Use of Target Language in Language Learning

What?

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.

Why?

Second Language Acquisition research has shown that learners need as much exposure as possible to the target language for acquisition to occur. Learners need to be actively engaged with the target language. Just like learning to ride a bike or any other important skill, learning is best achieved by doing. For many learners, the precious minutes in our classrooms are the only opportunity in their day to experience the target language. We must maximize this exposure by providing a language-rich environment that prepares them for success in the real-world. Likewise, if the goal is for learners to have the proficiency to survive and thrive in the target culture, whether it be in our neighborhoods or across the ocean, then authentic target language experiences and materials must be provided.

- 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.

- Students acquire language through meaning-making with others (like solving a puzzle). (Vygotsky, 1986)

- 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. (Long, 1981; Swain, 1995)

How?

- 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.

- Strategies that support using the target language in an immersive environment include (For more details concerning these strategies, please click here)
  - Provide a language-rich environment
  - Support comprehension and production through context/gestures/visual support
  - Focus on Meaning before Details
  - Conduct comprehension checks to ensure understanding
  - Negotiate meaning with students and encourage negotiation among students
  - Elicit talk that increases in fluency, accuracy, and complexity over time
  - Encourage self-expression and spontaneous use of language
  - Teach students strategies for requesting clarification and assistance when faced with comprehension difficulties
  - Don’t use English (one’s native language) as the default for checking on meaning or understanding

**Note:**

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).

**Find Out More:**


Further web-based resources include:

**Ohio Department of Education**
This one link contains sub-links to many other articles that explain how to use this core practice in the language classroom:


**Foreign Language Annals** (access is available through ACTFL website):

[http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/foreign-language-annals](http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/foreign-language-annals)

**The Language Educator** had a focus issue on comprehensible input and output (see October/November 2014, 9:5), available at ACTFL website:

[http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/the-language-educator](http://www.actfl.org/publications/all/the-language-educator)