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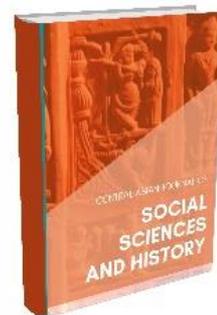
Methodology of French Language

Pulatova Sharifakhon Sobirjonovna

Uzbekistan State University of World Languages, Department of French Language Applied Sciences
Senior teacher
pulatovasharifakhon@mail.ru

Abstract:

Over the years there have been many theories about how our pupils best learn foreign languages. We have seen grammar-translation, direct methods, audio-visual and audio-lingual based loosely on the behaviourist movement, situational, communicative, 'comprehensible input', functional/notional, task-based, content-based (CLIL) and so on. In very recent times, lexicogrammatical approaches, such as Gianfranco Conti's EPI (Extensive Processing Instruction) have made considerable inroads in secondary modern languages classrooms, notably in England, as well as 'knowledge organiser' methods using parallel translations as a basis for manipulating chunked language. So, beware of being dogmatic about target language use. Clarity also means understanding instructions. I believe it is more pragmatic and efficient to explain the rules for an activity or game in English, perhaps after an explanation in the target language. This gains time and you do not waste time subsequently explaining to students what they are meant to be doing. So you use a little English to achieve a gain of greater practice time, understanding and enjoyment.

When planning a lesson the acid tests should be: Is this task useful? Does it build long-term memory? Is it just challenging enough? Is it enjoyable? Is the focus on comprehensible, recycled language?

And when evaluating your curriculum (scheme of work) does it respect principles such as spaced learning, repetition, high frequency vocabulary, interesting cultural content and assessment matched to teaching?

I would not advocate a traditional classroom per se, but it is not the case that every task we set has to be an exciting one! Above all, the classroom is a place for work, and most students know this. I would

hope to mix up a unit of work with all sorts of tasks, some very traditional, some more imaginative. When students are judging their teachers, they will appreciate imaginative planning and a lively approach, but above all they will wish to work and enjoy the company of their teacher. And this is of course the crux of the matter: teaching methodologies are very important, but more important is the personality of the teacher and the way they are able to control, interact with and motivate their pupils. There is no one way of doing this and it is difficult to teach and learn such subtle skills. Teachers need to have well-developed empathy with their students, not just emotional, but cognitive - a keen sense of what students find easy and hard and what is needed to move them forwards.

In our book The Language Teacher Toolkit (2016) Gianfranco Conti and I listed 12 principles you might find useful:

➢ Make sure students receive as much meaningful, stimulating L2 input as possible. Place a high value, therefore, on interesting listening and reading, including extensive reading. As Lightbown and Spada (2013) put it: "Comprehension of meaningful language is the foundation of language acquisition."

➢ Make sure students have lots of opportunities to practice orally, both in a tightly structured fashion led by the teacher and through communication with other students. Have them repeat and recycle language as much as possible.

➢ Use a balanced mixture of the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

➢ Promote independent learning outside the classroom.

➢ Select and sequence the vocabulary and grammar you expose students to. Do not overload them with too much new language at once. Focus on high frequency language.

➢ Be prepared to explain how the language works, but don't spend too much time on this. Students need to use the language, not talk about it. Research provides some support for the explicit teaching and practice of rules.

➢ Aim to enhance proficiency – the ability to independently use the language promptly in real situations.

➢ Use listening and reading activities to model good language use rather than test; focus on the process, not the product.

➢ Be prepared to judiciously and sensitively correct students, and get them to respond to feedback. Research suggests negative feedback can improve acquisition.

➢ Translation (both ways) can play a useful role, but if you do too much you may neglect general language input.

➢ Make sensible and selective use of digital technology to enhance exposure and practice.

➢ Place a significant focus on the L2 culture. This is one way of many to increase student motivation and broaden outlooks.

One thing the behaviourists taught us is that repetition, drilling and controlled practice are useful weapons in a teacher's armoury. So I found it useful over the years, especially with beginners and near-beginners to do frequent group repetition and drilling, rapid question and answer and simple oral drills (e.g. 'I say a positive, they give back a negative'). These traditions of audio-lingualism may be

less popular nowadays, but I believe most children enjoy the clear structure of such activities which can help to gradually fix structures in their heads. The more meaningful a drill, the better. I have always rather liked the imperfect analogy that learning a language is like learning a musical instrument. Drills (scales?) are often effective starters to lessons when you want to get all your class quickly paying attention. This approach is referred to in some quarters as "skill acquisition" - learning how something works, then practising the skill until it becomes automatic or fluent.

The communicative tradition of pair and group work based on information gap activities has been a very useful one, but such activities are generally best done after more controlled practice of a more traditional type. We cannot pretend that our classrooms are places where language can always be used authentically. It is perhaps wiser to base our choice of task on what is plausible, rather than what is authentic. Most audio recordings and texts are "adapted authentic", which makes pedagogical sense. This even applies at advanced level. The notion of 'receptive first' or 'lots of input before output' is sound.

The rise of communication technology in the classroom has also been a very useful one, now that most pupils have access to computers and tablets connected to the internet. I found that most students learn a lot, particularly about grammar and meaning from good interactive exercises or games (e.g. the *languagesonline* site from Royal Grammar School, High Wycombe, Textivate or The Language Gym). But the computer is no panacea either. Language learning is a social activity and pupils enjoy interacting with other humans, including, for the most part, their teachers. They appreciate being clearly instructed and led in their activities, knowing that the teacher is clearly in control.

