being careful to avoid stereotypes and clichés, is critical in all language teaching.

*Suggested readings:* Dörnyei, 2005; Horwitz, 2001.

## 2. Learning another language is a process

Learning another language takes time. Rules, forms and word meaning develop rather than being learned at one time and in one context.

Recent years have witnessed an explosion of research about language learning. A key feature of learning another language is that, like first-language learning, it is developmental. This means learners do not learn one grammatical form or one vocabulary word after another and then put the language together correctly. They have to learn to use forms over time. Sometimes learners seem to know a form and then forget it. Weeks or months later they correct it. Understanding such patterns helps teachers not to overreact to student errors. Teachers must understand the internal learning that all learners are going through.

All teachers know that what is taught is not necessarily what is learned at the time. Learners understand the facts of a language and only after multiple exposures do the forms become integrated into a coherent linguistic system. For example, learners can quickly understand the fact that there are regular and irregular verbs in many languages or that there are rules for expressing singulars and plurals. Teachers often present regular verbs first, then irregular ones, and then the past tense. We oversimplify rules (such as in English making the past tense with *-ed* or creating a plural with *-s*) only to find that learners apply the same rules everywhere. Thus, we hear such expressions as *'goed'* or *'wented'* or *'peoples'* (as in *'I saw the peoples'*) and teachers panic that the learners have not understood the exceptions. In reality, learners are actively involved in learning and are trying to apply the rules we teach them. This does not mean that learners should never be corrected. On the contrary, teachers should correct learners. But teachers should perceive learner errors as signs that reveal development. This helps teachers understand what they should do next.

For development to occur, learners should be given opportunities to talk to each other in the new language. The most effective way for learners to add new language patterns in their speech is to work with each other, trying to use new forms. Of course, errors will occur, but it is the learners' attention to the forms they are using that will enable

them to master that form. All activities support language learning. Listening and reading enable learners to view and to hear language forms in context. Learners should begin to understand that the language forms they are learning carry messages. It is through reading and listening that they understand how and why the past tense is expressed in one way rather than in another or why one word is used rather than another. Writing practice is also essential. Writing gives learners an opportunity to consolidate their learning and to express their own messages. Writers quickly learn that, when a reader does not understand, the message needs to be rewritten more clearly. There is no better way to practice language forms than in writing.

Another approach to assisting learners in their language development is to go back to previous activities, readings and listening comprehension exercises. Texts that were previously read should be re-read with an eye towards new levels of understanding. Working with texts that learners already know places them in a situation that encourages them to focus on language elements in more sophisticated ways. Learners might rewrite a text in another voice or use different words that they have found in a dictionary. Learners need to be given opportunities like these in order to progress in the language.

*Suggested readings:* Lightbown & Spada, 2007; Collier, 1987.

### 3. Designing courses for learning other languages

The design of language courses should be based in learner interests and should integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing.

We know that language learning is not a process of learning one form after another, one word after another, and then assembling the forms and words into a whole. Language learning is developmental. Learners should have the opportunity to learn all kinds of forms, words and structures over time. Two extremely effective ways of organizing lessons are *themes and topics* and *content-based*. Each of these designs introduces learners to elements of language based on some real scenario. They are also based on the interests and knowledge of learners and can be expanded. These course designs also give the learner a certain level of comfort because they already have previous knowledge on which to build.

*A topic or theme* as simple as “the weather” is very useful in employing different language forms and text types: *What is the weather like today? What is the weather going to do tomorrow? The weather was bad yesterday, so tell me how you got home.* This topic then leads on naturally to finding out from a newspaper or a report on the Internet what the weather is like in different parts of the world. Students can then write to a pen pal, describing the weather in their area and asking about the pen pal’s favourite season. Alternatively, students can be placed in a group that is given the task of planning a trip to somewhere in the world and deciding what clothes they need to take. Thematic/topical approaches, as this brief example illustrates, demand an integration of grammatical forms as well as the use of those forms in listening, speaking, reading and writing. It is essential to choose a topic or a theme with which learners are already familiar.

