Classroom Techniques: Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language

EDWARD DAVID ALLEN
REBECCA M. VALETTE

Classroom Techniques: Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language

EDWARD DAVID ALLEN
The Ohio State University

REBECCA M. VALETTE
Boston College

Preface

The success of a second-language course depends not only on the quality of the basic program but also on the flexibility with which the teacher uses that program. The aim of this handbook, which is a revised and expanded edition of *Modern Language Classroom Techniques* (published by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich in 1972), is to show the teacher ways of implementing and supplementing existing materials. The suggested teaching procedures may be used with large classes, small groups, and individual students. They may also be used with any method, inasmuch as a special effort has been made to include a variety of teaching approaches.

Classroom Techniques: Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language contains several new features. First of all, the reader will note the inclusion of special techniques for teachers of ESL (English as a Second Language). The emphasis, as before, is on elementary and intermediate language classes, although some of the techniques are applicable for advanced students. Second, all sample items from foreign languages are accompanied by English equivalents, so that readers can understand them more readily. Third, a wide variety of communication activities has been included for all four language skills. Finally, the chapter on teaching culture has been substantially revised to reflect recent trends.

Part One of the handbook presents an overview of the language class. Ways of preparing supplementary materials are briefly reviewed. A variety of procedures for classroom management is suggested.

Part Two focuses on specific techniques for teaching the language itself, its sound system, its grammar, and its vocabulary. For the sake of simplicity we have used traditional grammar terminology. The actual techniques, however, cover a broad range of methods and approaches. All teachers will be able to discover many ideas for varying their instruction, no matter what their teaching situation or basic materials.

Part Three of the handbook presents ways of developing the skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The aim of these procedures is to build up the student's ability to use the language as a vehicle for meaningful communication.

The final section of the handbook, Part Four, offers some suggestions for teaching culture, both daily life patterns and general civilization.

The Appendix contains sample lesson plans that show how several different procedures and techniques may be woven into a single class period.

This handbook does not treat the preparation of performance objectives and the use of learning contracts to individualize instruction.* However, teachers planning to adopt performance contracts will discover in this handbook many ways of varying classroom activities and of thereby avoiding the main danger of a poorly planned individualized program: student boredom.

In revising this handbook, the authors have received the encouragement and assistance of a great many people. Special thanks go to Barbara Freed of the University of Pennsylvania for a number of helpful suggestions. We would also like to express once again our appreciation to all those who contributed to the success of the first edition of the handbook: Alfred N. Smith, Lorraine Strasheim, Virginia Garibaldi Allen, Renée S. Disick, and the native speakers who checked the accuracy of the examples: Jean-Paul Valette, Werner Haas, Thérèse Bonin, Joseph Wipf, Jacob Voelker, and Esteban Egea. Once again we would like to thank our editor, Albert Richards, who, as ever, brought his critical eye to the manuscript.

Finally, we wish to express our thanks to our many readers, students, and colleagues throughout this country and abroad who, although not mentioned by name, have helped us in the formulation of our ideas and to whom this handbook is gratefully dedicated.

E.D.A.
R.M.V.

---

*For suggestions in these areas see Rebecca M. Valette and Renée S. Disick, *Modern Language Performance Objectives and Individualization: A Handbook* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), and Renée S. Disick, *Individualizing Language Instruction: Strategies and Methods* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).

Contents

PART TWO   Presenting the Language

PART THREE   Developing the Skills

part one
The Language
Class—
an Overview

outline

one
The Teacher
and the Course

The success or failure of a course in a foreign language or in English as a second language (ESL) may be evaluated by the progress of the students in language acquisition and cultural understanding and in the development of a positive attitude toward language learning. One simple, direct measure is provided by enrollment figures: What percentage of students are continuing with language study? The students themselves, with their aptitudes and their weaknesses, form the given or the point of departure for the evaluation. The key question is, Did the course succeed or fail with respect to the students enrolled in it? and not, Would the course have been more successful had more able students been enrolled?

The success of a course depends on several factors, the most important of which is the teacher. The scheduling of classes, the outward form of the instruction, and the basic program being used are of secondary importance.

