Guidelines for Second Language Instruction

Rodney H. Clarken

School of Education, Northern Michigan University

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From October 1995 to June 1996 I traveled throughout Sichuan province teaching demonstration lessons for teachers of English. It is said that I have visited and taught in more primary and middle schools in China than any other foreigner. I have taught English lessons to thousands of Chinese students and have observed and met with thousands of others in their classrooms. English teachers often asked me for suggestions on how to teach a second language. In an effort to help those teachers I have summarized some guidelines based upon my experiences, observations and reading. None of them are new or original as far as I know. All can be found in books on education and second language instruction. Some of them are probably wrong for your particular circumstances, and will need to be applied with wisdom. Some may seem so obvious, that they do not need to be stated, but it is my hope they will help to uplift the banner of knowledge in this great country.

Work from clearly stated rationales, principles and objectives toward clear and measurable goals.

Use the second language as much as possible in instruction.

The earlier a person learns a language the better. Learning a language before puberty from native speakers results in more authentic accents and better retention.

People who must use a language to survive or succeed, learn it more quickly and meaningfully.

Do not analyze too much or pay too much attention to grammar or language rules as they impede language learning by making the students unnaturally and prematurely conscious.

Children tend to learn languages more easily partly because they are less inhibited. Do not inhibit them with too much correction and unnecessary information.

If children comprehend what is being said, they are more able to use and learn it.
The more students are active constructors of language rather than passive receivers the better. Have students develop and use their own sentences in authentic communication as much as possible.

Remember communication is the goal: to understand and be understood.

Do not worry too much about mistakes and do not make the children too much worry about them. People make many mistakes learning a second language. Students usually correct their mistakes with more exposure and use. Some mistakes though, will need to be corrected in a systematic way.

Children all over the world have learned to understand and speak their language without formal classes. Learn from how children acquire their language skills. For example, children listen and speak before they read or write.

Learning a language involves learning a culture and way of thinking. Language affects thinking. Feeling positive toward a culture and language can help language learning.

Meaningful and interesting learning is more easily remembered. Avoid too much rote learning and drilling. Help students understand and value the language.

Rewards are much more powerful than punishments in learning. Focus on the positive and ignore the negative if possible. Help students find their own rewards to learning a second language. Motivation to learn based mainly on punishment or avoiding punishment is ineffective.

Have high expectations for all children. Expectations influence achievement. Higher expectation leads to higher achievement.

Meaningful communication, practice, play, associations, actions, story telling and mnemonic devices increase learning and minimize forgetting.

Studying a language just before going to sleep and just after waking up, and while relaxing and listening to soft music assist language learning.

Everyone has a different learning style and a different way of approaching problems. Help each student discover, understand, develop and utilize effective individual language learning strategies.

Help students develop a feel for the language and self confidence using it. Risk-taking, mistakes and anxiety are part of teaching and learning. Use them effectively.

Help students see how learning another language can help them meet their needs and wants.
Use a variety of strategies for learning a language and communicating, such as mime, songs, stories, rhymes, arts, crafts, sports, props, paraphrasing, memorizing, routines, teaching aids, visuals, translating and asking others for help.

People are like mines: they possess many valuable gems which only education can uncover.

Education is the path to glory, excellence and happiness.

Raise children so they will work hard, strive for excellence, dedicate their lives to important matters, acquire knowledge and serve the world of humanity.

Do not physically or verbally harm children. Correct their bad qualities using scientific methods that do not pervert their characters.

Schools, classrooms and children need discipline and order.

Praise and encourage students who do well. If students are told they are not smart they will be discouraged.

The greatest service to society and another person is being a good teacher: helping to develop others’ full capacities.

Teachers are like doctors. They should help make their students’ minds and spirits healthy.

Every child can potentially do wonderful are terrible things; it depends on his education.

Teachers are like gardeners who are responsible for all of the plants under their care.

Have students pursue studies according to their interests and abilities.

Having a good character is more important than being educated, but having both is best.

Teachers should be moral, knowledgeable and dedicated to service.

