Moreland University

M26U1A1

Top Ten Principles of Language Instruction Blog Post

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As a language teacher, the biggest note I always make to myself is that what I am teaching is first and foremost different to other subjects in that it is not so much an area of knowledge about the world, but more a way of understanding, thinking about, describing and communicating about this knowledge. Language is something so intrinsic to who we are as humans that it can almost be easy to take it for granted.

It should be remembered that the ability to learn language is innate. For so many of us who find challenges both teaching and learning additional languages, it can be good to stop and appreciate how beautiful a thing it is, how naturally we learnt our first language. For additional languages to feel as natural to us as possible, we do want to make the means of learning and using it as close as possible to that of our first language.

How then can we support students with this? What are some principles of strong language instruction? I share here ten principles that come from a combination of my own experience, those of some colleagues I have recently conversed with, and my readings and research.

For the first principles, I consider the foundations from which language acquisition can come from. To learn and acquire language, we first need input of language. As teachers, what are some ways we can provide this?

To start, consider you are receiving instructions for the completion of a physical process. Perhaps it is making a cake? Perhaps it is building or assembling a toy or appliance. Perhaps it is playing a game. You choose. Close your eyes and imagine being shown purely through demonstration and action, how to complete this process. Will you be able to follow? So long as the task was not overly complex and the demonstration clear and focused enough, quite possibly. Now imagine the demonstration was accompanied by clear to make out, and to the point, verbal instructions, delivered slowly, but naturally, perhaps repeated several times, would you then be hearing and attaching meaning to these words and sentences? This is only one scenario. By providing students with natural input in context and with purpose, you are providing a reason to listen and understand language. The language can be understood from the context. Over the time, this can lead to gradual acquisition. ASD World Languages (2017) states as one of its ten principles of effective language teaching and learning, "Using the target language and providing comprehensible input for instruction", suggesting that for example, "hands-on experience, picture descriptions, or subject matter content" can be used. In my own professional work, I am an early year's homeroom teacher for English as second language learners. By talking naturally with my students, but with scaffolds to support meaning, for example, pointing at objects, and use of body language, I have seen their comprehension and ability to use more and more of the language themselves, increase over time. The IRIS Centre (2011) provides supportive strategies for this process, for example speaking more slowly and clearly, "Monitor Vocabulary" and "Use multimodal techniques", for example, pictures, videos and body language. **Principle number 1 – provide lots of comprehensible input.**

So, this comprehensible input will mean natural and understandable input throughout the class. Is there a way we can then provide rich and focused support? Discussing with a colleague recently to prepare joint principles of quality language instruction, we noted the quality of reading programs, such as Oxford Reading

Tree. These can be used to provide specific reading instruction at earlier years and levels. However, they can also be used as the basis of speaking, discussion and thinking practice. They could be used to provide writing models. Throughout my teaching career, I have taught a range of different programs that focus on using input material, including stories, songs and poems. These can be learnt in their own right for speaking fluency practice. They can be used to acquire vocabulary. They can be used to provide sentence and paragraph models for different language structures, that can then be adapted and practiced for free production, both in speaking, and depending on student age, writing. This is all in addition to practicing listening and reading comprehension. ASD World Languages (2017) also state in their principles that we should use a "variety of authentic print and non-print materials". **Principle number 2 – use diverse and engaging listening and reading material to provide a basis of learning and skill development.**

We now then have some general principles for ensuring high quality language input, which can form our backbone. What then about some inclusions for the content of our classes?

First, remember that language is built up of the four keys skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Remember also that they are intertwined and support each other. Listening and speaking are used together during interaction; challenges in one of the skills could affect our communicative ability in this context. Reading and writing provide input and awareness of different forms of language expression that can then be used in speaking and writing output. Writing can allow for note taking which can support both reading and listening, as well as perhaps preparing for speaking presentation later. Practicing new vocabulary and language through the context of the different skills gives the opportunity for diversified practice and use, which can support the learning. Li (2012) identifies use of skills integration as one of its nine principles of language instruction, stating that teachers should "teach ELLs to simultaneously develop the four language skills". That is the further benefit; not only can integrating the four skills provide increased opportunity to practice language, but it can also ensure continual development of all skills. Pardede (2019) and Rahman and Akhter (2017) both highlight the extensive research that points to the importance of preparing students for real-world use of language and communication, which means continually switching between skills, and hence that an integrated approach is hence beneficial. Through my own discussions with colleagues, we have all used courses that focus on integration of skills within each unit, for example, the, Oxford Discover series and have found the material more natural and impactful for our students. **Principal number 3 – integrate the four skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing.**

