



Focus on the Learner:
Designing a Learner-Centered One-on-One Lesson

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Introduction

Gallia est omnis divisa in partes tres.

Anyone who has studied Latin will recognize the first line of Julius Caesar's *Gallic Wars*, which for centuries has served as the introductory text for Latin students. Until the middle part of the twentieth century, it was typical for modern languages to be taught using the same methodology that had been used for centuries to teach classical languages such as Latin. The emphasis was on translating and reading written texts, not on developing communicative competency.

Beginning in the 1960s, as new approaches to foreign language learning emerged, these new strategies were applied to the burgeoning field of Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Today, in the teaching of English to non-native speakers, the focus is on the learner: on his or her individual motivations, needs, and learning style. By making learning objectives and subject matter relevant to students' lives, and by actively involving students in their own learning processes, the TEFL instructor can create an atmosphere that promotes language-learning success.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language: A Brief Survey of Methods

As noted above, the translation-based approach was the principle way of teaching languages for many centuries. In more recent times, other approaches have come into and fallen from favor. The table below summarizes some of the leading language-teaching methods (International Teachers Training Organization, 2014, p. 119).¹

Method/Approach	Characteristics
Grammar Translation Approach	Focus on reading and writing; little emphasis on communication
Direct Method	Language is taught inductively, using target language only
Reading Approach	Renewed focus on translation, with grammar taught only in relation to reading
Audiolingualism	Rote repetition
Oral Situational Approach	Heavy repetition, emphasizing different contexts; with grammar taught progressively
Cognitive Approach	Incorporates linguistics and psychology; treats language as a series of rules to process
Affective Humanistic Approach	Based on principles of respect, communication, interaction, peer support, self-actualization, and a comfortable classroom atmosphere

¹ International Teachers Training Organization: A TEFL Certification Program, 2014, p. 119

Comprehension-based Approach	Assumes the process of learning a foreign language is similar to that of learning one's native language; emphasizes listening and comprehension
Communicative Approach	Based on anthropological linguistics; posits that language is primarily a system for communication, and stresses language use, drama, notions and functions

Today, it is generally accepted that a successful approach to teaching English as a Foreign Language method must address the four basic language skills:

- Reading and listening (known as *receptive skills*)
- Speaking and writing (known as *productive skills*).

There is something to be gained from nearly every approach described above; and no one approach is the right answer in all classrooms for all students. Savvy teachers of English as a Foreign Language use a combination of methodologies to address all four basic language skills; and adapt their approach for each unique situation. "All teachers must be better equipped to widen their pedagogical repertoire to accommodate linguistically, culturally, and cognitively diverse students."² (

Understanding Motivation

In order to devise a curriculum that engages the adult (or older teen) English learner, the instructor needs to understand the learner's reasons for wanting to learn English. In *The Practice of English Language Teaching*, Jeremy Harmer (2007) identifies two main types of motivations, *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* (pp. 98-104).

- **Intrinsic motivations** come from within the learner and exist prior to and beyond the classroom experience. Examples of intrinsic motivations include:
 - Love of the second language (L2) for its own sake
 - An abiding interest in languages in general
 - The desire to understand movies, books and music in the second language
 - An interest in culture, politics, and ethnic associations
 - A desire to travel to the second-language country
- **Extrinsic motivations** are based on external factors or incentives. These might include:
 - The promise or potential for a promotion or monetary reward; or, conversely, fear of job loss or other negative consequences for not learning the language
 - A desire to please parents, bosses, or other authority figures
 - A need to pass an exam to get into an English-language university
 - Peer pressure
 - A desire to move up the social and/or socioeconomic ladder³

² Hall, Marjorie Haley, "Learner-centered instruction and the theory of multiple intelligences with second language learners." *Teachers College Record* Volume 106 Number 1, 2004, p. 163-180
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 11517, Date Accessed: 2/7/2015

³ Harmer, Jeremy, *The practice of English language teaching*, fourth edition, UK; Longman 2007, pp. 98-104.

Harmer's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation theory draws on the earlier work of Robert C. Gardner and Wallace E. Lambert (1972), who characterized motivation as being *integrative*, *instrumental*, or a combination of both.

- **Integrative motivation** exists when the learner identifies with and desires to integrate with the second language and culture.
- **Instrumental motivation** exists when the learner is driven by educational or occupational needs.⁴

While motivation must come from the learner, Jeremy Harmer (Harmer, 2007) cites H.H. Sterns' identification of several ways in which the teacher can help *develop* and *maintain* motivation.

One of these is by **focusing on short-term goals**. Experiencing daily success can foster confidence in learners that in turn generates more success.

Another is through **learning environment**, by creating a cooperative and supportive learning community.

Lastly, by providing learners with **interesting classes**, teachers can make language learning engaging and meaningful to the student.⁵

Understanding Learning Styles

There are numerous theories on the subject of how people learn, from Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences⁶ to David Kolb's experiential learning cycle⁷. Regardless of whether the TEFL teacher subscribes to any theory in particular, he or she needs to be aware of the fact that, at the most basic level, students learn in different ways; and that a successful curriculum must address the learning styles of the widest possible range of students. Only by doing so can the teacher create a learner-centered approach that successfully engages all members of the classroom.

Because learner-centered teaching requires that students be active partners in the language-learning process, successful second-language learners must also become aware of *their own learning styles*. As stated in *International Teachers Training Organization: A TEFL Certification Program* (2014), being active participants in the language learning process requires that learners gain "meta-cognitive awareness of their learning styles."⁸ That is, they must become aware of *how* they learn, so that they can develop their own strategies—defined as "specific actions, steps, or techniques used by students to enhance their own learning."⁹

⁴ Gardner, R. C., & Lambert, W. E. *Attitudes and motivation in second language learning*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1972.