*A content-based course design* is slightly different from one organized around themes and topics. Content-based courses focus on and require the learning of new information; in fact, the new information to be learned is in some ways more important than the language to be learned. Ideally, content-based courses can be derived from the content of other lessons that students are learning in school. These kinds of courses demand that a teacher be knowledgeable and comfortable with the content. The teacher also needs to have a relatively high degree of fluency in the language because in content

teaching both the grammar and the vocabulary may be more complex than the learners have already experienced.

Social studies provide excellent content on which to build a language course. Most elementary and middle school curricula across the globe want learners to be familiar with world cultures, geography and natural resources. The students might begin by drawing a map of their own country, making sure that geographic features such as mountains, rivers and seas are named in the language they are learning. The teacher might then introduce the map of a country or region in which the language the students are learning is spoken widely. Students can label the geographic features and write out comparison charts with their own region (for example, the length of rivers or the height of mountains). They might then go to the library to find out about the natural world. Animals can be named, as well as the areas in which they live.

Both of these contemporary course designs necessitate that reading, writing, listening and speaking are taking place in the classroom at all times. Learners should never talk about content that they have not also been asked to write about; and write about something they have not read about, and so forth.

*Suggested readings:* Shrum & Glisan, 2005; Fortune & Tedick, 2008; Snow, 1998.

## 4. Designing and organizing classroom tasks

Effective learning is based on giving learners tasks to accomplish in a real-world context.

Courses arranged around content or a topic or theme lend themselves naturally to tasks that students should work on together and solve as a group.

Research indicates that “information gap” activities are effective classroom tasks. Information gap means that each learner in a group has some specific piece of information that the others do not have. Learners need to discover each piece of information by asking each other questions in order to complete a task. In using information gap activities, research also indicates that learners learn from each other and that this opportunity is extremely valuable for the development of their fluency and accuracy. Yet, teachers are often concerned that students in groups will hear incorrect language and copy it. Research indicates that learners do not copy the errors they might hear in the speech of the other learners. Because learners in task-based group work are focused on meaning, they are concentrating on communicating in the language they already possess and on the messages from their peers. Increasing student-to-student interaction and substituting it for teacher-to-student interaction leads to significantly more language use.

Finally, research indicates that learners should be placed in different groupings. At times they should be in homogeneous groups based on the same level of language proficiency and at other times in heterogeneous groups. When different proficiency levels are present in the same group, the more-able learners are able to state what they know in order to assist the less-able learners. The less-able learners then hear a more advanced language.

Information gap activities are easy to design. A common task puts learners into groups of two. One learner, for example, has the floor plan of a house or flat with furniture placed on it; the other learner merely has the floor plan. The one with the empty map can begin by asking questions about whether there are chairs, bookshelves or tables in various parts of the floor plan. The learner with the completed floor plan can also tell the other learner to place certain things in particular spaces. This back-and-forth conversation should continue until the empty plan looks like the full one. Obviously, the learners will not

communicate perfectly and pieces of furniture will become misplaced. When this occurs learners have to negotiate with each other, trying to make the other one understand.

A similar set of “information gap” activities can be designed around the weather, as in the example given in section 3 above. Perhaps each learner is given the highest temperature in a particular place in the world. A group could decide whether cities with similar temperatures are located in the same geographic area or not. This task also focuses learners on a particular message—in this case, deciding about global locations based on temperature. In order to discover whether their decisions are correct, students could be asked to research in their school library the locations of the cities mentioned in the first part of the task.

The final part of task-based instruction is to make sure that learners report their findings back to their classmates. They should be able to explain either what they did or how they came to their conclusion. This brings the class back full circle, ready for the next task. As a next step, learners might be asked to come up with their own tasks for their classmates to solve. This, too, focuses them on a message rather than on a set of isolated grammatical forms and words.

*Suggested readings:* Ellis , 2001; Norris & Ortega, 2000.

## 5. Reading and vocabulary learning in other languages

Reading is the most durable of all the language skills.

Reading skill determines the degree to which a person is able, if willing, to participate productively on the global stage. Written texts are useful for gaining information. Unquestionably, learners of other languages have a need for greater knowledge about topics that interest them; they need to understand how best to use their own literacy to help them understand texts and gain vocabulary; and they need to make wise choices about what they read and accept as useful.