What about grammar? My experience tells me that students like it when grammar is carefully explained in English at some point. Most researchers also argue for concise explanations of grammar at some point in a teaching sequence (e.g. ncelp.org). I preferred on the whole to practise a point before the stage of explanation, however (what's called the "inductive approach, rather than 'deductive', where the explanation is given at the outset. So students get the chance to work out patterns or rules for themselves. Even so, on some occasions, for example during an afternoon lessons when a class may become restless and need tight control, you begin with an old fashioned grammar explanation in English from a PowerPoint, followed by oral drilling and a written exercise.

"Learning grammar" is, of course, far more about internalising rules or structures through practice than knowing how to explain the rule, in itself not a particularly important skill. Grammar is the heart of everything for the learner who wishes to make serious progress and become fluent, but it may be much less important to the child who is going to stop learning after just three years. Perhaps the focus should be more on vocabulary knowledge, cultural input and survival language for such learners. Vocabulary is ultimately more useful and important than grammar.

On grammar, keep in mind the research that shows that learners develop their own internalised system in an often predictable order and may not be developmentally ready to really 'acquire' a new structure when you teach it. Students may appear to have understood a rule, i.e. explain it, but fail to apply it spontaneously for a long time, if at all.

As far as vocabulary is concerned, I disliked the concept of vocab tests – so dull, predictable and tedious - but I would now say that, once again, there is a comfortable structure involved with such tests which suit many learners. It is the case, however, that pupils of lower aptitude find memorising words

very hard, so testing needs to take various forms, short and longer term, whilst with some groups it may be avoided altogether. Vocab is best acquired by frequent repetition and recycling within meaningful contexts. Cognitive science tells us how powerful the 'testing effect' (aka 'retrieval practice effect') is. But you might like to get students to learn chunks or whole sentences than isolated words. This offers more communicative power and takes advantage of the 'chunking' effect we use to organise information.

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Learning a language is a difficult thing to do and adverts claiming you can learn a language in three months do us no favours. Poor school timetabling for languages (one hour or even two hour-long lessons, just one, two or three contacts per week) means that only the best pupils have a chance of making serious progress. Don't forget to tell your students that in science, no-one expects you be a Newton or Einstein; similarly in languages, you cannot expect to speak like like a French person in five years. Professor Eric Hawkins said that teaching a language is like "gardening in a gale" – you plant your seeds and then the seedlings are blown away by the gale of English from one lesson to the next. The biggest motivator I have come across for pupils is the visit abroad, especially the exchange format.

We have a hard task in many schools trying to share our skill and enthusiasm, but the fact that we can still produce many skilled and enthusiastic linguists despite all the obstacles should reassure us. If we are demanding, sensitive to pupils' needs and pragmatic we can achieve a lot.

When it comes to foreign languages, we can be impatient. Many of us look for the best, quickest or most innovative methods. We devote time to French online courses. We download special apps and so on. Everyone learns differently though, some work well alone, others in a classroom situation. And, there are loads of different ways to learn…

Use this Special Formula for learning French.

Specialists have derived an ideal formula for memorization – 30 words a day, 5 of which should be verbs. The methodology is aimed at busy people who want to learn the basics of a new language and don't have much time. According to the formula, words should be chosen according to the first letter. Then you change every day to the next letter. In this way, today you focus on 30 words beginning with "A." Tomorrow it should be 30 words with the letter "B". When the full circle of the alphabet is passed, you return to "A" and so on. The effectiveness of this method lies in the fact that it provides easy to follow rules. In time it becomes a habit, then a system. To achieve results learning French using this method, the main rule is – it must be done every day.

Use your natural surroundings to help you learn French.

Whatever is around you on a daily basis can help you learn French. Why not stick tags or sticky notes with French words to objects? Or you can set up electronic devices such as your TV, PC, laptop, tablet, phone, and even video games, to work in French. This can really help to reinforce

your knowledge of words.

The method for music lovers.

It's been found that a remarkably effective method of learning languages is memorising foreign songs in parallel with their translation. Linguists say that this method really helps to master a foreign language. It's especially successful if the translation is worked by the student, taking into account the grammar and style of the text. The "song" technique's strength is all about repeated repetition of the text. Of course it also helps with the pronunciation of words. Listening to French radio stations can really help with this one.

The immersion method.

One of the most proven and effective ways of learning a foreign language is the "method of immersion." In this technique, you immerse yourself, usually in France, and speak the language from the very first day of study. Perhaps you'll start by describing everything that you see around you from eating dinner to walking the dog. You communicate with others around you in French wherever you are. The main idea of express learning by this technique is that the learner first memorises key words and phrases. Then comes the grammar which with immersion seems to become more intuitive.

"First person" learning.

According to many language teachers, studying using phrase books can help to improve the process of memorising individual words and the general principles of constructing a sentence. By memorising the language with ready-made phrases in the first person narrative, you subconsciously simulate a situation, dn put yourself in it. For instance, asking for directions to the Eiffel Tower. This can help to anchor the learned words.

CONCLUSION.

In conclusion, so what do we know? After thirty-odd years of teaching French, reading, thinking and writing about second language acquisition, a number of points occur to me.

Children appreciate clarity. If using the target language all the time makes things hard for pupils and they stop understanding, then this can hinder progress. Students cannot process what they don'y understand. Don't get me wrong: large amounts of target language use in the classroom are important for pupils to improve their listening and oral skills, and to develop grammatical skill, but teachers should not be too dogmatic about TL use. I sometimes advise inexperienced teachers that it is a good idea to use the target language in solid bursts of, say, 10 minutes and then to "release tension" by briefly going into English. I was increasingly struck over the years that, whatever techniques we employ, many of our pupils, even quite clever ones, don't understand quite lot of what we say! I have also come to believe that translation is far from a dirty word, as long as it does not reduce too much the role of meaningful input.

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