Principles of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning)

Conditions for Classroom Language Learning

Any language lesson should support conditions for optimal classroom language learning environments regardless of the tools used. These conditions, based on research from a variety of literatures, have been characterized in different ways, but a general list (Egbert & Hanson-Smith, 1999) includes the following eight items.

1. *Learners have opportunities to interact socially and negotiate meaning.*

Although individual practice (e.g., in homework) may help learners master certain elements of structure, more effective learning takes place when learners can use language actively and creatively with people they come to understand. Anyone who has struggled to learn a foreign language has probably had the experience of successfully completing grammar exercises but then being totally tongue-tied when trying to form a simple request in the target language. To prepare learners to perform in authentic settings, they must be allowed to practice in social settings.

2. *Learners interact in the target language with an authentic audience.*

Learners often have difficulty paying attention when a peer is giving a presentation in class because the information is really addressed to the teacher. They will learn more effectively if they have a stake in what other learners are presenting so that (a) learners interact with each other and (b) learners have a reason to listen and respond. During initial language experiences, negotiation with other language learners in the target language may be at precisely the right level for the struggling student. In more advanced stages of learning, students must have access to sympathetic fluent speakers who are willing to adjust their language to the students' ability.

3. *Learners are involved in authentic tasks.*

Developing authentic tasks is the most important learning condition because the task influences all of the others. For our purposes, an authentic task is one that learners perceive they will use outside of class in their real world or that parallels or replicates real functions beyond the classroom. Even the much maligned grammar drill and practice can be an authentic task if learners see it as enabling them to use language outside of the classroom. A teacher can shout "listen to me, listen to me" to try to get students to pay attention and learn (I have seen this happen), but giving students an interesting, active task that they have the skill, support, and time to complete is more effective. The right task will motivate them and get their attention.

4. Learners are exposed to and encouraged to produce varied and creative language.

Remember having essay anxiety? Being nervous about speaking in front of the class? Picking "C" for all the multiple choice questions you really did know the answers to but would have stated in a different way? Not everyone acquires or can demonstrate knowledge and experience in the same way; this is especially true for learners from different educational and cultural backgrounds. Learners therefore need multiple forms of input and a variety of ways to express themselves as they try on a different language and culture and possibly even a new way of approaching knowledge and the learning process.

5. Learners have enough time and feedback.

Some students work more slowly than others, and some need more or less guidance for different tasks. Giving students the right amount of time and administering appropriate feedback are among the most difficult but also most important conditions to meet.

6. Learners are guided to attend mindfully to the learning process.

All too often, students are told what to learn but not how to learn it. Although each student tends to rely on his or her own particular habits or preferences in learning style, they can learn new ones. Optimal learning, then, is also about how to learn more effectively. Students who perceive a task's how and why will also be more attentive and more motivated to learn.

7. Learners work in an atmosphere with an ideal stress/anxiety level.

The amount of stress or pressure that helps students learn effectively is different for each person. Language learners should feel comfortable enough to take risks with the target language, but they should not be put to sleep by overly simple-minded tasks and exercises. Educators can create optimal stress (eustress or good stress) by matching the degree of difficulty, or challenge, to the students' skills (Cziksentmihalyi, 1990), giving them enough difficulty to keep their attention while providing them with tasks that are possible to complete.

8. Learner autonomy is supported.

Many language classes push learners along a rigid schedule requiring a certain number of book chapters, exercises, and essays in a given amount of time. This teacher-directed syllabus may be effective for some students, but it may ignore the needs of others. Allowing learners to control some facets of their learning can help the teacher to provide for different language levels, interests, and learning styles. For example, learners can choose their own books to read, create their own composition topics, or even choose what kind of tasks they will do and when. Some schools, the University of Oregon English Language Institute, for example, have even used completely individualized learning contracts. Teachers assist students in defining and refining their learning goals and in assessing their own progress (Averill, Chambers, & Dantas-Whitney, 2000).

These eight conditions, which work as a system, support TESOL's pre-K–12 (TESOL, 1997) and adult ESL standards (TESOL, 2003). TESOL is an international professional organization for teachers of English as a second or foreign language.