

Teaching Philosophy
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The cure for boredom is curiosity. Since there is no cure of curiosity, the best we can hope for is to redirect its force towards something constructive. Cliché as it may be, an experienced teacher has the power to harness curiosity. To accomplish that, educators rely on a teaching philosophy – a creed developed over the course of their careers. Outlined below is my attempt at articulating the teaching philosophy that has shaped my work as a teacher and mentor. It is a philosophy that is a perpetual work in progress reflecting my experiences as a teacher, academician, and a language student.

All learning – and language learning in particular – is contextualized. An astonishing cognitive phenomenon defined by creation of complex neural connections; learning is most effective when it can be conducted in relation to previous knowledge. The ability to tap into that information is therefore of key importance. Far from being “empty vessels”, students who drift into my classroom are generally full of knowledge that can be employed in language learning. In the rare instances where that is not the case, I attempt to relate the new material to their surroundings. Whether it is by taking a short cafeteria trip to engage with all things food related, or practicing the imperative mood with a round of “Simon Says”, I always make sure that both grammar and vocabulary are attended to in an authentic context.

The more complex and personal students’ engagement with the target language, the more likely they are to internalize it. Through watching videos, reading authentic newspapers or surfing the web students discover how the target language is used in everyday situations. Such exposure to authentic input combined with appropriately scaffolded communicative activities provides an ample opportunity for meaning negotiation. While realia and other authentic language artifacts - such as store receipts or posters - are very helpful with vocabulary teaching, corpus linguistics and popular literature have proven excellent aids when it comes to grammatical instruction.

In terms of the latter, I subscribe to inductive grammar teaching – an approach that puts students in charge of learning by allowing them to discover the language on their own. Though I recognize that certain situations may warrant a turn towards deductive teaching, I believe that its inductive counterpart is the more engaging, motivating, and ultimately the more effective tactic. It is particularly empowering when supplemented with the communicative approach. Language is fundamentally a tool of communication, therefore if we want our students to be able to communicate in it, we need to teach them how to do so. Drawing on the interaction hypothesis, the communicative approach addresses that requirement. By completing tasks structured according to the principles of task-based teaching, students are encouraged to use the target language in a communicative context. While the interaction hypothesis suggests that such approach is usually effective, my personal experience cautions against its limited appeal. Since communicative learning might not be for everyone, I always try to structure my classes in a way that would allow to address different learning styles and circumstances. Whereas a short grammar lecture might be appropriate for an older audience, younger students might appreciate TPR activities more. After all we all learn in unique ways that might not necessarily be compatible.

Old or young, beginner or advanced, all my students are encouraged to take charge of their own learning. I firmly believe in a student-centered classroom where the instructor serves as a resource for the learners. To that end I make my students responsible for different tasks from day one – whether it is checking the attendance or writing the date on board. With time their responsibilities expand so that by the end of the term they are able to lead review sessions or to give short lessons on pre-assigned topics. In doing so they often employ multimedia and other technologies furnished by our digital age.

As one of my core academic interests, computer-assisted language learning is an influential component of my teaching philosophy. Multimedia presentations, podcasts, wikis, and other CALL tools are a common occurrence in my classroom. I have learned that multimedia are especially useful when introducing students to the culture of the target language. According to the socio-cultural theory of language, language and its culture are intimately intertwined and ought to be taught together. From presentations on sights of historical significance to second language survival videos, students tend to be more engaged with interactive materials.

Fitting all the above into a coherent curriculum can be challenging. Some students need more time with the material, while others grasp it immediately. Life happens when one is not planning, and in order to accommodate for the unexpected I have adopted the model of evolving syllabus when planning my lessons. That way I am always able to adjust the instruction to my students’ needs, keeping the boredom in check while stimulating their curiosity. For after all, “curiosity is nature’s original school of education.” (S. Blanton)