Reading is a challenge for all learners. Research indicates that there are three components involved in reading languages other than the native language. The first is actual language knowledge—meaning knowledge of grammar—but most importantly, knowledge of vocabulary. A large vocabulary is absolutely essential for text comprehension—readers need to be able to recognize and understand almost all of the words in any text.

The second key component is the learner's first literacy language providing the basis for how language operates and what one can expect from a written text. First-language literacy tells the reader that there is a coherent message in a paragraph and that visual factors, such as print size, layout and the number of pictures, all support the message in the piece being read.

The third key component in reading other languages is the knowledge of the world and the interest and level of commitment that an individual reader brings to the process. In fact, interest level and knowledge of the topic may overcome or support very limited language knowledge.

Teachers need to spend lots of instructional time helping their students to learn words. Effective learning of words means seeing individual words many times and practising them in different contexts. In this regard, it is easy to see the importance of integrating reading into all of the tasks that learners are asked to do. Interacting with each other in oral language and confirming understandings through reading texts is a way in which learners can process words and add them into their active vocabularies.

As the research cited above notes, reading is also an individual process. Learners should be encouraged to keep personal word lists



where they write words of particular interest to them. For example, one learner might be interested in animals, another in cars. Learners should be encouraged to read independently in their areas of choice and to acquire knowledge about words that will help them to develop more sophisticated reading in the future. This independent reading also assists learners in developing fluency. Their interest in a subject and their individual knowledge of vocabulary will drive their need to increase the amount of text they read.

Teachers should also see reading as a powerful tool for future language learning. Reading gives learners opportunities to analyse grammatical features in context, not for the sake of form, but for the sake of understanding the message. Learners perhaps do not fundamentally understand how tenses, for example, carry meaning until they have examined a story that may employ several tenses in order to convey when and how different events happened.

Authentic reading texts are also valuable sources of cultural content. Examining what subjects native speakers are currently reading—whether about a popular sports figure, catastrophic weather conditions, a geological disaster or a commentary on a foreign neighbour—provides learners with a sense of what is important to the other culture. Teachers should give learners the opportunity to talk about the differences and similarities between their own culture and what they have learned about other cultures by reading texts.

*Suggested readings:* Bernhardt, 2010; Hedgcock & Ferris, 2009; Nation, 2004.

## 6. Writing and extended discourse

Writing enables learners to put the language together as a coherent whole that reflects their views and perspectives.

Writing, like reading, is a powerful tool for future language learning. During writing, learners are given the task of ‘putting the language together’ in a long stretch without the interruptions and interferences that occur during speaking. Research indicates that successful writers use the time that writing gives them to think through linguistic choices and to make them more sophisticated. Successful writers are focused principally on their audience and on the message the writer wants to express. They spend lots of time in planning their writing and in revising it for coherence and precision. Unsuccessful writers perceive writing as just another grammar exercise. They focus on mechanics, ignore their audience and spend little time on word choice. These relatively clear differences in successful versus unsuccessful writers provide teachers with windows into how individual learners understand words and structures in the language.

Writing can be carried out in groups. Teachers should place learners in groups to plan their writing. Learners can be asked to “brainstorm” in a group together to choose vocabulary words that they might need or to generate ideas on how to write about the topic. A standard writing task is to describe oneself. Learners should be asked to generate a list of descriptive words for appearance (hair and eye colour, for example); personal attributes (nice, friendly, talented); or interests (animals, the ocean, travelling). Reading should play a role here in that learners should have access to dictionaries to help them generate their word lists. Learners should also be given time to think about how they will use these words and concepts to describe themselves. They may even advise each other on how best to describe themselves.

During these group sessions, teachers should work with individual students in writing conferences. In a conference setting, the teacher is in the role of reader. Some writers will take risks and will place words in contexts in which they are inappropriate. When they do this in writing, teachers are able to correct word choice or to guide learners into a more careful use of dictionaries and thesauruses—tools that will help students become more effective communicators in advanced settings. Other writers will not take as many risks and teachers will find them repeating sentences that learners already know.

