

XX Rules for Student-Centered Language Learning

I think that the best way to understand our teaching is to do the opposite of what we usually do. If you usually stand in front of the class, try standing in the back of the class. If you always stand, try sitting. But when you try the opposite, I think it is important to spend just a few minutes with the alternative. If you say something such as “We have finished today’s lesson but we have a few minutes left in the class. Let me use these few minutes to try something very different from what we usually do. Tomorrow, I will ask you how you felt about this small change.” you and your students will be less upset. If you introduce any of the XX rules I list here in this way you and your students will feel more comfortable and less upset than if you try the alternatives during an entire lesson.

Never* explain vocabulary or ask students to define words, *instead** have your students use bilingual or monolingual dictionaries and/or imagination and/or grouping skills to discover or confirm lexical and grammatical meanings.* XX

Never ask students to read orally as their eyes are glued to the printed lines, *instead have your students read silently, cover what they read, pause to think and then say what they had read silently, chunks of words, never individual words, to another person.* XIX

*I started to develop and collect activities I refer to as *Huh? Oh. Aha! Activities* with rules that started with the word *Avoid* rather than *Never*. But I began to create and borrow activities that were less learner-centered than I wanted. Raising the bar has the potential to liberate us from the practices we are used to and which some textbooks and commercial tests force upon us. So to push myself to create more learner-centered activities, I substituted *Never* for *Avoid*, outrageous as the word *Never* is. I hope all readers will select a word that they feel comfortable with to start re-thinking the roles of teachers and students in language classes and to generate their own rules for generating activities that are more student-centered and lead not only to richer language development but also to more powerful ways of learning.

Obviously, my rules are extreme. In my day-to-day teaching, I think of the *Never* at one end of a continuum and the options under *Instead* on the other end of the continuum or someplace in between, like this:

10 Never

1 Instead

They are based on my belief that our role as teachers is to remind people what they know, not show them what they do not know.

**The options after the ‘instead’ in each rule are just a few of the hundreds possible.

Never suggest that students read or listen to any text only once, *instead urge them to experience the lexical and grammatical* forms and meanings in the same text multiple times, at least three to five times, and in different ways.* XVIII

Never forbid the use of students' first languages, *instead provide class time for students to clarify what is going on in their first language with each other, invite them to write and share reactions to methods and give their understanding of the rationale for what they are being asked to do in their first language, and use bilingual dictionaries to find meanings.* XVII

Never assume your students or you have some deficiency if they cannot perform in the way you had anticipated, *instead assume that what you and they are being asked to do and/or the material is deficient. (To develop language abilities, students need to read or listen to language which they understand at least 95% of—98% would be better—and they need to have some interest in the topic and feel challenged, not overwhelmed nor bored, by the activities.* XVI

Never use jargon, *instead provide examples of activities you are talking about and with your students generate names for the activities, if you think you need them. Any labels we use are arbitrary, but by using jargon, we imply that others know better than we how to label what we do and experience.* XV

Never ask students to use words in a sentence to illustrate their meaning, *instead have your students manipulate and embellish example sentences that contain the words from dictionaries, textbooks, songs, stories, etc.* XIV

Never explain grammar or ask students to explain grammar, *instead have your students become aware of word order, function words and grammatical suffixes, etc., by using language and by tapping the grammatical information in dictionaries.* XIII

*I use the word 'grammatical' to refer to ways English works in all dimensions: the ways we use stress, rhythm and pronunciation to speak, the ways we use word order, function words and suffixes to create sentences, the ways we arrange sentences in paragraphs and longer passages, the ways we take turns in conversations, etc.

Never focus on lexical and grammatical meanings separately, *instead integrate the learning of lexical and grammatical meanings. On the millions of flash cards and pages in texts that teach the names of fruits, for example, the word apple is printed under a picture of an apple rather than an apple and under a bunch of grapes, the word grape is printed rather than a bunch of grapes. Apple and grape without articles are used in phrases such as apple and grape juice. The words alone without articles before them or juice, flavor, etc. after them provide only lexical meaning rather than lexical plus grammatical meaning. These are examples of what I mean by the integration of lexis and grammar.* XII

Never answer students' question-word questions, such as "What does horse mean?" or "Why can't we say 'jargons' and 'vocabularies'?" *instead have your students ask yes-no and either-or questions such as "Is a horse bigger than me? Is a horse an animal or a bird? Is I have a large vocabulary? Or Do I have large vocabularies?" correct. These require them to predict or hypothesize about lexical and grammatical meanings.* XI

Never ask students to repeat or copy words or sentences, *instead have your students listen to or read the words or sentences, wait for a short period of time, and then, while not hearing or looking at the words or sentences, say or write what they remember.* X

Never give standardized tests produced by companies, *instead with your students note their language development, noting the decline in the frequency of errors, the increase in number of words they can say, write and understand week by week.* IX

Never say words such as 'very good, excellent, wonderful' after students respond, *instead observe how your students show that learning is its own reward and provide information about what they do that ensures they are accurate and have high expectations for themselves.* VIII

Never learn or teach computing skills alone, *include touch-typing skills development, as well.* VII

Never have students use erasers, *instead have your students edit by crossing out and re-writing or just re-write or re-type.* VI

Never provide complete information, *instead provide incomplete information, such as mouthed words, cloze passages, initial or final letters of words, or pointing, so your students can tap their previous knowledge and use prediction skills to produce lexically and grammatically correct language.* V

Never prepare detailed lesson plans, that require you to explain content and complex directions, *instead have a list of a range of activities that you can have your students do as they take in and produce language that they want to master and that engages them.* IV

Never tell students what they are going to learn before a lesson, *instead keep your goals to yourself and ask students what they think they are learning during the lesson, what they learned after the lesson and why you are using the activities you are using.* III

Never depend on information, experiences, feelings or ideas from outside sources alone, *instead integrate student information, experiences, feelings, or ideas with those from outside sources.* II

Never discuss teaching only with peers and by recalling events, judging them and using jargon, such as ‘icebreaker, key words, communicative activities, zone of proximal development, cognitive approach,’ etc., to explain them, *instead use transcriptions of excerpts from lessons and analyze and interpret the data from multiple perspectives using your own terms or those of peers and students in order to deepen understanding, not to improve teaching.* I

1,400 Words 49% Flesch Reading Ease 12th Grade Reading Level

