

TACKLING THE MAJOR CHALLENGES IN LEARNING TARGET LANGUAGE AND UTILIZING EFFICIENT METHODS

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ARTICLE INFO.

Key words:

target language, foreign language,
second language, teaching skills,
foreign teachers, students, etc

Abstract:

Learning a foreign language is one of the most important issues today. In particular, it is not in vain that this area is considered at the level of public policy. This article describes in detail the properties and methods of the target language.

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The use of target language refers to all that learners say, read, hear, write, and view – production and reception of language on the part of learners, educators, and materials. ACTFL recommends that learning take place through the target language for 90% or more of classroom time except in immersion program models where the target language is used exclusively. The target is to provide immersion in the target language unless there is a specific reason to NOT use the target language.

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Learners can only acquire (internalize) language when they hear large quantities of input that the teacher provides orally that is interesting, a little beyond students' current level of competence ($i + 1$), and not grammatically sequenced. (Krashen, 1982) Note that the i refers to the current competence of the learner and the $+1$ represents the next level of competence beyond where the learner is now. When learners hear large amounts of comprehensible input and they are engaged in meaning-making, they understand and retain what they hear and they use it to form their own messages. Educators need to be purposeful in their use of the target language in the classroom, however, not just to use the language for the sake of using it. Educators must ensure that learners are able to get the “gist” of what is being said,

read, heard, or viewed and understand what they are supposed to be doing to participate successfully at all times; otherwise, frustration takes over. Target language use is necessary but not sufficient for increasing one's proficiency: That is, use of the target language must be accompanied by a variety of strategies to facilitate comprehension and support meaning making. Comprehensible input and comprehensible output go hand-in-hand.

When language proficiency is the goal of a program, instruction needs to occur in a language-rich environment. The language rich environment includes everything that the learners encounter: what the instructor says and uses; what is read and viewed; what learners access or produce; and online resources whether websites or videochats. When possible, the language-rich environment may also include authentic texts and realia around the classroom. Learners comprehension needs a beginning context, which may be provided through gestures, visuals, objects, connections with prior learning or experiences. When introducing students to the family, for example, teachers might point to pictures of various families from the target culture and describe. When students are supposed to write their names or fill out a certain part of a paper, the teacher models this with an actual or projected version. If students are to answer questions about their favorite sport, the teacher might have a projected or printed out handout with the various choices depicted in pictures so that he/she can point to and repeat the choices often to enable students to answer. When asking a yes/no question, the teacher might scaffold with a simple "thumbs up/thumbs down" as he/she repeats "yes or no?" All of these scaffolds assist students in being comfortable and successful in a target language classroom.

It is important to identify the problems the Iranian students encounter in the process of learning English. The main obstacle for learning English is that there is no environment that makes them familiar with the original language. In other words, there is no active role for English outside the classroom. So, they do not feel the immediate need to learn English. And the educational system should bring about such need. The significant role of the English language as the lingua franca of today's world in establishing foreign relations is simply neglected in Iran. Very few learners and /or teachers travel to English speaking countries or have contact with English speakers. A few native English speakers are permitted to teach within Iran. We can see only a few English speaking foreigners in the country who are tourists or belong to business sector. Moreover, the places you may find the tourists are limited to tourist sites, hotels, or business companies. In addition, Iranian people are not allowed to watch or have access to satellite TV, as one of the sources of authentic materials, since the policy makers as well as clergymen in Iran consider their programmes inappropriate and against morality. So, this would be another issue which makes Iran unique in the region or maybe in the world. This can be explained in a study carried out by Mirzaei Rizi et al. (2014), in which the existing problems of teaching and learning English as a foreign/second language in the secondary schools of Iran and India were identified. The results indicated that Indian students had better access to English audio-visual aids (e.g., listening or watching English TV news or programs), they read English newspapers and magazines more than five times as compared to the Iranians and majority of them find the contents of their English textbooks interesting. It should be noted that publication and circulation of English magazines/journals in India is much higher than in Iran. The extent of speaking English in their English classes was higher than the Iranians. Moreover, poor English knowledge of the Iranian students may further discourage them to read English magazines/journals.

