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Second Language Teaching
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Philosophy of Language Teaching

Language teaching is situated at an intersecting point of myriad student experiences and expectations. My teaching philosophy stems from a core belief that language instructors cannot enter a classroom solely to teach grammar, but must rather act as ambassadors of culture, and should accordingly be held to an elevated standard of social and ethical responsibility in their practices. To this end, I teach to the belief that language learning occurs best when learners are engaged with comprehensible, *meaningful* input; that errors are a natural part of acquiring another language; and that the language we teach in the classroom must reflect real-life usage of language in context from diverse standpoints.

The role of input has been central to the study of language acquisition, but research has suggested that the most effective input for second language learners is not only comprehensible, but also *meaningful* beyond linguistic form and function. My goal is to engage my learners culturally and affectively whenever possible to stimulate critical thinking about course material beyond the mechanics of language itself. In one of the most successful activities I have used, I tasked my students with watching a spoken word poet¹ who emotionally detailed her own struggles with learning how to switch between three varieties of English, placing language, race, and power front and center. Learners then discussed the ways in which they, too, engage in forms of changing their speech within different groups, and why certain populations might have to do so more than others. As an affectively stimulating activity, I want to believe they left class that day having contemplated more than just contractions.

Given that native speakers sometimes question their own language usage and make errors in the acquisition process, it should be a given that learners, too, will produce errors while acquiring a new

¹ "Three Ways to Speak English" by Jamila Lyiscott, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k9fmJ5xQ_mc

language. I believe in empowering learners to act boldly in using their language, not to fear the prospect of making mistakes. One practice that I have adopted in my assessment practices is to allow my learners to simply cross out with a line any answer that they want to “erase” but still leave a record of in their exam, allowing for me to give partial credit if their original answer was more appropriate. In this way, I attempt to give learners a way to use more “risky” vocabulary items or grammatical structures while still allowing them to know their grades are not at risk for using language they may not be as familiar with.

If the dangling preposition at the end of the previous sentence was not enough of a dead giveaway, I strongly believe that the language we teach in our classes needs to mirror actual usage of language in context by speakers from a multitude of backgrounds. It is not sufficient in teaching English to only display the voices and beliefs of White speakers of English, or heterosexual speakers of English, or any other number of social dimensions. In my classroom, I do not stress prescriptive attitudes of what language *should* sound like, so long as the resulting utterance follows a recognizable pattern of English that makes sense for the speaker to be adopting. I want my learners to understand that English, or any language, can sound different from different speakers and still be equally valid as that language. To accomplish this, I vary the content of the materials I use to highlight marginalized voices, particularly those from speech communities (like Black American Language) that have traditionally been left out of English as another language curricula. While some may argue that incorporating “non-standard” varieties of English will confuse learners, I offer these counterpoints: 1) any new language topic is bound to befuddle some learners; they will adapt and learn to recognize diverse forms of language, and 2) not teaching these diverse forms only means that when students encounter them outside of the classroom, they will be even less prepared to engage. As stated above, language instructors are also ambassadors of culture: it is our ethical imperative to provide learners with meaningful input, acknowledge that they will make errors, and show them how the language we teach in the classroom is true to an authentic sense of the language found outside the contained community of the classroom.