In this case, teachers can work with individual learners encouraging them to try new words so that their readers may understand a new meaning. When writers adopt a sense of their audience, they become better writers and therefore better language learners.

Writing also enables learners to acquire a deeper understanding of paragraph-level speech. Exchanges in the classroom are frequently stuck in interpersonal kinds of speech—students and teachers asking and answering questions of each other. This type of speech pattern leads to familiarity with sentence-level discourse.

In reality, though, the outside world is often focused on language designed to communicate complicated information. Writers should be encouraged to use reading passages as writing models. To use the example of describing themselves, learners should read short autobiographies of famous people as a way to expand on what they have already written about themselves. Exploiting the reading/writing relationship helps learners begin to understand notions of topic, supporting detail and inferences from the details. Developing this knowledge is critical so that learners become effective users of the language, able to present arguments, persuade others and make judgements. Writing is an effective means of discovering how to structure longer speech segments and to become powerful participants in discussion.

*Suggested readings:* Hirvela, 2004; McCarthy, 1991.

## 7. Error correction and feedback in language learning

Students deserve to be corrected so that they improve their accuracy and understanding.

Learners report that they want to be corrected. Yet, research indicates that overcorrection of either oral or written work by the teacher discourages students from speaking or writing. Clearly, correcting learners to the point that they remain silent is counterproductive. The same is true of returning written work to learners with so many corrections that they believe they will never overcome their mistakes. Research based on classroom observation shows that teachers use a number of strategies for the correction of errors. This varies from direct corrections—such as pointing to what is wrong—to more indirect means—such as repeating the phrase correctly or asking students to explain the rule. Studies indicate that teachers prefer to say again and correctly what the student has said. Nevertheless, while this appears to be a very polite form of correction, learners tend to ignore it. They focus on meaning and treat the teacher's utterance as mere participation in the conversation. To have more impact, teachers should ask for clarification (*"I'm sorry. I didn't understand that. What do you mean?"*). Students are then more likely to incorporate corrections into their speech. Errors in comprehension are obviously much more difficult to recognize and research indicates that teachers often cannot "see" these errors at all or dismiss them as a lack of initiative on the part of readers.

Error correction should always be positive, yet targeted. Learners should be able to understand what their mistakes are and how to correct them in the context of what they do correctly. Learners can easily accept: *"No. Remember there is an -s on the third person singular verbs. It's 'he runs'. If you could fix that, your story line would be much clearer"*. It is much more unpleasant to hear *"When are you ever going to remember that there is an -s ending on the third-person singular?"* and easy to shut down.

Teachers also need to think about errors as more than mere grammatical mistakes. Errors in content, based either on factual mistakes or on misunderstandings of the culture to be learned, also need to be corrected. In oral speech, correction of this sort would involve helping learners state their particular view, permitting the teacher to add more appropriate knowledge. "Meal time" is an

interesting example. Some cultures have a main meal at midday while others might eat in the evening. Learners are quick to judge the “good” and the “bad” of different approaches. Teachers need to be able to modify learners’ judgements with additional information that explains the practice. In like manner, errors in content often appear in learners’ written compositions. Teachers should respond to student writing regarding accuracy of message and interpretation with comments such as: *“This was an interesting point about meal time habits. I think if you expand this section where you make a comparison, your point will be clearer. Right now there are too many generalizations. You need some specific examples.”* This kind of feedback reminds learners that their teachers are readers and as readers they deserve clear prose that should be as interesting and as accurate as possible.

All learners should be encouraged to keep a journal of important points they should try to remember so as to correct their speech and writing. A classroom chart to which each learner contributes a correction in the new language is also a helpful way of sending the message that learners should focus on accuracy; that everyone makes mistakes; and that everyone should concentrate on fixing repeated mistakes.

*Suggested readings:* Lightbown & Spada, 1990; Lyster & Ranta, 1997.

## 8. Technology and the teaching of other languages

Teachers should use available materials effectively and efficiently.