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Furthermore, there are a lot of people who look for ways of improving their English, but they do not know how and where to start. In most of the English classes, little attention is paid to the conscious efforts learners make in mastering a foreign language. Many of students do not know, neglect or pay not enough attention to how to deal with the task of learning a foreign language even after years of study; only a few students who have used a set of strategies, have been able to succeed and hence, learn the language. It is a neglected area in our language classes.

Teachers should be concerned with helping students to learn how to learn the ways of effective learning of English as a foreign language and to achieve autonomy in their education. It has been argued that learning how to learn (self-directed learning) would be of utmost importance for language learners for at least three reasons. First, because of the complexity of the task which learning presents, there is never enough time within a formal scheme of instruction to ensure mastery on the part of students, and if the learner has not been prepared within the classroom to take responsibility to learn autonomously outside, it is unlikely that any learning will take place. The second reason is the belief that engaging students in the process of learning and assessment would encourage their learning efficiency. Studies of the characteristics of good language learners suggest that efficient learners consciously monitor their performances, analyze them, and develop a repertoire of efficient learning strategies.

Thirdly, in a self-directed scheme, through reducing the distance between the learner and the teacher, feelings of anxiety, frustration, and alienation decrease, and consequently the learner becomes more receptive to the learning process. Another challenging factor is students' beliefs about the nature of learning English as a subject consisting of a list of words and a set of grammatical rules which are to be memorized and separable skills to be acquired rather than a set of integrated skills and subskills.

Furthermore, the students in English classes do not have common background knowledge because some of them are trained in rural areas in which un-qualified English teachers teach them while other students are taught in urban areas having access to a lot of classroom facilities to gain advantage of. While some of the students take advantage of using satellite programs, VCD and video tapes, and go to private language schools, most of the students just have their textbooks as the only source of learning English. Under such circumstances, there is no placement test to put students into different groups homogeneously based on their language proficiency levels. This makes the situation even much worse for the weak students and they resort to guide books.

As classes are crowded, most of the students do not have enough practice in English and do not overcome language learning problems and are not proficient enough to communicate in the foreign language. Because in the limited hours of instruction, they normally could not have the chance of

learning English especially the most favored skills of listening and speaking.

Learners at the Novice and Intermediate levels of proficiency need support to get a general understanding of what is heard, read, or viewed before digging in to figure out details or nuances. Whether listening, reading, or viewing, learners need a strong context, may need supporting visuals, and need a focused task such as finding out what is new information or figuring out the main idea. Meaning needs to precede form as the basis for comprehension: before looking at letters or characters, before looking for clues in grammatical forms or word order, before trying to figure out details, learners should search for overall meaning. Learners benefit from showing their understanding frequently. Frequent comprehension checks help learners to feel that their efforts are valued and understand what they need to improve upon. They also give teachers necessary data to adjust instruction.” Examples of comprehension checks include raising one or two fingers to indicate their answer to a question, writing responses on individual white boards, holding up the correct flashcard to match a statement, arranging a set of visuals to show comprehension, using an online response tool, selecting the best summary sentence from among several options, or having students correct their own work using a teacher-provided marker.

Educators introduce, model, practice, and encourage learners to use key phrases in order to negotiate meaning. Initially, this might be phrases such as “Really? Me too!” or “Wow! Cool!” Then, learners may expand their comments to “I like it too because...” or “I agree because I too ...” Then educators might encourage learners to discuss new words using phrases such as “that means almost the same as ___.” During an interpersonal activity, learners may need certain phrases to make their interactions more natural and educators can provide these in the moment, adding key phrases to a physical or virtual “word wall” for learners to access during future language activities.

Asking simple yes/no questions keeps learners at the Novice level, since the natural response is not more than a single word. Educators need to carefully consider how they are expanding the types of questions, prompts, and descriptions they are modeling to identify how they are guiding learners to higher levels of performance. One step is simply to ask learners to add more details by adding who, what, where, when, how, and even why to a basic question. As learners practice asking such questions in interpersonal tasks, they help each other improve and expand their language over time. It is important for learners to realize from the beginning that they can respond in the target language, albeit simply at the word-level or with comprehensive gestures. This can be supported by educators by giving lots of choices using visuals and repetitive phrases that can be easily modified. As confidence builds, learners should be encouraged to mix and match their language chunks to create their own messages. Learners who apply their learned vocabulary and/or structures in new contexts are beginning the transition from Novice to Intermediate. To maintain target language use by both educator and learners, teach learners phrases needed to ask for help or clarification in the target language (What? Huh? What do you mean by ___? How do you say ___? I don’t understand. Can you repeat that?). These learning aids, as well as other common classroom phrases, can be included on a “word wall” or printed on a list that can be given to the learners or even taped to desks.

