

Guided by Principles: The Righteous Path

Karl Hedberg
Shiga University / Lecturer

“How can I learn English?” Not a semester goes by when I am not asked this question at least a dozen times. I quickly reply with my set answer, “Study!” I believe students expect me to share some magical method or technique for successfully learning English. I wish I could give a simple response but the answer to this question is complicated. My philosophy on teaching and the best way to learn English is not based on any particular method, but rather on principles that I have developed through teaching experience, action research, professional development, and self-reflection.

I was greatly influenced by a paper entitled “The postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second/foreign language learning” by Bala Kumaravadivelu (1994). He correctly believes that language learning/teaching has gone beyond relying on any one particular method and the rigid rules of implementation. He asserts that language learning and language learners are far too complex to employ a single method.

Kumaravadivelu’s Post Method Condition has three characteristics. First, it is an alternative to method rather than an alternative method. Second, the method recognizes teacher autonomy and expects teachers to reflect, adjust, and initiate change in the classroom. Third, teachers should rely on principled pragmatism to shape classroom learning. Kumaravadivelu developed a strategic framework of ten macrostrategies for teachers that allows microstrategies to develop depending on the teaching challenges and situations. I will explain how I apply some of these strategies at Shiga University.

1. Maximize learning opportunities

Each classroom meeting is a joint learning event between teachers and students. The production of language discourse in the classroom is multi-directional, which allows for numerous and unpredictable learning opportunities. For example, I begin every class with the question, “What’s new?” This common greeting requires an unscripted answer.

2. Facilitate negotiated interaction

Learners need to develop clarification, confirmation and comprehension skills. To maximize these opportunities, I developed a number of pair and small group work activities and incorporated them into the handouts and textbooks I wrote for Shiga University students.

3. Minimize perceptual mismatches

Learners must have a clear understanding of the teacher’s intentions and language learning objectives. There could be many potential sources for the mismatches, including cognitive, communicative, cultural and even attitudinal misunderstandings amongst students. To avoid mismatches, I list that day’s objectives on the board before class.

4. Activate intuitive heuristics

Foreign languages cannot be learned from explanation alone. Students need to decipher grammar rules and linguistic meaning on their own. One way to do this is through independent extensive reading of graded readers from the university library. All of my students are required to do this outside reading.



5. Foster language awareness

One way to foster language awareness is to treat grammar as a network of systems and not something that needs to be mastered perfectly. Grammar teaching for the most part is teacher-centered with a focus on memorization and rules, while language awareness teaching is student-centered, emphasizing general principles and understanding.

6. Contextualize linguistic input

It is essential that the language input be contextualized for our students and not be isolated into fragments. Students would be deprived of the linguistic clues that contextualization allows. My textbook employs problem-solving tasks and role-plays in which the students have more control of all the language learning elements.

7. Integrate language skills

Listening, speaking, writing, and reading are often isolated in curricular and material design without pedagogical justification. The activities I bring to the classroom utilize all four skills and are integrated as smoothly as possible.

8. Promote learner autonomy

Many second language learners are passive learners lacking self-initiative. University students must take increased responsibility for their own learning and it is my responsibility to remind them of this. I encourage students to follow their own interests as this is the key to raise motivation to learn English.



9. Raise cultural consciousness

Foreign language and cultural learning go hand in hand. It is essential to raise the awareness of the culture and values of the target language. The teacher should not be the only source of cultural information but should encourage learners to be cultural informants. At Shiga University we are fortunate to have many exchange students from diverse backgrounds who contribute to raising cultural consciousness.

10. Ensure Social relevance

This refers to teachers being aware of the numerous variables that can influence the language learning environment. Any attempt to make serious and realistic language goals must consider the societal and educational restrictions that are in place. Social context affects everything from learners' motivation to their objectives for learning English.

Just as each student needs to develop a plan of study, teachers also need to experiment with different approaches and styles to maximize learning opportunities. Teaching is not a static profession, and I will continue to reflect, adjust, and initiate change as I search for the answer to "How can I best teach English?" and prepare students to think about, "How can I best learn English?"

References

- Hedberg, K. & Mauser, P. (2008). *Living English I & II*. Nagahama, Japan: Keystone English Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1994). The postmethod condition: (E)merging strategies for second language/foreign language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 28(1), 27-48.