



Language Teaching 101

What is the key to being the best language teacher possible?

As I have traveled around the country this year representing ACTFL, I have met many people who ask me what I do to help students be successful language learners. In answer, I have identified four key areas that sum up who I am as a language educator. These “tips” are not mysterious; they are, in fact, something that every language educator is able to do. Just think of them as the ABC’s of language teaching: Address all learners, Be a target-language teacher, Connect culture with language, and Develop as a professional.

Tip A: Address all learners. It is essential that as language educators, we understand the diverse needs and learning styles of our students. We know that each person acquires language skills at different rates of proficiency, so our planning and lesson design must include differentiation and take into account diverse styles of learning. This is especially true as we welcome more students from varied backgrounds in language programs.

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Careful, thoughtful planning is needed to make sure that the needs of all students are met. I continually run through a mental checklist as I plan the activities for my classes to make sure that I am including a balance of the four skill areas (listening, reading, speaking, and writing) as evidenced through the three modes of communication of the National Standards (interpersonal, interpretive, and presentational), and that there are differentiated activities which address all of the learning styles of my students.

At the start of each year, I ask my students to complete a survey based on the concept of multiple intelligences to help them to identify their strengths in learning activities. I then poll the students to tally their strength areas and create a “class portrait” of learning styles on a poster which I then refer to as I plan for each class. This poster serves as a reminder to me when a group of students is especially musical, for example, to include activities that incorporate music or rhythm with language.

These days, I am no longer surprised when I discover that my students are more and more interpersonal! What to do? Include more opportunities for interpersonal communication such as surveys and “caterpillar” interviews where students form two lines, ask a question, then each line moves to form new partners. Over time, using this learning styles survey to guide my lesson design, I have seen an increase in the oral proficiency of my students because they routinely communicate with each other in French from the beginning of level 1.

Tip B: Be a target-language teacher. This is probably the most challenging and yet most rewarding thing for language educators to do, and I have not always been a target-language teacher myself. I began seriously transitioning from perhaps 75-80 percent target-language to 100 percent about 5 years ago. It started with weekly challenges to myself to do a class period entirely in French. Then, as I saw that not only could I do it, but my students were responding positively to it, I gradually began using French more in my lower levels until I simply began using French from the start of French 1 to do all instruction and class activities. It takes thoughtful planning and consistency, but everyone can do it, and the benefits are enormous in terms of increased language proficiency.

There are a few key ingredients to being a target-language teacher: training students and creating routines, using visuals and gestures, and staying consistent. You have to begin by training students to know that you will help them to understand as they are immersed in the language. I start day one of French 1 by welcoming the students and leading them through an introductory activity entirely in French before I explain that they will experience an immersion environment in my class. This sets an expectation that I will use French to teach them French.

This also paves the way for creating the routines necessary for using the target-language at all times in class. The more routines and procedures that are established, the better. I always greet the students and give classroom instructions in the same way so that they can make a connection between the language and the activity. It makes me smile when, partway through the first semester, my French 1 students begin finishing my sentences because they know what I will say. I begin, “*Classe, sortez...*” and they continue “...*une feuille de papier pour la classe.*” It is also vitally important to carefully think through how to break down instructions for activities so that beginning learners will be able to understand and the teacher will be able to remain in the target-language when giving instructions for a particular activity. Lesson design must include a solid dose of task-analysis in order to avoid situations in class which lead to high levels of frustration for students and teacher alike.

Another key to using the target-language exclusively is to incorporate gestures and visuals routinely in your class activities. This helps to scaffold the new concepts for the students and provides context to help students make meaning of the new input. I use a lot of gestures, including some based on American Sign Language, and I ask students to design gestures to represent vocabulary which also addresses the needs of the kinesthetic learners in my class. I have a large magazine picture file and use overhead pictures extensively in my classroom activities as well.

I have had to make a pledge to myself and my students that I will use only French to teach my classes. At first, I thought this was going to be hard, but over time, I have realized that it is actually a lot easier than switching back and forth from French to English. Amazingly, changing from language to language actually increased the affective stress on my students because they didn’t know what to expect at any given moment. Also, it took a lot more of my concentration and energy to change languages than it does to speak exclusively in French. This frees me up to concentrate on my actual teaching.

Keeping myself honest pays off as I am observing a noticeable increase in proficiency in my students over time. My French 3 class this year was the first group of students that I began immersing in French from the start of French 1. When I compare this class with my last French 3 class, I see a huge difference and can only attribute the difference to the fact that they have had even more consistent exposure to French. This class has no trouble understanding me and communicates orally in French with me with no apparent fear or difficulty. When I assign a quick-write to them, they readily begin writing and frequently produce several paragraphs with considerable fluidity and proficiency, whereas the last class struggled even to begin writing and then would only produce a few simple sentences. This shows me that a major result of providing a target-language environment is that my students are more willing and better able to communicate in French.