

*This is an extract from the introductory chapter to **Classroom Language**, by Sagrario Salaberri. From the series **Handbooks for the English Classroom** (Macmillan Heinemann ELT).*

Who is *Classroom Language* for?

This book is specifically designed for teachers of English who do not feel confident enough to use English as the main language of communication with their classes. It is also designed for those teachers who do use English as the language of the classroom, but who want to improve their technique or get new ideas.

Extract

Some of the theories which support the use of English as the main language in the classroom from primary education onwards are outlined below. They are presented in the form of answers to the key questions that teachers may want answered.

What are the processes of learning and acquisition?

Both learning and acquisition take place in the foreign language classroom. Learning is a conscious process, whereas acquisition helps the development of knowledge about the language in a spontaneous and unconscious way. The process of acquisition is particularly important in primary education as young learners do not yet have the levels of cognitive development to analyse the foreign language in the way that secondary and adult learners do. Situations which lead to the immersion of learners in the foreign language are of benefit in that they provide learners with an opportunity to understand language at a higher level than they may be able to produce. As the learners progress, they become more and more able to participate actively in the use of the language.

Classroom language helps promote acquisition in a variety of ways - the language is highly contextualised with many extra-linguistic clues to help comprehension and it appeals to the young learners' previous experience. The learners will only start to understand rules about the language when their level of cognitive development is sufficiently high and after exposure to these rules through language in context.

What is meant by the *silent period*?

In the early stages of the teaching of a foreign language, it is important not to force the learners to give verbal responses which are beyond their productive competence. This reflects the *silent period* theory which takes place when a child acquires its first language and comprehension of language is shown by gestures or actions and not by verbal responses.

Learners are asked to give non verbal responses in many situations which use classroom language (preparing materials, organising their work, etc), as much of the language is receptive and aims to develop the comprehension of language in context. This means that a higher degree of teacher input is needed with primary-level learners to allow for this *silent period* than is necessary with secondary learners who have a greater ability to communicate orally.

What is meant by *comprehensible input*?

It is important to provide the learners with *comprehensible input* (language they can understand but not necessarily produce themselves). This is particularly important when learners are just beginning a language and have a low level of linguistic competence.

The use of classroom language gives learners *comprehensible input* which is meaningful to them for the following reasons:

- The language answers the immediate needs of the learners in that it is used for the setting up and carrying out of activities in the classroom and so is of instrumental value.
- The language used is functional in that it can be used in everyday contexts.
- The language is very highly contextualised and often easily demonstrated physically making comprehension easier.

How do you contextualise language?

The classroom environment is very important during the compulsory stages of primary and secondary education in that it is the only real language learning context which is common to all learners. The classroom and the language that is practised in it create many opportunities to establish personal relationships and meaningful communication between learners in various situations. Learners can relate the use of the foreign language to problem solving, sharing ideas and opinions and expressing feelings in an immediate and meaningful way.

What is *learning by doing*?

Looked at from a cognitive point of view, knowledge is developed through a process of building on meanings. The cognitive development of children is such that they do not usually develop the ability to think in abstract terms until the age of about twelve. This means that they acquire knowledge through the association of meaning with objects, people and actions, etc within an immediate context. It is only after a period of practice with these associations that learners become able to think in abstract terms and use the language independently of the context.

A child learns both its first language and a second language in context through referring to the physical environment. This suggests that the foreign language classroom should include teaching activities which promote the systematic use of classroom language which is itself highly contextualised. It is also important to include what could be called *routines*, that is language and expressions which are closely linked with everyday classroom activities. These *routines* allow the learners to use language appropriately within a defined context and they can often be learnt through repetition without needing to be explained in language terms.

During primary education, it is important to select activities and work contexts that include instrumental language that the learners are already familiar with (the rules in games, recurring aspects of stories, etc) The importance of the classroom itself and what it contains should not be overlooked. The classroom is the place where activities, relationships and patterns of behaviour take place which draw on the learners' experience of school.

A link can be seen between the use of classroom language and certain psycho-pedagogic theories. Amongst these are the theories put forward by Vygotsky, Bruner, Dewey, Stenhouse, etc which relate to the *Natural Approach* by Krashen and Terrell in that they consider comprehension and the meaningful

use of language as fundamental in language learning. A more direct link can be seen with Asher's *Total Physical Response* which recommends that in the early stages of interaction in the classroom learners give non-verbal responses in communicative situations.

How can learners become more independent?

The goal of the language classroom should not be simply that the class learn English in order to communicate, but they communicate in order to develop their own learning. The activities in the classroom should be seen as generating language, rather than the language dictating different activities. In other words, the language should derive naturally from doing the activities. Different learners will process information and react to it in different ways. This means recognising that learners have different styles and ways of learning which become apparent when they start to learn a foreign language.

One of the reasons for using classroom language is that it allows learners to control and evaluate their own successes, respect the learning styles of others and encourages them to learn from their peers. The act of sharing information in the classroom and helping others to understand creates a feeling of success and reduces inhibition.

The use of classroom language can also play a part in the principle of *learning to learn*, in that it helps learners control their learning environment, encourages pair and group work and helps learners access information and resources, etc. The aim of this book is to help develop learner independence by setting up or increasing the number of situations in which learners can use classroom language which in turn will broaden their experience of using the foreign language.

This book provides resources and information about eight common areas of classroom communication. It aims to help teachers think about their current classroom practice and their use of classroom language, to work at their own pace and to make any changes they think appropriate.