⁵ Stern, H.H., *Fundamental concepts of language teaching*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987. Chapter 17, pp. 375-383.

⁶ Gardner, Howard, *Frames of mind: the theory of multiple intelligences*. New York: Basic Books, 1983

⁷ Kolb, David A., *Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1984

⁸ *International Teachers Training Organization: A TEFL Certification Program*, 2014, p. 170

⁹ Oxford, Rebecca L., "Language learning styles and strategies," in: *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language*. Edited by Marianne Celce-Murcia. Heinle and Heinle, 2001. USA pp. 359-366.

A Learning Styles Inventory can be a useful tool to help teacher and student alike identify the learner's innate learning style.

Case Study: Bianca C.

Bianca C. is a 17-year-old Guadalajara native currently enrolled at IMAC Total Ingles at the Master Mind 2 level. Based on Part 1 of her Needs Analysis Questionnaire, in which she rated all but two situations either a 4 or 5, Bianca sees an all-around need to be able to read, write, and converse in English. In keeping with her age group, her priority is to be able to use English socially: to talk on the telephone, read pamphlets and magazines, entertain foreign visitors, travel, and appreciate cultural diversity. However, she also anticipates needing English in her future career. Although she has not yet identified her career goals, she expects that English will be most important for speaking and listening in small groups and meetings, giving presentations, and for creating written materials.

Bianca's appearance and demeanor suggest that her family is decidedly middle-class. I think it fair to assume that her family's expectations for her include a career and a personal life in which English language skills are a necessity.

As evidenced in her completion of the questionnaire, Bianca's vocabulary and reading skills are quite good. Bianca feels she most needs to improve her speaking fluency and listening skills.

Bianca's Learning Styles Inventory indicates that she is comfortable with and adaptable to different learning modes. She did not rate a single statement as "1" ("Least Like Me"), and rated only 5 out of 45 statements as "4," (Most Like Me). The statements that resonated most with her were:

- I can write about most of the things I know better than I can tell about them.
- I would rather read a story than listen to it read.
- I prefer to work with a group when there is work to be done.
- I understand a math problem when it is written down better than when I hear it.
- If I understand a problem, I like to help someone understand it too.

In conversation, Bianca shared that she is interested in music and dance; specifically, that she plays piano and takes hip hop dancing lessons.

It is interesting to note that Bianca self-identified as being more comfortable with written versus verbal learning. When taken together with her statement that she needs to work on English fluency and listening skills, it indicates that Bianca is aware of both her learning style and the areas in which she needs improvement.

Utilizing a communicative approach, my plan is to design a two-part lesson for Bianca that uses her interest in music as the basis for listening and speaking activities.

In Part One, I will present a range of musical cues, such as:

- A pop or rock song with poetic lyrics
- A commercial jingle
- A song from a popular musical

Specific activities will focus skills such as:

*Focus on the Learner:
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- Listening for/understanding rhyme scheme, meter, and word sounds (such as alliteration)
- Understanding similes, metaphors, and other figurative language
- Telling a story through song
- The mechanics of persuasion
- A hip hop or rap song (provided I can find one with lyrics appropriate for classroom use); or another song with a strong social message.

I will lead the student in a discussion of such questions as:

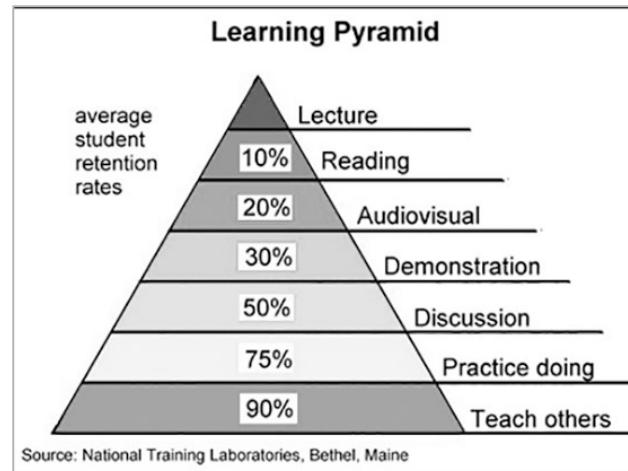
- What techniques did the songwriter use to communicate his or her message?
- What pictures did the song create in your mind, and how?
- Did the commercial make you want to buy the product? If so, how and why?

Bianca's interest in music and dance indicates that, based on Gardner's multiple intelligences, she may be a kinesthetic learner (Gardner, 1983). Incorporating movement or physicality into the activity, such as tapping out the rhythm of a song lyric, may help her internalize the information presented in the lesson.

Part Two of the lesson will provide an opportunity for Bianca to practice her conversation skills by discussing something she is passionate about: hip hop dancing. Because Bianca indicated that she enjoys helping others improve their understanding, I will ask Bianca to become the teacher and use the "show and tell" method to explain hip hop dancing to me. This approach is in line with the Learning Pyramid, which indicates that teaching others yields the highest retention rates.

I will provide a series of guided questions, such as:

- What makes music "hip hop?"
- What about hip hop music appeals to you?
- Are there actual dance steps, or is hip hop dancing completely freeform?
- How does hip hop use gestures or motions to indicate words or emotions?



Summary

As an English-language learner, Bianca is self-motivated, engaged, and aware of her strengths and weaknesses and personal learning style. Her strong interest in music and dance, combined with her desire to improve her conversational fluency and listening skills, suggest that a learner-centered lesson focusing on music-based communication would be an ideal way to help her achieve competency in all four key language skill areas.