

## Trinity CertTESOL

### Study Resource 2: Understanding the Learner

As part of the Certificate course, you will have four hours' tuition as a beginner learner of an unfamiliar foreign language and complete an assessed Unknown Language Journal. This will place you in the position of a beginner learner, for you to evaluate your experiences and to compare and contrast learning with teaching.

You will also look at the lessons from the perspective of a trainee teacher and analyse some of the methods and techniques to learning that are introduced in other parts of the course and which you can apply in your own teaching.

This resource will introduce you briefly to Unit 5: the Unknown Language component of the CertTESOL course. We'll introduce:

- the *Unknown Language Journal* component in general
- some contrastive features of language
- reflection on teaching and learning
- ideas to support students through variety, reducing affective factors and motivation

*For each **Reflection Task**, take a moment to think and make notes mentally or in writing before you continue to read.*

### The Unknown Language Journal

In the journal you'll describe and analyse your feelings on *how* you're learning a new language and the techniques used to help you learn the lesson objectives. These objectives will include:

- language functions – e.g. how to exchange telephone numbers
- lexis – e.g. vocabulary for describing family members
- grammar - e.g. how to form a question

You will also describe the main differences and similarities between English and the new language that you notice in terms of lexis, grammar and pronunciation.

### Reflection Task 1

1. In the unknown language lessons, what objectives do you think the teacher will have?
  - a. What lexis and grammar points do you expect to learn?
  - b. What functions do you think will be useful for a beginner?
2. Think of any other language that you are familiar with. In what way is it similar to and different from English?

### Did you know that...

#### In lexis

- The German verb *bekommen* means *to get* - not *to become*. Hence, a German English learner may well say to a London waiter, "I want to become a beefsteak".
- The English word *gift* (= present) may mean either *poison* or *married* in the Scandinavian languages, depending on context.
- The number of words in a language for any particular concept normally indicates the importance of that concept to lives of that language group , e.g. the suggestion that the Inuit have hundreds of way to describe 'snow' (although the exact number of ways is hotly debated!)

(Source: Wikipedia)

#### In grammar

- Maori has three numbers for pronouns: singular, dual and plural: *ia* (he/she), *rāua* (they two), *rātou* (they 3 or more).
- A Swedish question is formed without the use of an auxiliary verb: *Var bor du?* (*Where live you?*)
- Japanese has subject-object-verb word order: *Watashi wa hako o akemasu* (I box open).

#### In pronunciation

- English is described as a stress timed language: there is a tendency in English for stressed syllables to occur at roughly equal intervals of time, regardless of the number of unstressed syllables in between. French, however, is described as a syllable-timed language and there is more equal stress on each syllable. This is sometimes called a 'machine-gun rhythm'.
- Spanish speakers distinguish between /r/ and /rr/ ("rolled r"): *pero* (but), *perro* (dog)
- Polish has 8 vowel sounds while English has over 20.

In the journal you will describe and reflect on methods and techniques used by the teacher to achieve the objectives, including:

- class management – e.g. instructions, correction, encouragement
- interactive patterns – e.g. pair / group work
- activities – e.g. listening practice, games, matching words to images
- materials – e.g. worksheets, recordings, pictures, realia

### **Reflection Task 2**

1. What methods and techniques do you think the teacher will use to give instructions and provide explanations in the unknown language?
2. Try to anticipate the types of activities the teacher will use.
  - a. What would functions/language would be helpful to learn first?
  - b. What materials do you think will suit this type of lesson?
3. Think about your most and least favourite teacher.
  - a. What made you feel this way about them?
  - b. Answer the questions below.

1. Were they enthusiastic, encouraging, lively, approachable, positive, flexible, friendly, firm, well prepared, knowledgeable...?
2. Did their eye contact include everyone for questioning, holding attention, retrieving attention, encouraging contribution, checking understanding?
3. Did their voices include a good range, variety, projection, and clarity? Were they well matched to their learners?
4. Did they talk too much, or not enough? Did they tell you the information or elicit it from you? Did you have a chance to discover meanings, patterns and rules? Were there plenty of opportunities for the learners to use the language in real communication?
5. Did they use gestures and facial expressions to convey meaning?
6. Were their instructions simple, clear and checked?
7. Was their error correction encouraging, helping students to correct themselves and each other?
8. How were the learners seated – in a horseshoe, in groups, in pairs or in rows? Did you get to work with different partners? How did this affect the interaction between teacher and learners and between learners and learners?
9. Was the teachers' board work organized logically organized for different purposes and varied?
10. Did they use a variety of aids: projector, images, video, music, realia?

In the UL Journal you will also describe and reflect on the nature of the learning experience and specific methods and attitudes that were more or less helpful to you and others in the group. Here you will include comments on your and others' feelings and motivation, and contrast this with any previous language learning.

