Guidelines for Second Language Instruction

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From October 1995 to June 1996 I travelled throughout Sichuan, China teaching demonstration lessons for teachers of English. It is said that I have visited 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. The educational leaders and English teachers for these schools always asked me for suggestions on second language. Below I have given some guidelines based upon my experiences, observations and reading. None of these guidelines are new or I know. Some of them are probably wrong for certain circumstances, and will need to be applied with wisdom. Some may seem so obvious that they need not to be stated. They are all offered to help those educators who are laboring to assist their students learn a second language.

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

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

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.

Use the second language as much as possible in instruction. People who must use a language to survive or succeed, learn it more quickly and meaningfully.

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

Children all over the world have learned to understand and speak their language without formal classes. Learn from how children acquire their language: simple, children listen and speak before they read or write. Emphasize listening comprehension over speaking initially, then as the students are ready introduce reading and writing. If children comprehend the language, they are more able to use and learn it. Remember communication is the goal, not grammar: to understand and be understood. Do not analyze too much or pay too much attention to grammar or language rules as they impede language learning by making it unnatural and prematurely conscious.

Children 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. Use social, cultural and intellectual contexts to learn the language.

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; usually correct their mistakes with more exposure and use. Some mistakes though, will need to be corrected in a systematic way.

A language involves learning a culture and way of thinking. Culture is learned more through experiences than discussion. Feeling positive toward a language can help language learning. Language affects thinking.

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

Schools and children need discipline and order. Rewards are much more powerful than punishments in discipline and learning. Focus on the positive and give it possible. Help students find their own rewards to learning a second language. Praise and encourage students who do well. Have high expectations. Expectations influence achievement. Higher expectation leads to higher achievement. If students are told they are not smart they will be. Do not physically or verbally harm children. Correct their bad qualities using scientific methods that do not pervert their characters. Motivated mainly on avoiding punishments is ineffective.

Meaningful communication, practice, play, associations, and other mnemonic devices minimize forgetting.

A language while relaxed, such as just before going to sleep and just after waking up, and while listening to soft music, assists language learning.
Everyone has a different learning style and a different way of approaching problems. Help each student discover, understand, develop and utilize effective language learning strategies based upon their interests and abilities.

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

Education is the path to glory, excellence and happiness. Help students see how learning another language can help them meet their needs and wants.

Variety of strategies for learning a language and communicating, such as movement, physical activity, mime, songs, stories, rhymes, art, music, role play, drama, dance, crafts, sports, props, paraphrasing, memorizing, routines, teaching aids, visuals, props, objects, translating, hands-on experiences, and asking others for help.

Good character is more important than being educated, but having both is best. Encourage children to work hard, strive for excellence, dedicate important matters, acquire knowledge and serve the world of humanity. Have students pursue studies according to their interests and abilities.

Test service is being a good teacher. Teachers should be moral, knowledgeable and dedicated to service. They are like doctors in that they should tend minds and spirits healthy. They are like gardeners who are responsible for helping and care for all of their students. Every child can potential or terrible things; it depends on his education.

Children are very young, teach them through play and talking with them. Have them teach one another through questions and answers. At about five 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. 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.

Assess the students learning and make adjustments as needed. Smaller classes give the students more opportunity to participate and the teacher more opportunity to monitor, adjust and assist.

Goals, objectives, methods and rationale. Make the classroom warm, lively and entertaining. Create a healthy learning climate in the classroom and self confidence high. Use rewards frequently, punishments seldom. Model excellent language knowledge and usage. Focus on meaningful, real-life communications. Use memorization and rote learning sparingly. Connect language with thinking. Use the second language as much as possible. Make the classroom student-centered, not teacher-centered. Use peer tutoring and small group work to encourage language development. Do not let the native language impede the second language. Teach to and help the students develop and utilize their strengths, styles and strategies. Allow mistakes and use games. Make learning the new language fun. Use concrete examples, experiences or objects. Go from the known to the unknown, concrete.