

## USING THE TARGET LANGUAGE IN THE CLASSROOM

**Learners who are struggling in the foreign language class often say they don't know what's going on, that the teacher speaks in the foreign language all the time and that since they don't understand it they don't know what to do to be successful. Rather than lose face these learners will play up, or say they're not interested in learning the language anyway. How can teachers meet the needs of these learners as well as complying with guidelines on target language use?**

*(If you haven't already done so, read about the [5-Stage Cycle](#) before continuing.)*

For the schools that use it, one of the most useful aspects of the 5-stage model was the clear distinction it makes between practising language and using language for real purposes. In effect, this creates two phases: Stages 1, 2 and 3 (Phase 1); and Stages 4 & 5 (Phase 2).

The distinction has been useful for learners as well as teachers. It makes learners aware of the importance of engaging with the presentation, practice and consolidation activities in Phase 1 if they are to be able to cope confidently with the 'real' language in Phase 2. And it prompts teachers to check that learners are sufficiently familiar with new elements of language to be ready for the challenge of using the language in real contexts.

As far as using the target language in for classroom interaction is concerned, however, the division into two phases is less clear cut. While the distinction between 'practice' and 'real' is still useful, in that it provides some justification for using the mother tongue in Phase 1 and for insisting on target language use in Phase 2, it would clearly be wrong to exclude use of the target language from Phase 1. Indeed, if learners are to be able to use the language interactively, confidently and consistently, at Stage 4, preparation must begin from Stage 1 in the same way as preparation for other linguistic skills and competencies: knowing what is expected, and why; systematic introduction and modelling of new linguistic items; opportunities for consolidation and revision, etc. In other words, a progressive programme of preparation.

The precise nature of that programme will be determined by the foreign languages department with input from individual teachers and – increasingly – learners. (Useful suggestions can be found amongst the downloads and links below.) It will certainly include a gradually expanding corpus of communicative elements that can be introduced, practised and used every day: greetings, responding to instructions; asking for help or permission, etc. and building over time to the capacity, confidence and willingness to interact exclusively in the foreign language after the Stage 3/4 watershed.

Reaching such a level of competence will, of course, take time. In the interim, some mother tongue use, even at Stage 4, is inevitable. Quite early on, learners can be encouraged to treat difficulties as opportunities for learning what to say when they find themselves faced with just such a difficulty in a real-life context. These are genuine occasions for using coping strategies and should be treated (and prepared for) as such – no need to abandon the target language, except momentarily, perhaps, in the course of receiving help. If larger gaps are discovered they can be flagged up at the debriefing stage and dealt with systematically in the early stages of the next lesson or unit of work.

### **Where to look for materials and further ideas**

MLG Publishing

Ici On Parle Français, Wir Sprechen Deutsch and Se Habla Español all deal comprehensively with classroom language, including coping with language difficulties, problem solving, and use of mime and gesture

Cartoons for Classroom Communication covers all these situations and more besides.

<http://www.mlgpublishing.com>

Speak Up! Using the target language in class Peter Satchwell & June de Silva. CILT  
2009.

<http://www.languageswithoutlimits.co.uk/TL.pdf>