A big focus in discussion with colleagues was on English development within our academic subjects as that is something we all have experience with. Teaching within an IB school, content and language integrated learning forms a bedrock of what I do. As only one example, I have recently been exploring light and shadow with my students. As we have practiced describing our ideas, presenting our artistic work, and describing procedures for experiments and investigations, I have seen students use new language structures and vocabulary during discussion and presentations. Students have been able to learn technical vocabulary and thinking, while also seeing all round language development. They have been able to use the language for natural purposes that stretch it. Li (2012) indeed states that we should "make sure we keep the standards for academic instruction", this summarizing the outcomes of extensive research. No matter whether we are supporting language learners within a broader academic context or specifically working with language learners on their language development, using real world and academic topics make it more functional and meaningful. In exploring such topics, it is natural that we will encounter situations in which we need to use higher level thinking and problem-solving skills. Thinking and expressing ideas here can inspire us to stretch our language and find motivation to practice and develop. According to Galguera and Hakuta (1997) and Hakuta (1998) also, we should challenge students with tasks that require higher order thinking and language processing. Of course, content needs to be made accessible and comprehensible by use of supports, as per

the first principal. **Principal number 4 – have a focus on exploring real world and academic content, and practice higher level thinking to support language development.**

I remember introducing a previous topic of plants with my class. As an early assignment, all students found a plant of their choice and took a photo of it, which we then used to discuss and explore some related concepts. Many students found plants related to places they have visited with their families, and one even, a banana tree from her hometown. The inquiry was then more personal for them, and all found it very natural to engage. We learn new concepts in relation to what we already know (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000). This means then that our language learning should be made relevant to our background, culture and experience. As noted by Li (2012), August and Shanahan (2006), Howard and Major (2005) and NCTE (2006) for example, all discuss this as well as how culturally relevant material should be selected and used. **Principal number 5 – base teaching, learning experiences and activities and materials, on the culture, background and past experiences of the learners.**

At this stage, we have the basis for vast language input, and ideas for how to explore language deeply and develop skills. What then is fundamental in our lesson and curriculum planning?

As a teacher, we are supporting driving the learners forward. There will be long-term and eventual hopes, goals and expectations. We need to have direction to be getting towards there. This will be a step by step process. Actually, colleagues and I have all found in our careers that we have to continually reflect and adjust the steps and short-term direction with our students. However, continual awareness of where we are, where we are heading and where we want to go next is needed. Having checkpoints formalized will give structure to this. Lesson and course language objectives, as discussed extensively in Himmel (2012) are what are most relevant to our language development. However, in light of some of the principles we have put together so far, we also remember the importance of combining with academic and real-world content and making learning culturally relevant. When relevant, regular content objectives and also culture objectives, as described for example by Huynh (2020) should also be included. **Principal number 6 – incorporate clear goals and objectives, both for the individual lessons and sequences of lessons, diversifying these to content, language and culture objectives as necessary.**

I remember in my early years as a language teacher; my classes were filled with games and check-in activities. While I have deepened aspects of my teaching since then, the importance of allowing students themselves as well as us educators, the opportunity to assess where they currently are, remains paramount. This allows for reflection by both students and educators on on what we need to do next for where we need to go. A colleague shared how she tries to incorporate a fast self-assessment, even if only in the form of words or checking boxes, as part of each regular assessment she uses. This means putting together reflection on the concept being assessed with that on the performance in and experience of the assessment activity itself, for deeper awareness. Valdez-Pierce (n.d.) outlines that ongoing assessment is a fundamental part of supporting students in the instructional process. It should also be noted that assessment can also function as a practice and a learning activity. Pomerance, Greenberg and Walsh (2016) include assessment to boost retention as fundamental for learning. **Principal number 7 – include regular assessment, set up appropriately. Referring back to the fifth principal, this should also be culturally relevant.**

With this, we are getting close. Again, we have our sources of language input, methods for practicing skills and key inclusions for structure within classes. What then are some final supports?

