

REFLECTIONS FOR REMOTE LANGUAGE TEACHERS

How to Best Use Limited Classroom Time (Part I)

During my 30 years of teaching, I taught in public and private school classrooms, the French Chamber of Commerce, paint and railway factories, a farmhouse and on athletic fields, but never in the midst of a pandemic. Consequently, it is with a mixture of respect and humility that I submit these reflections on language teaching to the brave souls who are hanging in there in the classroom and online, trying to give their students the best possible experience while, at the same time, maintaining their own sanity. My hope is that the ideas and tools I share may lighten the load a bit for the teachers that read them and may enrich their teaching experience to such an extent that they will one day say that this trying season we are currently in became a positive turning point in their teaching career.

As I try to imagine the challenges language teachers will face this fall, knowing that most will do at least part of their teaching remotely, outside of simply keeping healthy, I imagine those teachers must have three major concerns: 1) how to use the limited time they will have with students in the classroom, 2) how to protect the integrity and authenticity of online testing and 3) how to develop relationships with students one rarely sees face-to-face (or should I say, “mask-to-mask”?). If you are a teacher, and see that I have overlooked another major concern, I hope you will let me know so that we can discuss it as well.

Today, I am simply going to put forth some rather strong convictions I hold, particularly regarding one’s work with first and second-year language students. This may seem to have nothing to do with the efficient use of in-person time with one’s students, but I will explain the connection tomorrow.

* Students who do not become comfortable with hearing and speaking the new language during their first year of study, almost certainly never will. (chapter 4)

*The method of instruction a teacher employs during a student’s first year of language study will either set the student up for long-term success or will condemn him or her to permanently inauthentic pronunciation and halting speech. (chapter 7)

*The language teacher’s most important task in working with beginning students is not the teaching of grammar and vocabulary, but rather that of training them in how to think as they are speaking the second language. (chapter 7)

*If you first teach students to read and write a foreign language, and then try to get them to speak it, you will find the task to be “like pulling teeth”. By contrast, first teach them to speak it, and moving to reading and writing becomes a comparative breeze. (chapter 2)

*The premature exposure of students to the skills of reading and writing engenders an awkward 5-step thought process that stands in sharp contrast to the 3-step thought process of the native speaker. (chapter 4)

*It is less important that your students understand everything you are saying than it is that what you say be spoken in the target language. When addressed by a creative, uninhibited and expressive language teacher, students who hear only the target language from September through January end up effortlessly understanding everything the teacher says by February. (chapter 8)

*One cannot steer a car until it is moving. Initially prioritize substance over form. Lavishly praising the beginning student's grammatically imperfect yet comprehensible remarks builds their confidence to speak again and again, opening the door for you to refine their speech gently and progressively. Offering too frequent correction of his or her speech, crushes the student's will to communicate and, therefore, your opportunity to refine speech. (chapter 9)