### **Reflection Task 3**

1. How would you describe your previous language learning experiences? (If you haven't studied another language, think of a different subject.)
2. How do you prefer to learn? Do you like taking notes, trying things out, copying what you hear, working alone or with peers, moving around, completing exercises, etc.?
3. How do you feel about the prospect of doing the UL classes and assignment? Are you interested, worried, excited...?
4. What, generally, motivates you?

## **Approaches to Language Teaching**

There are lots of approaches to *how* we teach and depending on when and where you went to school; you may have experienced one of the following approaches. Which of these sound most useful?

### **Communicative Language Teaching**

In CLT, the aim is for students to become communicatively competent. In non-scripted, real-life situations, speakers choose what to say and how to say it, usually interacting in small groups. The belief is that the target language will be learned best through the process of communicating. Errors are natural and seen as essential for the learning process.

### **The Direct Approach**

This approach tried to involve more use of the language. Lessons were based around a dialogue, and actions and pictures were used to clarify meaning. Exercises consist of questions and answers based on the dialogue. Grammar is taught inductively, so that learners are encouraged to discover it for themselves through understanding of meaning.

### **The Grammar-Translation Approach**

Classes are taught using the learners' mother tongue for explanations and translation of meaning. There is a focus on learning forms, inflections and grammar rules. These are practiced in exercises but without much use of the language for active communication, e.g. very little speaking.

## Ways of Learning

We all have various ways we like learning (and teaching). We learn better from certain activities or materials than others (do you learn better from writing something down or using it directly?) Depending on the time of day, how we feel, the topic being studied, etc. we sometimes learn better in pairs or small groups and sometimes, when feeling introspective, we learn better when doing individual work.

There is very little scientific evidence to support assigning any one learner only one 'learning style' because of all the different ways in which we learn. Some people like to say that they are a 'visual learner' but are they *only* visual? Is not everyone a visual learner if they see something; is everyone not a 'kinesthetic learner' if they make notes or like doing things? Upon light critical analysis we can quickly find problems with assigning learning styles to people. However, thinking about the different ways we learn *does* mean that we remember to keep our classes varied, not repeating the same kind of activity again and again. Think about these things:

- Use **visuals** to supplement instructions and explanations. Students learn well when they can see what's being referred to.
- Use **audio** to include variety in the class. It's helpful for students to hear voices other than the teacher's. Only one voice can become monotonous. Use recordings from other English speakers to supplement your own (use the course book resources, Youtube or record your friends!)
- Include **kinesthetic** activities. Only sitting down and writing can be boring. Make classes lively by getting students to move around or give them cut-up pieces of paper to match. You'll experience this kind of thing on the CertTESOL and see firsthand how engaging it can make learning.

There are numerous tests available on the internet for working out learning styles or learning preferences; but use these with caution. Remember these tests only give an indication of someone's preferences at the time of the test and will change depending on how they feel. Rather than rely on these tests, keep classes varied to maintain interest and motivation.

## Affective Factors

Affective factors influence learning in either a positive or in a negative way. A learner's attitude to the unknown language, to the teacher, to other learners in the group and to him or herself all have impact on how well he or she learns.

The term *affective filter* is used to refer to negative emotional and motivational factors that may interfere with learning. If a learner has a high affective filter, they are less likely to engage in language learning because of shyness, anxiety,

boredom, etc. Learners feel anxious in the classroom for many reasons. They may worry about the embarrassment of not knowing the answer to the teacher's question, or they might be anxious about being asked to perform an action or an oral task in front of the class. Consider how you, as a teacher, can help reduce things like shyness, anxiety and boredom.

Some positive factors may be:

- a positive atmosphere and encouragement
- an outgoing personality and willingness to interact
- a positive attitude to having a go and making mistakes
- a sense of success and achievement
- a genuine interest in the language and the country where it's used

Reducing affective factors are important for successful language learning. Teachers can reduce negative factors and develop positive ones by creating a positive learning environment and by choosing activities that are interesting and engaging for the learners.

## **Motivation**

Motivation is essential when it comes to learning a new language. Motivation can be intrinsic, which means the learner wants to learn the language for some internal reward: because they want to become part of the L2-speaking community or are genuinely interested in the language. Extrinsic motivation refers to a desire to learn the language for an external reward, such as high grades, job opportunities or praise. Understanding why our students are learning a language will help us decide what *and* how to teach them.

The teacher's ability to motivate learners is central to good teaching. Part of this involves developing good teacher-student rapport and behaving in an engaging and enthusiastic manner. It also means creating a relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere in which students can take chances and feel that they do not risk being ridiculed. How could *you* create a relaxed and supportive classroom atmosphere?

## **Links**

- To find out more about the main differences between English other languages, go to this [Guide to Learning English](#) from Frankfurt International School.
- Another excellent resource is [Learner English](#) which identifies problems students learning English will have based on their first language (e.g. do students have the same letters in their alphabet as in English?)