

Strategies for the Non-Native Language Teacher

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Synopsis: This article focuses on the challenges a non-native language teacher faces and presents some strategies to use. It is based on research conducted by the author during the last six years.

Introduction

I have been working in the field of language education for over 30 years. My job as a foreign language teacher educator has consisted of training Americans to become teachers of Spanish. Over the years I have come to realize that there are many special aspects to consider when working with foreign language teachers who are not natives of the language and culture they teach. My own experience teaching English in Bolivia taught me that there were adjustments to make and strategies to employ in order to compensate for not being a native. For this reason, I started to document the experiences of student teachers, many of whom I supervised during their practica. This paper is based on those experiences.

There are many aspects to consider when preparing language teachers who are not natives of the language they teach, but the most important are cultural, linguistic, and psychological. In all three areas, the non-native teacher has both hurdles and advantages. Let's first define each of the areas and then focus on the hurdles.

Cultural Aspects

The role of the language teacher differs from country to country. The most traditional cultures view a teacher as the master of knowledge. The teacher is the only person with knowledge and the only one who can impart knowledge. Students listen, take

notes, and respect the opinions of the teacher because he or she is the authority. In some cultures, it is simply not possible to conduct classes in a participatory manner. Students “participate” only when they answer direct questions the teacher asks. A student will neither refute nor contradict what the teacher says (or reads from a book). While this approach might function in subjects like history or geography, certain adjustments become necessary when it comes to language instruction. Students have to participate to some degree; it is, after all, the student who needs the practice, not the teacher. Yet, how many of us have seen classes dominated by the teacher?

To complicate matters further, there is the issue of gender. In many cultures most of the teachers at the high school level are males. At the university level the majority of professors are also males. This means that the behavior of the female teacher is already put to the test. She must be strong, authoritarian, and able to implement some form of control and punishment for misbehaviors or lack of achievement. Imagine a non-native teacher who is unaware of these customs, values, and attitudes that are reflected in the conduct of both the students and other teachers. Thus, the first cultural hurdle has to do with expectations concerning the role of the teacher and his or her gender.

The second one is more sociocultural and has to do with the teacher’s knowledge of slang and jargon. This is especially important at the high school level. If teachers are not informed about current slang and jargon used among teenagers, they can find themselves in precarious situations. When learning a language, most high school students want to know how to say their favorite phrases in the target language. This always helps to spark their motivation. A non-native language teacher has not always been fortunate to spend time in the country where the target language is spoken. Some teachers make special efforts to keep up to date on common expressions, but slang is yet another thing. How can we respond to this challenge? Later on we will discuss some strategies.

Finally, the perspectives, values, and attitudes that speakers of the target language hold become almost impossible to grasp. We know about them because we were given examples, but we may not have experienced them directly. Yet, sociocultural proficiency is as important as the linguistic mastery language teachers should have.

Psychological Aspects

Following cultural aspects, and closely related to them, are the psychological aspects. Some foreign and second language teachers feel distant from the target culture. They find it difficult to identify with despite the fact that they loved their year in Paris or semester in Madrid. They can never be quite French or quite Spanish. It is not natural to “imitate” the people from the target culture because if it’s overdone, there is the danger of perpetuating stereotypes. We have already discussed the perceived role of the teacher. Yet, we cannot be someone else. The dilemma is whether to conduct your class as a French person or as a teacher of French, despite your nationality and what your natural inclination tells you.

Obviously, we would like to conduct our classes in the French, Italian, or Chinese way. But is this really ever possible? Moreover, what behavior do we expect of our students? Some language teachers are well aware of the expected behavior of students in the target culture because they themselves have spent time as students in another country. Clearly, there are many things to consider regarding our expectations of student conduct. For example, a teacher might expect his or her students to behave as Mexican students, addressing the teacher in a different way, standing up when responding, and so. How far one goes to implement this depends on the instructor and the level of comfort he or she feels in doing this.

Linguistic Aspect

This is probably the most problematic area. There are so many linguistic aspects to consider. Let’s take the phonological aspect as an example. The non-native language teacher may still have a trace of his or her native accent when speaking the target language. For some people pronunciation has never been a problem. They sound so perfectly native that they are often complimented when they speak the foreign language. Other people still have an accent even after years of speaking and teaching the language. Having an accent for some is a matter of not exercising the right articulation organs. Spanish for example, requires a great flexibility of the tongue in order to trill the r’s, whereas French requires something different to produce glottal and nasal sounds.

In terms of structures, those teaching a foreign language derived from the same linguistic family as their native tongue often find this less of a problem. But teaching a language with very different grammatical structures can indeed be a challenge. In morphology, too, the existence or absence of similarities between cognates, suffixes, affixes, and so on presents another important aspect. One can compare and contrast the two languages in question and see obvious differences or similarities, yet in most cases, teachers don't resort to this contrastive approach, and present the target language as something completely unrelated to the student's native language (even if it is a related tongue.)

Finally, in regard to suprasegmentals (stress, pitch, and intonation), it is probably best not to overemphasize them. In some cultures the pitch used by females is higher than the one for males, and the intonation may vary. In other cultures the intonation may indicate whether what someone says is a question or a statement. In short, the linguistic area tends to be the aspect that many teachers consider most important when preparing to teach. And although we acknowledge that it is extremely important, it is certainly not language alone that makes a teacher a teacher. So, how do we deal with these challenges?

Let us now consider a variety of strategies that a non-native teacher might employ when teaching a language that is not his or her first tongue.

Cultural Strategies

Create classroom situations using specific scenarios (role plays, simulations, activities).

Keep informed about developments in the target country—or countries—where the language is spoken (music, age-specific slang, etc.).

Ask other teachers (especially natives) to team teach.

Assign culture-rich texts.

Assign Web searches.

Do things you can do well, without trying something that does not come naturally or easily to you.

Think through possible scenarios in order to be prepared to deal with problems: rehearse, practice, and be sure you know every step.

Psychological Strategies

Make sure the material you use is appropriate for the age, gender, and interests of your students.

Choose material that you are familiar with and can handle comfortably.

Bring out the positive side of every issue presented in class.

Remember your experience in the target culture or your experience learning the language yourself.

Linguistic Aspect

Use prepared materials.

Structure your lessons, rehearse, and read ahead of time.

Monitor your own speech: if you have problems with certain words, practice them.

Control context and content.

Use technology, Web materials, DVD, and CD-roms.

Give homework that involves native speakers.

Invite native speakers to your classroom.

Besides all of the above, the use of appropriate materials and teaching approaches, given the personality of the teacher, plays an important role in effective language teaching. As with everything else, there is no one right answer, no magic solution. The only thing we can do to become better teachers is to monitor ourselves and pay attention to our students, their likes and dislikes, and motivate them. The rest will normally take care of itself.