Choose a word, any word. If possible, choose a word from an additional language, for which you might be closer to the experience of leaning it. If not, your first language. Think about it. Take a second and think about what it means to you. Do it. Now take a moment to think about why it means that to you. Our understandings of a word will come from all the associations we have with it. These, in turn, will come from our experiences with it, that is, all of the times we have heard and seen it used. Now do the same for more

words and think about the same questions again. Do it. For any of these words, now imagine you do not have all these experiences with it. If it is a newly learnt word, think back to a time when you had fewer exposures to it. Would or did you still have the same connections with it that you do now, or remember it as well? The greater the number of situations in which you have seen a word, the more connections you have and the more familiar you are with it. Of course, many words can be used in many different contexts, and perhaps differently in different places. Li (2012) includes the presenting of vocabulary in multiple contexts as one of his nine principals, noting that "Expanding students' vocabulary is essential for the development of other language skills such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening" and "Useful vocabulary teaching strategies include offering increased exposure to words in different contexts". Words are fundamental to language and actually without words, there is no language at all. We need to support students to develop their vocabulary. We then also need to ensure that students are both being encountering and using the word in different settings. All colleagues I spoke to and myself have actually seen the benefits here. When recently teaching language related to different types of pattern, it was after we had first seen them in the classroom and we practiced it later when seeing patterns out and about during our day, that students started using it themselves more and more. The same has been true for colours, shapes and actions for example. We can relax a little here as teachers. While we do want to show students vocabulary in as broad a range of contexts as possible when we first introduce it, we can remember that the further exposures to become more and more familiar over time. We can be purposeful at exposing students to this. The use of listening and reading materials, as per principal 2, can support it. **Principal number 8 – support students to develop vocabulary and allow them to be exposed to and use it in multiple contexts.**

I remember my earlier days as a language teacher. I put a big focus on always stretching students to speak independently and without guidance. I remember also receiving very impactful feedback from a parent during an open class that she didn't think the teacher (me) was talking enough. We often hear that student speaking time should be as high as possible and teacher talking time reduced. This is true, of course. Our goal is for students to eventually be using language completely freely and independently. However, while still at earlier stages, students might not be ready for this yet. Just as we need to provide comprehensible input, we are there as a resource for providing modelling of expressive written and spoken language. Such modelling can encourage and inspire students to also communicate in this way and provide aa demonstration for how they can do so. In many areas of teaching and learning, not only language development, it is a constant reflection how much modelling and examples to provide. This is especially the case for artistic and creative work. Really, we want our students to be as independent as possible, but that is not to say that models are not necessary to support and inspire. Indeed, for language learning, students do need to see how it can be used while still learning. Li (2012), again, in its conclusions from much research, focusing on English language learning, states, "Before asking ELLs to produce English either in oral or written form, teachers should set a good model for ELLs to follow.". In more recent times as I have seen the necessity of support and guidance, I have regularly seen the impact modelling can have, both in the moment, and on further language expression later. **Principal number 9 – provide rich written and spoken language models for students to follow.**

Finally, the use of the learners' first language has been a long-debated question within language teaching and learning. While the focus for communication should be on the language being learnt, so that students can grow to use it naturally for receiving information, production, and thinking and learning, Li (2012) for example, in his summary of research notes specifically for English learners, that we should use "the first language of ELLs as a resource and use them strategically, if possible", including strategic use of the first language as one of his principles. For language learning more broadly, the SIOP® checklist also refers to including the opportunity to use L1 for clarification. L1 can be used to support with understanding and explanation for more difficult concepts and also for comparison or contrast, where the language structures might be similar or different, to alleviate any misconceptions take into the new language. There is a further

point also. My colleague noted that when teaching her Chinese learners, phonics and reading in English, she will put it alongside Pinyin, which is the Romanised version of Chinese reading and writing, for comparison by students. Li (2012) also notes that the use of L1 is particularly useful for students who have received formal education in L1, and Valdez-Pierce (n.d.), that literacy skills in the first language can be leveraged. Skills including reading will transfer over, making it useful to refer back to L1. The point with use of L1 is that it should be strategic and have a purpose for supporting the development of the new language, but with the focus kept on a natural environment of the language being learnt. **Principal number 10 – use the student's first language strategically as a support and a resource.**

There we have it then – our ten principles. They cover key aspects, starting from the providing of input, moving to key principles for stretching skills and use of the language, then important concepts in planning, and finally, more specific supports. Not included in the principles because it is fundamental to teaching and almost goes without saying, learning should be personalized and individual needs of students always considered. The learning experience should be student centered, with these ten principles here to facilitate the journey.

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