Meeting Learners' Academic Needs

By Peter Reilly (Mexico)

One important theme at the TESOL convention held in Vancouver last year was the importance of seeking new ideas on effective education from outside the field of language teaching. For example, insights from two educational psychologists, Jones and Jones (2000), can be interpreted and applied to language teaching and learning. They examined the academic needs of junior high school students in the United States. Those needs include feeling important and secure in the learning environment, understanding learning goals, having time to integrate learning, understanding the learning process, and receiving feedback. In all, Jones and Jones identified 13 distinct needs. They concluded that motivation to learn increased and misbehavior decreased when students perceived these needs were being met in class.

This article is about how 5 of the 13 needs are being met at a private English language institute in Mexico.

The need to feel secure and important

The most important task for teachers at the institute where I work is to help learners feel important. According to Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs, before people can achieve certain levels of growth and creativity, they must feel secure in their surroundings. Language students are no different. If you have studied a second or foreign language, you know you are more likely to take risks and explore in the new language if you feel comfortable and supported by those around you.

One practical way of fostering a caring and secure environment is for the teacher to listen with empathy at the end of class. Specifically, the teacher can ask students to reflect on whether the learning goals were easy or difficult, and what feelings they experienced during the class. The teacher can ask students to reflect silently for 30 to 40 seconds. Then learners can do a pair share with a classmate. A moment later, the teacher can ask someone to volunteer to share his or her thoughts with the class. The teacher needs to listen with empathy, then reflect the content and perhaps the feeling of the learner's comment.

Using empathy this way sends a clear message to the students that their experience and feelings are important. Because empathy is nonjudgmental, learners' sense of security is enhanced. Also, because the teacher is often perceived as the leader, the tone is set: people are sincerely listened to and understood in this environment. Students report feeling acceptance when their teacher fosters sincere expression and understanding of feelings (Rogers and Kramer 1995).

Occasionally in teacher development courses I've attended, novice and experienced teachers alike have stated that this caring environment is part of their classes, but implicit. However, once teachers try this sort of listening at the end of class, they often report that the explicit practice of empathy does enhance the quality of classroom communication.

The need to understand the learning goals

Students need to be told what they are supposed to learn. Brophy (1998) reports that too often students do not know why they are participating in learning activities. This is akin to asking people to practice archery without showing them the target. Brophy points out that people become more involved and derive more satisfaction from activities they understand and those with defined aims.

How might this be included in a language class? At our institute in Mexico, teachers state the learning goal in 20 to 30 seconds at the beginning of each lesson. For instance, the teacher might say, "The goal for today is to learn how to talk about our habits" and then write on the board, for example, "John gets up at 7:00 every day." These sentences are left on the board and help learners remain focused on the learning goal.

The need for time to integrate learning

Learners are rarely given time to reflect on material that they have been exposed to and practiced. Too often, classes move swiftly from one activity to another. One of Piaget's contributions to our understanding of learning processes was to discover that people need time to accommodate new information and skills. Retention is limited when concepts are taught one after another without reflection time. Instead of increasing motivation, this may decrease learners' self-efficacy.

The implication is that silent moments ought to be included in lesson plans. Teachers can interject these periods of silence once or twice during a 50-minute class. After a discussion or the presentation of a grammar point, for example, the teacher might say, "Please think about this for a moment." Then the teacher can move out of sight or sit down for 30 to 40 seconds.

Some participants in teacher development courses I have attended have argued that homework is the time when learners should accommodate and consolidate information. However, the depth and detail of understanding is much fresher in class than it is hours later at home or in the office. It is important to mention that allowing for these silent moments is not common teaching practice. Thus, students may benefit from being taught as a learning strategy that silent periods may help consolidate information they have just studied.

The need to understand the learning process

Traditionally, the teacher is the one who knows all. The lesson plan is private information for the teacher, and students passively receive instruction. One of the aims of contemporary language teaching should be to demystify the learning process for the learners. We can do this through the three following activities:

• Teachers need to be open and explicit about procedures in the class. Commonly used teaching terminology such as *semantic maps, skimming and scanning, and controlled activities* needs to be defined in class. Jones and Jones (2000) report that such explaining promotes participation.

• It should be made clear how performing these kinds of tasks contributes to achieving the learning goals.
• The teacher should ask students to what extent they believe class activities have helped them achieve the goals.

One example of demystifying learning is related to error correction. Often at the beginning of lessons, learners are engaged in more controlled activities. Then toward the end of the lesson, they participate in freer, more communicative tasks. In the first part of class, the teacher should explain that she will correct mistakes because controlled activities often center on a grammar point or specific function and require accuracy. The teacher then should explain that later in the lesson, during the subsequent communicative tasks, no correction will be given until afterwards because the purpose of the task is to develop fluency. Thus, learners will understand why correction is given immediately early in the lesson but not during later stages of the lesson.

The need to receive feedback

Feedback relates closely to goal setting. Goals serve as targets for learners. When learners understand how they are attaining those goals, they can adjust their behavior to learn more effectively (Martens, Hiralall, and Bradley 1997). From my teaching experience in Mexico, I have found that for feedback to be most effective, it should be:

• Immediate: Teachers should give feedback as soon as they have something meaningful to say.

• Frequent: Feedback should be given regularly because students need to know how they are doing.

• Specific: Specific feedback is much more effective than vague comments or encouragement to "try harder."

• Realistic: Feedback has to be related to something the student performed or observed in class.

• Appropriate: Too many comments or recommendations can overwhelm the learner.

• Private: Feedback should be offered one-on-one whenever possible.
Here are five tips for offering effective feedback. First, relate feedback to the goals as much as possible. You will be perceived as fair and focused if you do. Second, keep little pieces of paper with you during class to jot down notes of specific mistakes that students make when speaking, focusing mostly on their serious mistakes in accuracy. Give these papers to students at the end of class. Third, state that the student's learning is important to you and that is why you are speaking with him or her individually. Fourth, remember we teachers are not omniscient and cannot meet with every student. So do what is possible and try to make a difference with those students that really need extra feedback. Finally, ask students to provide you with their feedback and show them that you learn from feedback, too.

At our institute in Mexico, where maximum class size is 12 students, teachers meet individually with each student twice a month. In the one-on-one meetings, the teacher first asks the student to mention one or two of the learning goals. Then the teacher offers specific comments on what the

student does well and what he or she should try to improve. Finally, the teacher asks for the student's opinion on these comments. These conversations are kept brief, only a couple of minutes in most cases.

Conclusion

We can learn from the insights of many outstanding educators who work outside the field of language teaching. This article has attempted to show how research on students' needs by educational psychologists can be applied to language classes to make our teaching more effective and our students more successful.

References

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