Technology is supposed to help a user achieve a purpose. Language teachers often forget that the primary technology in which their profession is rooted is books, paper and pencils. For language teachers, books can be language textbooks, of course, but the term “books” should mainly refer to texts written for a particular audience about topics that interest them. For younger learners such books might contain information, for example, about the weather, volcanoes, ancient civilizations or interesting animals. For older learners, books might contain information about aeronautics or sport. Whatever the environment, it is literacy—the ability to read about a phenomenon and to write about it—that is the core of language teaching. The most important technology for teachers to possess is a class library full of books that their learners can learn from and enjoy. Every classroom should also have writing materials (paper, pencils, pens and markers) that allow learners to work with language and to make it their own. Learners need to be active participants in their own learning. There is no more important activity than making active links between reading and writing.

Unfortunately, the modern world often tries to convince teachers that computers and software are substitutes for books, pens and paper. Clearly, they will never be substitutes. Nevertheless, computers have changed our ideas about what is available. If teachers have easy access to the Internet and to a printer, they have an enormous source of up-to-date, authentic language materials at their fingertips that is almost cost-free. This status, of course, is accompanied by a huge risk. Material should be filtered carefully. At times, language use is at too low a level or inappropriate; at other times, the language may be too difficult. Many Internet-based materials may be age- and culture-inappropriate. What teachers may gain in convenience and authenticity, they may lose with complicated and unsuitable content. The important point is that teachers should view modern technology as a source for high-quality materials that reflect the culture and the people who speak the language being learned. Technology should not be viewed in language teaching as the site of learning, but rather as a tool.

Less-expensive technology, such as portable telephones, will play a role in most classrooms soon. Teachers should work with this

technology rather than against it. Textbooks may be delivered via the Internet. The same is true for trade books. Many learners already download music and videos. They should be encouraged to use that knowledge to download books in the language they are learning. Many tools, such as spell-checkers, grammar-checkers and rapid translation devices, are also available and affordable. Students need to be taught how to use these tools. Translation devices are particularly interesting. However, learners should beware. Sometimes these translations miss the subtlety of language and learners should be taught to see that it is more important actually to know a language in order to accept a machine translation; not the other way around. If teachers have worked from the beginning helping students to make the language their own and not something abstract, this point will be obvious.

Teachers should use technology to make connections with other teachers and classrooms focused on the language at hand. Connecting individual students with other learners who speak the language being learned is an important way for students to practise the language outside the classroom. In contacts outside the classroom, features of language such as morphology, pronunciation and word choice fall into place as carriers of meaning and not just as items to be learned.

*Suggested readings:* Blake, 2008; Hubbard & Levy, 2006.

## 9. Assessment

Good teachers monitor what their students can and cannot do with the language and adjust their teaching accordingly.

Teachers and their students often overreact to the concept of assessment, believing that the test is all-important and that students will be punished somehow if they do not “pass”. A contemporary perspective on assessment is much broader, focusing on what students *can do* rather than on what they *cannot do*. This provides teachers with guidelines for exploring student abilities and in setting goals for improvement. Learners should receive explicit feedback from their teachers on what they know and also guidance on how to improve and enhance what they do not know. Feedback should focus on form, but also on the effectiveness of a particular message. When learners are speaking, teachers should not interrupt them constantly with “correct” forms. Teachers and other learners should only offer assistance in conversation if an error is preventing communication. Teachers should keep careful notes on the errors they hear. Based on these notes, teachers should develop lessons that provide explanations and further opportunities for students to practice accuracy.

Similarly, for the assessment of writing, students should be encouraged to keep portfolios that contain drafts of their writing over time. These drafts help learners and their teachers to measure progress and to set further goals. All learners need to be reminded that language learning is a process and that their teachers expect development over time and not immediate perfection. Rewards should be based on progress, not on one-time tests.

Assessment of interpretive skills (listening and reading) is more difficult precisely because readers and listeners do not necessarily reveal their understanding easily. Teachers traditionally ask questions of students to see if they understand. But the questions themselves often use identical vocabulary words to those found in the text and students are able to answer a question simply by reformulating the words. In the case of interpretive skills, the use of the learners’ native language is critical. Learners should be asked questions in their native language about what they have understood and they should be permitted to respond in their native language. Research indicates that learners can understand far more than they actually express. When teachers understand how learners comprehend what they read or hear, they can clarify cultural contexts and provide learners with key background information that may have been missing.



