

My Teaching Philosophy: Brian Gabriel Olson

Language teaching is a waste of time... unless it results in language acquisition. Language acquisition is the ability to apply language skills to the real world. If a student can score well on a test but cannot use the language in a useful way, then acquisition has not taken place.

My favorite learning theory is the Communicative Approach because it focuses on the end goal of all language instruction: communicating with other people. In addition to giving students plenty of opportunities to communicate, I'm a partisan of using authentic language in the classroom. Students require broad exposure to their target language in a variety of settings. I encourage students to watch videos, listen to music and participate in dramatic scenarios so they can have a wide exposure to language situations. Using authentic language ensures that students are developing the ability to communicate with real people in the target language.

Before a lesson can begin, the teacher needs to meet the students in their world. This means that I like to introduce a new lesson with a story or a problem or a teaser to draw students in. I try to present something that will show students why the lesson content is important to them. Without their attention and interest, nothing else matters. Before you can get into the presentation and objectives, the students need to be engaged with the material.

Another important aspect of teaching a language is the pace and speed of instruction. If a class is too hard or too easy, the students get anxious or bored. It is not automatic for a teacher to find the proper balance between difficult and easy. Teachers must determine exactly how far they can stretch student understanding without overwhelming them with new material.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky split up learning into three zones: what students can do, what they cannot do, and what they can do with guidance-- what he called the "zone of proximal development." This zone of proximal development is the best zone for teaching because it is challenging enough to be interesting but not so challenging that students feel overwhelmed.

Encouraging students to actually speak and write in their new language is vital to their development. That is why I subscribe to the 80/20 Principle in teaching: 20% of class time should be instruction and 80% should be practice. Students need plenty of time to practice their target language inside the classroom so they can flawlessly continue to do so outside of the classroom.

What does it mean to "encourage" students to speak and write? It means to give them a platform where they can be brave. In his research, Stephen Krashen used the term "affective filter" in reference to the complex emotions student feel as they attempt to actually use the language previously learned. The teacher's role is to lower the affective filter to help students take more risks. Every level of student, including the highest level, needs help in gaining the courage necessary to conquer new language structures.

Assessment of student progress is a core job of teaching. I prefer to assess students by checking if they can successfully perform a relevant task. Helping students gain this ability to perform is built into my lesson objectives. Through instruction and modeling, I show students how to perform the objective, then I let them have a try in a scenario of guided practice. The assessment consists of the student performing the objectives independently, which might be in the form of a presentation, a project, or an exam.

The best teacher is somebody who is a great learner. I pride myself on being a lifelong learner, who is always enrolled in a course or two and always engaged in fascinating new projects. Learning new things enhances my energy and makes me feel good about the future. As an educator, my aim is to make my students similarly optimistic about the future and about their ability to make their goals a reality.

My teaching philosophy includes the continuation of my own growth as a teacher. If students in any particular classroom are not gaining new language abilities, I am always open to adapting my lessons and strategies.