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COMMUNICATION FIRST! SIX BEST PRACTICES FOR THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

By John De Mado

EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO COMMUNICATE WITH CONFIDENCE



START

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COMMUNICATION FIRST!

Six Best Practices for the Second Language Classroom

By John De Mado

BACKGROUND

Language is a common phenomenon that comes freely to virtually everyone with the exception of those who may suffer overwhelming physical and/or cognitive handicaps. Yet, the emergence of language is still largely the subject of debate—a debate that has ensued for centuries. In fact, for discussion purposes, **it may be best to view language acquisition as a mystery, shrouded in a puzzle, wrapped within an enigma.**¹⁰ Nonetheless, over time, an ever-growing research base leads us closer and closer to an understanding of how the human mind creates and acquires language.

Several methods have made their appearance in U.S. schools, with most eventually waning. A brief sampling of certain historical trends, leading to current practices, might be in order at this point so as to grasp our evolution as linguists. As a point of clarification, **it should be noted that the terms *approach* and *method* are not considered interchangeable here within. An approach might best be defined as the sum total of beliefs (organizing principles) that one holds regarding language acquisition. A method refers to the techniques that one deploys to realize those beliefs.**¹

Prior to the introduction of modern languages into the American curriculum in the 19th century, Latin and Classical Greek were the only languages offered. Their study was thought to develop mental discipline along with a more refined and educated citizenry. The instructional focus centered on grammatical knowledge, discrete word study, reading of ancient literary and historical texts, and translation of said texts into English.¹

It was only natural that initial modern language study should follow the same pattern of instruction and lead to what has since been referred to as the Grammar-Translation Method. This method prevailed in the 19th century classroom and continued well into the 20th.¹

- **Grammar-Translation Method:** Students learn grammatical rules and translate sentences from Latin/Greek into their native language (L1). The method has two main goals: to enable students to read and translate Latin/Greek literature and to further students' general intellectual development.²

In reaction to the Grammar-Translation Method, the beginning of the 20th century heralded the arrival of Direct Method.

- **Direct Method:** With the stated goal of students learning how to communicate in another language, Direct Method is characterized by instruction conducted solely in the target language, grammar taught indirectly, and the absence of translation, with the primary focus on vocabulary acquisition and oral language. Known also as the “Natural Method,” Direct Method supports the notion that a student should acquire a second language in much the same manner as he/she acquires the native tongue.²

Behavioral psychologists, such as B. F. Skinner, believed that all human behavior, including language, is a result of repetition and reinforcement. Thus, the early to middle decades of the 20th century saw the inception of the Audio-Lingual Method.²

- **Audio-Lingual Method:** Although a four-skills approach, the Audio-Lingual Method focuses primarily on listening and speaking, with reading and writing deemphasized. Rote memorization of dialogues acts as the centerpiece of the method, along with repetitious pattern drills designed to inculcate certain linguistic patterns in students. The “language laboratory” made its first debut as an important instructional aid. Much like Direct Method, the usage of L1 is discouraged, but to a lesser degree.

A seismic shift in thinking occurred in the latter part of the 20th century and continues to the present. With the arrival of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, priorities have shifted from methodology to Applied Linguistics—from language teaching/learning to language acquisition.

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- **Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory:** Stephen Krashen, professor emeritus at the University of Southern California, is a major proponent of SLA. It is through the various hypotheses set forth by Dr. Krashen that we begin to understand the “nature” of language and the fact that any instructional methodology employed must respect that nature for it to be effective.³ That is not to say that method is unimportant. It simply reorders instructional priorities. It serves as a reminder that “best practices” are to be considered commensurate to their impact upon a learner’s facility with the varied functions of language. Four of Dr. Krashen’s major hypotheses are listed below:

- **Acquisition-Learning Hypothesis:** This hypothesis is based on the fact that languages are “acquired” subconsciously as opposed to being “learned” discretely. Individuals are generally unaware of the process as well as the aspects acquired. Language acquisition is largely a random process with knowledge stored subconsciously in the brain.³
- **Input Hypothesis:** This hypothesis is based on the fact that all output of language is a byproduct of “comprehensible input (CI).” The more CI is provided by the teacher, the more it is sought by the student.³
- **Monitor Hypothesis:** This hypothesis is based on the fact that consciously learned language provides a monitor (editor) for previously acquired language. *As a result, accuracy in a language is the eventual byproduct of language acquisition.* Language acquisition is not the byproduct of accuracy. In support of that thinking, Freeman and Freeman remind us that “the conventions of language should not impede the invention of language.”³
- **Affective Filter Hypothesis:** This hypothesis is based on the fact that anxiety blocks both input and output of language. Reducing that anxiety for the student both environmentally and personally enhances language acquisition.³

It is against this backdrop of Second Language Acquisition Theory that this white paper highlights six “best practices” that support language acquisition and, therefore, enhance the opportunity for second language (L2) functionality for both English Language Learners (ELL) and students studying Languages Other Than English (LOTE).

