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CREATING THE OPTIMAL LANGUAGE LEARNING CLASSROOM

The best learning environment will have actively engaged students who are retaining information and able to use this knowledge in real situations. The old teacher centered methods of teaching language have been set aside. Just listening to the teacher explain grammar rules and the students memorizing paragraphs or poems to recite have proven to be ineffective methods of teaching. Of course, students need the fundamentals of language, grammar, sentence structure, and vocabulary. However, without connecting this knowledge to useful real-life situations, it leads to students who cannot communicative effectively in a foreign language. If you know grammar and vocabulary but you are not able to put thoughts together in an understandable way, then you do not have a mastery of the language. To achieve fluency in language the communicative approach should be used in the classroom. To supplement this teaching approach instructors should also implement project-based learning. These two methods will create the optimal language learning classroom.

The communicative approach means that you create real-life like situations in the classroom. Explain grammar and vocabulary for specific usage. The students should recognize why they need this grammar and vocabulary. What information can they convey with this knowledge? For example, after studying the present perfect you can set up scenarios for students to practice with each other. You may want to do a mock job interview where the interviewee can use the Present Perfect tense to talk about experiences he or she has had in the past, something he or she has worked on for a while, or something they have recently done that is important in the present time. This situation will help to show students how useful the grammar tense is and allow them to put into action business vocabulary they have learned. This also allows for a repetition of the grammar and vocabulary in a meaningful way. Students are introduced to the new information by the teacher; they are able to practice speaking with the teacher and other classmates. There is also the opportunity to listen to their classmate's usage of the new material. This will insure that students will not forget what they have just learned and be able to implement their knowledge to real-life situations. *"If instruction is to influence comprehension it needs to (1) present*

multiple exposures of the words being taught; (2) involve a breadth of information – not just repeat definitions but present contexts, examples, and the like; (3) engage active or deep processing by getting student to think about the words and interact with them. Breadth and depth of information enable students to establish networks of connections from the new words being learned to words, experiences, and ideas they already have" [2, 24]. Connecting all these components will help students to make great progress in language learning and give them the ability to communicate effectively in different situations.

If project-based learning is implemented in the classroom along with the communicative approach there will be a huge improvement in students' language learning. Project based learning is a method of teaching in which students gain knowledge and skills by working for longer periods on meaningful projects that are engaging and authentic. These projects last for a week or longer and focus on a challenge or complex question. All factors of language learning can be combined for a project, such as vocabulary, writing, grammar, listening, and speaking. For beginner students a good project is to create a children's book in the new language. Students must discuss different topics and characters for the book and persuade classmates to choose what they believe is the best option. Then vocabulary and grammar can be studied. Finally, students will put everything they have learned into writing the short children's book. To make the project authentic students can find local schools or libraries where they can read their book to an audience. Having a specific goal like this will help motivate students to work together and to do their best. A good mid-level project of a language class is to do a project related to food. A class can divide up into different groups and each group will pick a country or region to focus on. Students would research popular or traditional food from that area and learn about how the culture is connected to the food. Groups could then make their own cooking show and demonstrate how to make the recipes while explaining their importance. For large groups make sure to include appetizers, main course, and dessert. If the class is able to record their cooking show they will have a lasting keepsake of their learning experience. Otherwise, their project can simply be presented to each other and if it is possible to bring in food that the students have prepared following the recipes they chose, then the whole experience will be elevated. An added bonus when be to include music connected to the different countries or regions. The most important thing is connecting all aspects of language learning into a project that motivates and challenges students. For a higher-level class an excellent project and for the students to make their own lesson. This lesson can be taught by students to other classes and used for next semesters or next year's students. This ensures that the learning material is relevant and interesting for students. Student's interests should play a role in their education. Each lesson that is created should contain all components of language learning, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar. This is the realistic environment that is best for learning. In life everything is connected and so it should be in our studies also. This is key for project-based learning. For students to retain information and be able to use it well, the projects must be relevant, rigorous and have purpose. Before there were separate classes that

focus specifically on reading comprehension, vocabulary, grammar, and so on. Now studies have shown that integrating these components creates the optimal learning environment. Sitting through an hour and a half long grammar class is not the best way. *"A list of agreed upon opinions, claiming that grammar cannot be taught effectively in discrete, unconnected units; cannot be taught effectively in massive doses; cannot be taught divorced from student writing; cannot be taught effectively if students see no real need for it and if teachers cannot persuade them to see a need. As in the case of most areas of life, extremes are easy to achieve but unproductive. The balance, the moderation, provides the long-lasting productive results. The same goes for grammar. It should be neither abandoned nor worshipped but appropriately placed with the discipline of English"* [1, 123]. Project-based learning helps to find that balance of learning in the classroom.

The communicative approach to teaching combined with project-based learning is the most effective way to help students learn a language quickly and with the ability for real meaningful use of language. It makes sense that the classroom should be more student centered since it is for their learning experience. The more students can produce of authentic language the better. *"Students who are overly controlled not only lose initiative but also learn less well, especially when learning is complex or requires conceptual, creative processing."* (Deci, Ryan, 200). Giving students some choice and control in their learning environment leads to success. Working together on projects mimics real life situations and prepare students to achieve success in the future. It gives students the opportunity to utilize higher-order skills, such as analyzing, evaluating, and creating. The communicative way of teaching give students' ample opportunities to practice what they have learned. This kind of teaching takes a little more preparation and flexibility, but in the end it will be a better experience for both students and teachers.

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