

Perspective

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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Every Word Counts: Are You Teaching in the Target Language?

At some point, most of us have heard someone remark that they studied a foreign language for two or three years and can barely remember anything they learned. Why is that such a common refrain?

Learning a foreign language in English, rather than in the language itself, has been compared to learning how to swim without water. As language educators, we have a great advantage in being able to enrich our instruction with our everyday encounters with students in and out of the classroom—since learning in our discipline simply occurs more naturally with the repeated use of language. Asking students how they are feeling or what their plans are for the weekend or telling them to open their textbooks or put away their cell phones in the target language can be both teaching and learning.

We know that students learn by doing, by trying out language and by modifying it to serve their communicative needs. Surrounding students with oral and written language is an important first step in building a classroom environment that will facilitate communication. Encouraging a really good communicative atmosphere in the classroom from the start of your school year should be rewarding and fun.

Evidence suggests that students benefit significantly when teachers adopt a consistent and coherent approach to target language use. Maximizing the use of the target language has been shown to improve listening skills, give a sense of culture, create real language contexts, develop role models, and give a purpose and challenge to lessons. As a result, students gradually become more confident and try things for themselves. Students also see their teachers promoting the cultural diversity of language through active, purposeful, helpful, and effective examples, enabling them to sense the value of their learning experience. Language teachers can assist students in seeing and understanding the world from a different viewpoint. We model another reality and encourage students as they enter our classrooms not only to step into another country but also into another world. The more we expose students to the target language, the better they will be able to understand the language and its culture when they do actually travel abroad.

The leaders and members of ACTFL have long recognized the importance of this issue. As you most likely know, as part of its mission and vision, ACTFL provides guidance to the profession and to the general public regarding issues, policies, and best practices related to the teaching and learning of languages and cultures. ACTFL has adopted several general principles that provide the foundation for implementation and expansion of language programs at all levels of instruction.

The use of the target language in the classroom has been the issue most often cited by members when asked for topics that ACTFL should address. ACTFL has thus prepared a statement on this topic, which is currently in the review process. Another such principle, *A Statement of Professional Responsibility*, has progressed through several stages of the review process and is in its final revision before being presented to the 2009 Assembly of Delegates. These two position statements and others are currently posted on the ACTFL website. Please take a moment to examine the statements at www.actfl.org and provide your feedback so they can be revised for the next stage in the review process. Once reviewed by the membership and approved by the ACTFL Board of Directors, these statements will become policy of the association. Please make your voice a part of this process!

Finally, as the school year begins this fall, I urge you all to challenge yourselves to create a classroom environment that encourages target language use beginning with the very first lesson. Make every minute count. Surround your students with useful expressions and support them in their efforts. Encourage them to make simple statements in the target language right from the start and let them know that making a mistake is part of the learning process. One of the things that can prevent a student's language skills from improving—particularly pronunciation and conversation skills—is the fear of looking silly, or being embarrassed by making a mistake in public. But, if you have fun with your teaching, your students will have fun with their learning!