BEST PRACTICES:

1. Use Comparative Linguistics: It serves no constructive instructional purpose to ignore the role that the first language (L1) plays in the acquisition of a second language (L2). In fact, doing so may completely undermine the acquisition of the second language. One of the primary functions of a language is to identify an individual as a member of a group.¹⁰ Devaluing a student’s native language is, in effect, asking that individual to relinquish ties with his/her group and/or culture. It is equally important to note that when one is acquiring a second language, the tendency is to move L1 into L2, thus causing linguistic interference. Whenever possible, compare both languages for similarities, such as cognates. It is useful to contrast, as well, particularly as it relates to structure, syntax, and situational usage.^{4, 5, 6, 7, 11}

2. Provide Comprehensible Input: When a student is in the midst of acquiring a second language, he/she moves from the concrete to the abstract.¹² Therefore, visuals, gestures, music, dance, facial expressions, etc., all enhance language acquisition and should be incorporated as primary techniques in the L2 classroom. Everything done instructionally to assist students with input (listening, reading, and viewing), encourages output of language (speaking and writing). The more instruction “provides” comprehensible input, the more students will “seek” it.³

3. Focus on authentic language acquisition: Language is primarily a device deployed by humans to resolve problems. It emerges as a byproduct of context and situation. As such, the language classroom needs to reflect the “purpose” and “nature” of language. *Authentic* language acquisition classrooms encourage students to acquire language within real-world contexts, using the language to resolve real-world problems. In the traditional language classroom, the target language typically is not used for problem resolution. Rather, it is the very study of the target language that becomes the problem.¹⁰ Authentic language acquisition is student driven and interdisciplinary, and it connects the construction of new knowledge with a student’s existing knowledge and experience.⁴ Among other characteristics, an authentic language acquisition classroom includes:

- inquiry
- exploration
- discourse
- collaboration
- reflection
- problem resolution
- diversity of outcomes^{4,5,6,7}

4. Use authentic assessment: Authentic acquisition of language demands frequent authentic assessment, both formative and summative.¹¹ This form of assessment is performance-based, tends to focus on contextualized tasks, and seeks a demonstrable “end product”—one that is rooted in the real world. Some broad categories include:

BEST PRACTICES

1. Use Comparative Linguistics
2. Provide Comprehensible Input
3. Focus on authentic language acquisition
4. Use authentic assessment
5. Implement a “Communication First” environment
6. Hold rigorous, yet realistic expectations

- **Public demonstration of a given skill or modes of communication** (interpersonal, presentational, interpretive) that encourage use of the target language for authentic communicative purposes—to debate a topic of current interest, negotiate a process for completing a project, or perhaps explain one’s interpretation of a scientific phenomenon or cultural practice.
- **Role playing and simulations**, such as mock debates on a topic relevant to the culture of the target language or situational mini-dramas, in which students take on roles and engage in a mock conversation (i.e., bank teller and customer; tourist asking for directions; museum docent explaining a work of art).
- **Studio portfolios** (art, musical composition, photography, poetry, essays, vocal and instrumental musical performance, etc.)⁸

Authentic Assessment is the measurement of “intellectual accomplishments that are worthwhile, significant, and meaningful.” In many cases, it is a product that is intended to be shared with an audience and, therefore, open to critique. Whereas traditional assessment follows the curriculum and seeks one correct answer, authentic assessment employs “backwards design,” with the curriculum based upon the assessment as well as inviting a diversity of possible outcomes.⁸

- 5. Implement a “Communication First” environment:** In order to encourage language production (speaking/writing), a “linguistically friendly” classroom environment needs to be established, one where a student is free to acquire a second language without fear of ridicule and where one is rewarded for what one knows as opposed to being penalized for what one does not yet know. There is an intimate relationship between language acquisition and an individual’s willingness to take linguistic risks, to be vulnerable, and to use intuition.¹⁰ Loosely defined, **linguistic risk-taking** is the willingness, on the part of the language student, to confront more language than what he/she owns. **Vulnerability** is the willingness, on a student’s part, to err for the broader goal of communication. **Intuition** implies student willingness to skim and scan for information and to seek comprehensible input whenever possible. Moreover, a student can only exhibit these psycholinguistic characteristics to the extent that the teacher supports them instructionally.¹⁰ Belief in *communication first* can serve to encourage such a classroom environment. It is always tempting to focus initially on the language arts of a given language in an attempt to guarantee accurate L2 communication. Yet, as Dr. Krashen reminds us, *accuracy is a byproduct of acquisition and not the inverse. Seeing accuracy as a destination rather than a point of departure enhances the opportunity for language acquisition.*^{3,10}

