

Five Techniques to Support Second Language Learners in the Classroom

1 CREATE LINKS TO PERSONAL EXPERIENCES AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE

Why? Second language learners benefit from understanding the context of new materials. Relating the new material to their experiences and background knowledge provides meaningful context.

How? When introducing a topic, ask students what they know about it. Have they ever seen, used, or done this thing? When? Think-pair-share works well for this type of schema activation. Students can think about what they already know, talk to a partner about it, and then a few students can share with the whole class.

2 ENCOURAGE USE OF FIRST LANGUAGE (L1)

Why? Using the L1 to learn a L2 can help students clarify their understandings of classroom discourse and text, confirm and expand their understanding of the content, prepare to carry out a task in the L2, and talk about metalinguistic points. It can also save time by allowing for the occasional quick translation, rather than undergoing a long attempt at explanation in the L2. Additionally, it can give students a sense of security when much of what is happening in the classroom is new.

How? Using L1 in the classroom needs to be done carefully with intentional planning. Regular code switching from L2 to L1 without a planned strategy may result in linguistic confusion. To avoid confusion and save time when explaining a new vocabulary word, systematically ask students as part of the instructional routine, “How would you say this in your language?” Likewise, after reading a story ask students to retell the story in their own language. A rule of thumb for deciding on the use of L1 is to consider if the students’ understanding of the content is important or how to express a message in the L2. For example, when students share their prior experience with a new word or concept, using L1 can be helpful because what is important is to connect to their experiences, not how to express that in the L2. Similarly, when students are preparing a partner or group task, they may be invited to use the L1 but reminded that the ultimate product should be in the L2. This encourages deeper thinking about the topic and allows for metalinguistic discussion in the L1 about the L2 as students prepare their work.

3 GIVE PUPILS TIME TO PROCESS AND TEST OUT IDEAS, EITHER BY SPEAKING IN THEIR FIRST OR IN THEIR NEW LANGUAGE, WITH A PARTNER OR SMALL GROUP

Why? In an L2 classroom, it is important to have learners feel secure so that they can take risks and participate fully. They will feel more secure if they have time to practice using their L2 and answering the question before having to say it in front of the whole class. While this cannot be used for every question in every class, it is important to remember to do this several times each lesson so that the students who tend to take longer to prepare an answer and who do not frequently raise their hands have more opportunity to participate in a non-threatening way.

How? Students may be asked to jot down their idea on a slate or in their notebook or to think quietly and then participate in a think-pair-share. Another way to encourage participation from even the quietest students is to ask a whole-class question that has two or more possible answers and all students answer at once. For example, a teacher might say, “In the story today, would you describe the main character as brave or foolish? Raise your fist if you think she was brave and raise one finger if you think she was foolish.”

4 ENHANCE MEANING WITH PICTURES, OBJECTS AND ACTIONS

Why? L2 learners need to interact with a new word or idea many times and in many ways to fully appropriate the meaning. Using pictures, objects and actions can help provide visual, tactile, and kinesthetic reinforcement to any verbal explanation that may be given for a new word.

How? It does not matter if you do not have fancy, prepared flash cards and posters. Teachers can draw simple stick figures and line drawings on the board (or ask students to do it). The teacher and the students can use actions to demonstrate individual words and concepts, or can use role plays to dramatize stories they have read. Many everyday objects are portable enough for teachers to bring to school to use for demonstrations (e.g., dishes, clothing, cooking tools, etc.). Parents’ committees can also help collect empty containers that can be used in class for demonstration and vocabulary practice (e.g., old containers for different foods and drinks, empty medicine packets, labels of various products, etc.).

5 PRACTICE AND PLAY WITH THE SOUNDS OF THE TARGET LANGUAGE

Why? After vocabulary, phonological awareness is one of the most important skills for L2 readers to develop. Even if sounds are similar in the L1 and L2, students who are new to the L2 will need to develop their capacity to hear those same sounds in a new linguistic context. The first skills to develop are more general phonological awareness skills, such as identifying words in a spoken sentence and identifying rhyme. Finer skills such as identifying syllables and phonemes and being able to substitute or delete syllables or phonemes are developed later.

How? Teachers can make a habit of integrating some phonological awareness work into lesson plans whenever they are introducing new words and phrases and returning to phonological awareness work if students are struggling to read certain passages or spell certain words. Techniques include representing spoken words with pebbles or bottle caps, clapping the syllables in a new vocabulary word, and finding words students already know that rhyme or contain a similar sound to a new word.