1.1 THE TEACHER

The teacher is the key figure in the language course. It is the teacher who sets the tone for the learning activities. In a classical audio-lingual approach, the teacher is an orchestra leader directing a group of apprentices. With a highly student-centered approach, the teacher may simply encourage student activity and answer occasional questions. In either of these cases, as well as in the classroom situations falling between these two extremes, the teacher plays a prime role in effecting student progress or lack thereof.

3

1.1.1 The teacher's competence

It is, of course, desirable that all language teachers be fluent speakers of the language they are teaching. At the same time, however, it is evident that the great majority of foreign-language teachers whose native language is English do not possess near-native fluency in the second language.

Professional foreign-language teachers continually strive to improve their competence in the second and often third language. They try to get abroad at least once every five years, perhaps taking advantage of the low-cost charter flights of the professional organizations (such as MLA, ACTFL, the AATs). They try to get to foreign films, possibly seeing them two or three times, once for entertainment and subsequently as a means of increasing their audio-lingual skills. They subscribe to at least one foreign periodical to keep abreast of current developments in the countries whose language they are teaching. If possible, they listen regularly to radio broadcasts in the foreign language, on shortwave or (in many parts of the country) on local stations. They may even invite (and pay) a willing native speaker residing in their community to visit their language classes from time to time to note any mistakes they make.

Yet, how effective can native Americans hope to be as foreign language teachers? The answer is that they may be highly effective.

First, their own continuing role as students of the language they are teaching is sensed by their students. Students will respond warmly to a person who doesn't pretend to "know it all," but who is truly committed to the learning process.

Second, a recent study has failed to find any definite correlation between teacher language proficiency and student language achievement at the elementary levels.[1] Although there may be many explanations for this lack of significant correlation, it seems plausible that a dynamic language teacher of average-to-low language proficiency who uses tape recordings and a variety of techniques in the classroom might well be more effective than the very fluent teacher who is less responsive to the needs of the students and lacks imaginative teaching methods.

Although techniques in themselves cannot compensate for very poor language proficiency, they definitely enhance the effectiveness of the teacher in the classroom.

If the language course introduces the culture of people who speak the target language, it is evident that the teacher should develop a solid familiarity and understanding of that target culture or cultures. Nothing is as effective as a prolonged period of residence in the target country, but even such an experience must be supplemented with ongoing activities: reading, conversations with visitors from the country, films, recordings, and so on. With the increased

---

[1] See Philip D. Smith, Jr., *A Comparison of the Cognitive and Audiolingual Approaches to Foreign Language Instruction: the Pennsylvania Foreign Language Project* (Philadelphia: Center for Curriculum Development, 1970).

availability of international communications, most countries of the world are in a period of growth and change. The France of 1976, for instance, is not the France of 1956 or even that of 1966.

1.1.2 The teacher's attitude

The attitude of the teacher also influences a student's success. A study among elementary-school students seems to indicate that a teacher's expectancies are self-fulfilling.[2] In other words, if a teacher assumes that half the class is incapable of mastering the German /y/, then many of the students will never learn the sound. If another teacher is confident that all of his or her students can produce the /y/, they all eventually find they can say it. If the teacher feels that modern languages are just for the bright student and that the slower ones will be unable to keep up, then many of the students will drop out at the end of the semester or the end of the year.

Teacher attitude is particularly crucial in the case of ESL students. When students from another culture and/or linguistic group enter an American school, their integration is definitely enhanced if teachers demonstrate a supportive and understanding attitude. Such students not only need help in developing their command of English, but also frequently could benefit from an introduction to American culture, its conventions and its value systems.

A positive attitude on the part of the teacher is essential to success. The many techniques suggested in this handbook will work only if the teacher is personally convinced that the students are capable of learning another language.

1.1.3 Teaching for mastery

The pace of the class may be governed by three things, either singly or in combination: the book or program, the syllabus, and the ability of the students. For some teachers the book is the decisive factor: the First-Year Book, as the title indicates, must be covered in one year, no more, no less. In some school systems teachers are expected to adhere rigidly to a prescribed syllabus, which again makes no allowances for individual differences among classes and students.

Ideally, the pace of a language class, particularly at the beginning and intermediate levels, should be determined by the rate at which the students master the material. High attrition rates in foreign languages are an indication that most classes are paced too fast for the average student. Teaching for mastery means organizing instruction so that all students are given the opportunity to learn what is being taught.