Assessment plays an important role if learners intend to go abroad to study. Convenient frameworks exist for determining the level at which learners can perform certain tasks and for identifying what they still need to know. In the United States, a proficiency-orientation is common. This orientation is focused on what students are able to complete in their listening, speaking, reading and writing over time. Two mechanisms—the Oral Proficiency Interview and the Writing Proficiency Assessment—are available to help teachers make judgements. Europe uses the Common European Framework (CEF). The CEF is a corollary to the US documents, revealing an ascending scale from basic (A1) through proficiency (C2). CEF is aligned with the International English-Language Testing System (IELTS). The importance of these measures is that learners can understand what they should be able to do with the language they are learning and thus set their own goals and expectations. Further, these frameworks demonstrate that language knowledge is integrated; that is, that the skill areas of reading, writing, listening, and speaking support each other and are closely related. Accuracy is only one dimension of effective language knowledge and use.

*Suggested readings:* Shohamy, 1995; McNamara & Roever, 2006.

## 10. Professional development for teachers of other languages

Teachers should keep up with new developments in language teaching and maintain and improve their language skills.

Language teaching has changed more in the past two decades than it did in the prior two centuries. There are several reasons for this change. One is the fact that a research base is developing. All teachers need to be familiar with this information. A second reason for the changed and changing nature of language teaching is the ability for individuals to move rapidly around the globe and to live, work and study in various settings. Foreign travel, foreign postings and foreign study were once the domain of a tiny elite. Now there are many more opportunities and these opportunities have obliged language teaching to satisfy the needs of a broader audience. A third reason is technology. Technology enables language teachers across the globe to interact and to communicate about their profession almost instantly.

All of these changes place enormous responsibilities on teachers. Yet, they are small compared with the most pressing responsibility for many teachers—to maintain their own knowledge and ability to use the language they teach in a dynamic and modern way. Most language teachers across the globe are not native speakers of that language. These teachers report that maintaining language proficiency puts a unique pressure on them. They worry that they are not perfect users of the language they are teaching; this lack of perfection might place their learners at a disadvantage. This situation often makes teachers resistant to using some of the techniques mentioned in this pamphlet. Clearly, just explaining grammar and working with sentence-level language allows a teacher to maintain control of the class—a comfort zone. Group work, which is inevitably more flexible and unlimited than class work, demands that a teacher should have good command of all forms of language. This demand can be quite threatening to teachers and can make them feel uneasy. At the same time, other research has indicated that the non-native teacher has a huge advantage. The non-native teacher has been through the same process of language learning that learners are undergoing themselves. The non-native teacher has acquired sensitivities toward the learning process that a native speaker of a language can never acquire.

Balancing the skills that teachers bring, both pedagogically and linguistically, and how to enhance these is a tall order. All teachers

should have funding to maintain a current professional library. They should have access to teacher-oriented journals and they should be permitted to go to local and international conferences that focus on effective language-teaching strategies. Linguistic development is more challenging. Clearly, most teachers cannot travel each year to areas where the language they teach is spoken by the local population. This fact does not excuse them, however, from actively engaging in reading and listening to the language they teach. If teachers have Internet access, reading and listening materials are readily available for daily, almost hourly, consumption. Teachers should bookmark at least one newspaper written in the language they teach and make a habit of reading it daily. Radio and television stations transmit news regularly and, if teachers have Internet access, they may be able listen to these broadcasts. Teachers without Internet access should rely on books and journals written in the language for regular consumption. Sometimes, teachers only read materials prepared for their students. In reality, they should maintain their own language library written to ensure authentic language input. Watching films made or dubbed in the language can also help teachers sustain their aural understanding. Teachers should watch for and request opportunities that enable them to live among speakers of the language they teach.

*Suggested readings:* Briane, 1999; Horwitz, 2008; Llurda, 2005.

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# Notes

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