Moreover, there are a lot of people who look for ways of improving their English, but they do not know how and where to start. In most of the English classes, little attention is paid to the conscious efforts learners make in mastering a foreign language. Many of students do not know, neglect or pay not enough attention to how to deal with the task of learning a foreign language even after years of study; only a few students who have used a set of strategies, have been able to succeed and hence, learn the language. It is a neglected area in our language classes. Teachers should be concerned with helping students to learn how to learn the ways of effective learning of English as a foreign language and to achieve autonomy in their education. It has been argued that learning how to learn (self-directed learning) would be of utmost importance for language learners for at least three reasons. First, because of the complexity of the task which learning presents, there is never enough time within a formal

scheme of instruction to ensure mastery on the part of students, and if the learner has not been prepared within the classroom to take responsibility to learn autonomously outside, it is unlikely that any learning will take place (Carver & Dickinson, 1982; Dickinson & Carver, 1980). The second reason is the belief that engaging students in the process of learning and assessment would encourage their learning efficiency. Studies of the characteristics of good language learners (Naiman, et al. 1978; Stern, 1983) suggest that efficient learners consciously monitor their performances, analyze them, and develop a repertoire of efficient learning strategies. Thirdly, in a self-directed scheme, through reducing the distance between the learner and the teacher, feelings of anxiety, frustration, and alienation decrease, and consequently the learner becomes more receptive to the learning process. Another challenging factor is students' beliefs about the nature of learning English as a subject consisting of a list of words and a set of grammatical rules which are to be memorized and separable skills to be acquired rather than a set of integrated skills and subskills.

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Not all students have the same motivation or purpose for learning English. Some of them look at English just as a course that should be passed and do not understand its importance as a means of communication with which they can adapt themselves to new improvements in technology and other sciences. For most learners, learning English is a duty — something that they have to, but don't want to do. They don't see pleasure in learning English. These students have low motivation to participate in class, and they simply try to get a passing mark to get rid of the course. Other students attend the classes to learn some special points to be successful in the University Entrance Examination so they pay attention to special parts of the book. To be successful in this kind of examination, only a good grasp of vocabulary, some grammatical points, and reading comprehension are sufficient, so the students pay little attention to speaking, listening and writing skills. Another demotivating factor is that English is considered as a general subject compared to special subjects such as physics, chemistry, mathematics and biology. In the university entrance exam, the scores for special subjects outweigh those for general ones. So, students spend more time on studying their special subjects than general ones such as Persian, Arabic and English.

Of equal importance is making careful instructional decisions about when NOT to use target language (keeping that to 10% or less of what students say, hear, read, write, or view), and reserving that for deeper processing of understanding in generally private exchanges between teacher and student, for reflection on the learning process or for explaining deeper understanding on an assessment. English is reserved for very strategic purposes, such as explaining why this approach is worthwhile and what learners should expect in this class (not knowing every word, but being able to guess at the meaning and show understanding in a variety of ways), to briefly explain a concept that would take too long to act out or demonstrate, or to allow for brief processing of an idea (e.g., from all the examples you have

heard and used, discuss with a partner how you think Spanish expresses possession). English should not be an easy default choice – otherwise, learners simply wait to hear words given in English. When people are in a country where only the target language is heard or visible, learners from these immersion settings are the ones who will be comfortable figuring out a sign, understanding a store clerk, ordering in a restaurant because they have worked to “make meaning” in their classroom setting.

In Classical Languages, the instructional focus is on the interpretive mode; however, interpersonal conversations and presentational writing tasks develop fluency in looking for the “gist” and thinking in “chunks” rather than reading or writing one word at a time. In immersion programs, the goal of maximizing comprehensible input is the same but the context is different and the inclusion of L1 is determined by the model used (e.g., 90/10, 80/20, or 50/50 models) and often increases over time (again – for pedagogical reasons, such as to bring in English language arts or to provide practice of English vocabulary for science and mathematics content/concepts in preparation for state testing).

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