When children are very young, teach them through play and talking with them. Have them teach one another through questions and answers. Children can be taught to read and write through play. For example, the teacher can make letters out of sweets to give to the children when they learn them. Later students can copy letters, then words and then sentences from the board. When they are skilled in their language, they can be taught another language by first learning the meanings of words and then sentences using methods that have proven effective.

**Summary of Learning Suggestions**
Have clear goals, objectives, methods and rationale.

Make the classroom warm, lively and entertaining.

Create a healthy learning climate in the classroom.

Keep motivation and self-confidence high.

Use rewards frequently, punishments seldom.

Be creative in teaching and with the language.

Do not worry too much about perfect pronunciation from the students.

Focus on meaningful and interesting real-life communications.

Use memorization and rote learning sparingly.

Connect the language with thinking, action and concrete relevant material.

Encourage accurate effective communications.

Use the second language as much as possible.

Make the class student-centered, not teacher-centered.

Be a good example and a motivator for the students.

Use peer tutoring and small group work to encourage language development.

Smaller classes give the students more opportunity to participate and the teacher more opportunity to monitor and help.

Try not to let the native language get in the way of learning English.

Teach to and help the students develop and utilize their strengths, styles and strategies.

Allow mistakes and learn from them.

Use games and make a game out of learning the new language.

Work from concrete examples, experiences or objects.

Go from the known to the unknown.

Use all modalities of learning.
Use music in the background for relaxation.

Be eclectic in your approach.

Introduce some novelty and variety in your language learning.

Involve everyone and increase participation and interaction.

Emphasize fluency over accuracy.

Use activity, acting out, singing, music, role playing, drama, story telling, dance and the arts to aid learning.

Laugh.

Be happy.

Serve.

Love.

*The above ideas were adapted from my experiences and several resources, particularly the Bahá'í and educational psychology literature and *Breaking the Language Barrier* by H. Brown, Intercultural Press.*
Our brains are programmed to recognize human speech, to discriminate subtle differences between individual speech sounds, to put words and meaning together, and to pick up the grammatical rules for ordering words in sentences. However, the particular language each child masters, the size of his vocabulary, and the exact dialect and accent with which he speaks are determined by the social environment in which he is raised—that is, the thousands of hours he has spent (beginning even before birth) listening and speaking to others.

Language skills depend critically on verbal input (or sign language, for babies with hearing impairments) in the first few years or certain skills, particularly grammar and pronunciation, may be permanently impacted. The critical period for language-learning begins to close around five years of age and ends around puberty. This is why individuals who learn a new language after puberty almost always speak it with a foreign accent.

Certain skills (including grammar and phonology—the ability to perceive and produce individual speech sounds) are more sensitive than others (such as vocabulary size) to a child's experience with language in the first few years of life.

The one form of stimulation that has been proven to make a difference is language: infants and children who are conversed with, read to, and otherwise engaged in lots of verbal interaction show somewhat more advanced linguistic skills than children who are not as verbally engaged by their caregivers. Because language is fundamental to most of the rest of cognitive development, this simple action—talking and listening to your child—is one of the best ways to make the most of his or her critical brain-building years.

Simply put, early literacy research states that:

1. Language, reading and writing skills develop at the same time and are intimately linked.
2. Early literacy development is a continuous developmental process that begins in the first years of life.
3. Early literacy skills develop in real life settings through positive interactions with literacy materials and other people.

Our current understanding of early language and literacy development has provided new ways of helping children learn to talk, read and write. But it does not advocate "the teaching of reading" to younger and younger children. Formal instruction which pushes infants and toddlers to achieve adult models of literacy (i.e., the actual reading and writing of words) is not developmentally appropriate. Early literacy theory emphasizes the more natural unfolding of skills through the enjoyment of books, the importance of positive interactions between young children and adults, and the critical role of literacy-rich experiences. Formal instruction to require young children who are not developmentally ready to read is counter productive and potentially damaging to children, who may begin to associate reading and books with failure.