---

[2] See Robert Rosenthal and Lenore F. Jacobsen, *Pygmalion in the Classroom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1968).

Teaching for mastery also implies the creative use of a variety of teaching procedures. Since different students learn in different ways, the introduction of a new technique frequently helps a student overcome a learning problem. If a teacher expects the entire class to master the usage of the subjunctive, then he or she must utilize techniques to help the eye-minded as well as the ear-minded students, to help those who need explanation as well as those who learn best by developing their own generalizations, and to help those who are hesitant to express themselves and thus run the risk of looking foolish as well as those who are eager to try to express themselves and are unmindful of errors.

1.1.4   Classroom behaviors of the outstanding teacher

In a recent research project, Gertrude Moskowitz identified and studied a group of outstanding foreign language teachers in the Philadelphia area. In comparison with a matched group of heterogeneous teachers, the outstanding teachers exhibited the following classroom behaviors and interactions:[3]

1. The target language dominates the classroom interaction, whether or not the teacher or the students are speaking.
2. The teachers have an excellent command of the target language.
3. Even in first-level classes, very little English is used.
4. The teachers have fewer verbal tics.
5. Students use the foreign language to raise questions.
6. The amount of teacher talk is less.
7. The teachers are active nonverbally and use many more hand gestures.
8. The teachers are more expressive and animated.
9. The teachers move around the classroom a great deal.
10. The teachers use more behaviors that encourage and reinforce student participation, whether communicating in the foreign language, English, or nonverbally.
11. The teachers give students more immediate feedback.
12. The climate is warm and accepting.
13. The teachers often smile, praise, and joke.
14. Their praise is longer, more varied, and they use more nonverbal praise.
15. There is more laughter in their classes.
16. The teachers personalize the content more.
17. The students are "with" the teacher, rather than being apathetic or flippant.
18. Students exhibit more outward signs of enthusiasm to participate.
19. Student behavior is very seldom criticized.
20. Less classroom time is devoted to silent reading and written tasks.
21. There is less writing on the board by the teacher.

[3] Adapted from Gertrude Moskowitz, "The Classroom Interaction of Outstanding Foreign Language Teachers," *Foreign Language Annals* 9, no. 2 (April 1976), pp. 156–57.

22. Students speak to the teachers before and after class.
23. The teachers greet students before the class formally starts.
24. There is a greater amount of warm-up questions, review, and focusing on the skill of speaking.
25. There is a greater number of different activities per lesson.
26. The pace of the lessons is generally more rapid.
27. Drills are conducted rapidly.
28. The teachers have excellent classroom control.
29. The teachers exhibit patience.
30. When correcting student behavior, the teachers tend to joke or to maintain eye contact with students.
31. When correcting student errors, the teachers do so gently.
32. Students assist the teachers more in setting up and running equipment.

In an informal way, the teacher may simply read through the above list and determine personal areas of strength and weakness. The list may also be used by students observing foreign language classes, or by supervisors visiting those teaching under their charge. Some teachers may wish to experiment with Moskowitz' more formal system of Interaction Analysis.[4]

1.2   SCHEDULING

School schedules determine the basic arrangement of teaching time. However, no matter which of the following systems is being applied at a particular school, the actual foreign language class is ultimately as flexible or as rigid as the teacher makes it.[5]

1.2.1   Setting up time blocks

1.2.1a   TRADITIONAL SCHEDULING

The day is broken up into periods of forty or fifty minutes in length. Each class meets a certain number of periods a week in the same classroom with the same teacher. Sometimes one or two half-hour periods per week are scheduled in a language laboratory.

Teachers may treat the period as one long period for full-class activity, or they may alternate full-class activity with small-group work or individualized instruction. While they may cut the period up into smaller time segments, however, they can rarely arrange for activities lasting more than one period.

[4] For an excellent introduction to Interaction Analysis, see Gertrude Moskowitz et al., "Interaction in the Foreign-Language Class," in James W. Dodge, ed., *Sensitivity in the Foreign-Language Classroom*, Reports of the Working Committees of the Northeast Conference (1973).
[5] For a more complete treatment of this subject, see Jermaine D. Arendt, *New Scheduling Patterns and the Foreign Language Teacher*, ERIC Focus Report No. 18 (1970). Available from ACTFL Materials Center, 2 Park Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10016.