IMPLEMENTING A COMMUNICATION FIRST ENVIRONMENT

- **Linguistic Risk-Taking:** the willingness, on the part of the language student, to confront more language than what he/she owns
- **Vulnerability:** the willingness, on a student’s part, to err for the broader goal of communication
- **Intuition:** implies student willingness to skim and scan for information and to seek comprehensible input whenever possible

6. **Hold rigorous, yet realistic expectations:** It is imperative to establish performance expectations for students that are both rigorous and realistic. They should be rigorous to the extent that course content provides linguistically rich content and multimedia, along with challenges that are appropriately scaffolded and supported with comprehensible input, and realistic to the extent that varied student backgrounds and learning needs are taken into account. As such, a more balanced approach comprised of social language proficiency (informal register), academic language proficiency (formal register), grammar, and literacy is preferable.¹¹ Opportunities to read and discuss literary and informational texts can assist in this balancing process. Additionally, arranging students both homogeneously and heterogeneously in small groups, based on linguistic experience and learning needs and the task at hand, can also be beneficial.^{9,12}

SUMMARY

Our knowledge of how the human mind creates and acquires language has steadily increased over time. Latin and Classical Greek were the initial languages studied in the American schoolhouse. Language classrooms focused on the reading and writing of their respective literatures and histories. The popular method of instruction at that time featured grammatical analysis and vocabulary study, along with translation of original texts into English, and was referred to as the Grammar-Translation Method. Despite the eventual appearance of modern language study in the American curriculum, the Grammar-Translation-Method continued to be employed, and its influence extended well into the 20th century.

The 20th century brought an awareness that four skills, not just two, were inherent to the languages taught in the schoolhouse: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. As a result, Direct Method made its appearance. This method, although four skills based, focused primarily on listening and speaking, with the classroom conducted exclusively in the target language. Known also as the Natural Method, it was anticipated that students would acquire L2 in much the same way they acquired L1.

The Audio-Lingual Method made its debut in the mid to latter part of the 20th century. Heavily influenced by Behavioral Psychology, it was believed that students could be “patterned” into a second language. The memorization of situationalized dialogues and rote pattern drills were the hallmarks of the method. The language laboratory made its initial debut.

Simply stated, the goal of the 21st century language classroom is *functionality*. Pursuant to the increasing influence of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) Theory, “methodology,” though still important, is secondary to “approach.” Method is seen as the byproduct of organizing principles drawn from Applied Linguistics. As a result, the discussion of “best practices” no longer centers *primarily* on specific techniques used to deliver a discrete instructional point—for example, understanding the difference between completed and repeated past actions and how that difference impacts past-tense usage. Instead, best practices reflect a broad, research-based conceptual approach believed to encourage language acquisition.

Thus, this white paper underscores six important best practices for your consideration. Functionality in a second language can be achieved by using Comparative Linguistics, providing comprehensible input (CI), targeting authentic acquisition, using authentic assessment, implementing a “communication first” environment, and holding rigorous, yet realistic expectations.



**JOHN
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John De Mado has been a vocal advocate for language acquisition in the United States for many years. Beginning his foreign language studies in high school, Mr. De Mado attended Montclair University in Upper Montclair, NJ. There, he received his BA and teaching certification. During that time, Mr. De Mado was selected to participate in an immersion experience in Grenoble, France, sponsored by Princeton University. He began his French and Spanish teaching career in the state of New Jersey, simultaneously completing his MA degree in French language and literature at Middlebury

College, Middlebury, VT. His degree was funded in part by the French government. Mr. De Mado then undertook his second French and Spanish teaching assignment in Connecticut. He also served on his local board of education, spearheading a successful campaign to implement a K–5, content-related Spanish program.

After several years of classroom experience in both public and independent schools, Mr. De Mado began his career in educational publishing, serving as Senior National Consultant for Foreign Languages and ESL, Foreign Language Marketing Manager, and Editorial Director for Foreign Languages.

Mr. De Mado is co-author of ***Allez, viens!*** and ***Bien dit!***, middle/high school proficiency-based French programs published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt®, and the Creative Consultant to ***iAvancemos!***, a middle/high school proficiency-based Spanish program published by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt as well. He has also authored several texts with various other publishers.

Mr. De Mado has also composed and recorded a series of instructional French and Spanish rap CDs/DVDs entitled ***La Boutique Magique***, ***Une Boum Cool***, ***iFestejemos!***, and ***iSomos Campeones!***, respectively. Each features original raps designed to transmit specific linguistic functions and related vocabulary, structure, and syntax.

Since 1993, Mr. De Mado has directed **John De Mado Language Seminars, LLC**, a full-service consulting firm dealing exclusively with language acquisition issues. Mr. De Mado has also consulted to the U.S. Department of Defense Schools in Europe and conducted workshops throughout the United States as well as abroad. A member of several national, regional, and state language organizations, Mr. De Mado is best known for his motivational keynotes, provocative conference sessions, and insightful professional and staff development workshops. You may visit Mr. De Mado's website at demado-seminars.com for further information.

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