1.2.1b MODULAR SCHEDULING

The day is divided into modular units or "mods" of twenty minutes each. A French class, for example, might meet for two consecutive mods on Monday, three consecutive mods on Tuesday, two mods on Wednesday, one at 8:30 and the other at 2:30, not at all on Thursday, and two consecutive mods on Friday. Small-group activities, such as a conversation group or several interest groups, could meet during a single mod period. A film might be shown during the longer Tuesday class.

Unfortunately, even in schools having modular scheduling the teachers sometimes fail to differentiate among the time combinations available to them. In other words, teachers have not adapted their techniques to the flexibility offered by the varied class periods.

1.2.1c FLEXIBLE SCHEDULING

Under flexible scheduling, time blocks can be moved as well as increased. For example, on Monday of the first week the German class might have a time block or mod of twenty minutes at 8:30. On Monday of the second week, this same class might meet for three mods at 1:00.

Flexible scheduling allows the teacher to request specific time arrangements to coincide with the week's lesson plan. A long time sequence could be requested, for example, to show a full-length foreign language film. However, since such a system calls for a complex computer program and considerable advance planning on the part of each teacher, the flexible scheduling arrangement often degenerates into the modular scheduling described in the previous section. An effective flexible scheduling arrangement does, however, make it possible to offer a greater variety of learning activities than the straight modular system does.

1.2.1d OPEN SCHEDULING

Open scheduling allows each student to plan the day's activities. This system cannot be implemented unless all courses are fully programmed with special sets of material for every level. The Spanish IV student, for example, can decide at what time he or she wishes to take Spanish and then go to the appropriate carrel, laboratory booth, or working table.

1.2.2 Back-to-back scheduling

With any of the time arrangements mentioned, it is possible to schedule classes *back-to-back*, that is, at the same time. Back-to-back scheduling can contribute to the increase of flexibility of ESL and foreign language classes in several ways.

1.2.2a   TRACKS OR STREAMS

If a school offers two or more tracks of a given language course, such as Spanish I, it is advisable to schedule these tracks at the same hour. Then if a student in the faster track or stream falls behind for any reason, he or she may be transferred to the slower track without any shift in schedule. Similarly, if a student in the slower track begins to spurt ahead of the others, he or she may be transferred into the faster track.[6]

1.2.2b   BETWEEN-CLASS EXCHANGES: SAME LEVEL

Back-to-back scheduling facilitates between-class exchanges. (The informal grouping of two or more classes is called informal team teaching. See Section 1.3.) One first-year class may prepare a skit for another first-year class. Then for part of a period on the day chosen the two classes can be merged without raising any scheduling problems. Exchanges can be more frequent than this. For example, if both classes are progressing at similar rates, both might use the same set of tests. As a follow-through, one teacher might take those students from both classes who passed the test into one classroom while the other teacher would meet with the rest, who need remedial work, in the other classroom. The extent and variety of this between-class cooperation is limited only by the imagination of the cooperating teachers.

1.2.2c   BETWEEN-CLASS EXCHANGES: DIFFERENT LEVELS

Classes of different levels may also benefit from back-to-back scheduling. The faster students of the upper class might be excused at certain times to help tutor students or guide small group conversation or pattern drill practice in the lower class. Students in the upper class who have consistent difficulty with a confusing point of vocabulary or grammar might prepare a presentation on this problem area and give it at the appropriate time in the lower class. The teacher of the upper class might even wish to send those students who, for example, are unsure of the partitive to the lower class on the day that teacher is presenting the partitive to that class. The lower class, on the other hand, might prepare short skits or dialogs for the upper class.

1.2.2d   DOUBLE REGISTRATION

Double registration allows gifted students to advance more rapidly than their classmates without requiring additional time from the teacher. If Spanish II and French I are offered at the same time, a gifted Spanish II student might attend

---

[6] See Michael Herñick and Dora Kennedy, "Multi-level Grouping of Students in the Modern Foreign Language Program," in *Foreign Language Annals* 2, no. 2 (December 1968), pp. 200–04.