

Useful Terminology in the ESL Field

Diane Pinkley

Accuracy

Accuracy is the ability to produce spoken and written language in a grammatically correct and socially appropriate way. This contrasts with **fluency**, which is the ability to produce language easily and to communicate quickly but not necessarily with grammatical correctness.

Achievement Test

An **achievement test** measures what students have learned from a particular course or set of materials. It contrasts with **diagnostic tests**, which identify what learners do and do not know, and with **proficiency tests**, which are tests of general ability and not linked to any particular course or set of materials.

Affective Filter

An "imaginary" device first used by Krashen, the **affective filter** is a kind of screen that controls the degree to which students' positive or negative feelings about learning a language influence how much new language and information passes into the brain. A student with a low affective filter is thought to acquire more language because of less resistance and fewer negative feelings.

Authentic Materials

Authentic materials are texts from "real life" sources, such as magazine articles, newspaper articles, lectures, and recordings, originally intended for native speakers for purposes of communication. These contrast with **authenticated materials**, which are slightly modified authentic materials, presented in authentic formats, for nonnative speakers.

Background Knowledge

Also known as *schema/schemata*, **background knowledge** refers to the knowledge of the world and prior experiences that learners bring to the task of interpreting spoken or written language. *Schema theory* is a theory of language processing based on the notion that past experiences lead to the creation of mental frameworks that help us make sense of new experiences.

Behavioral Objective

A **behavioral objective** describes in precise terms what observable things learners should be able to do after taking part in a course of study. **Formal objectives** have three elements: (1) a *task element* specifying the performance; (2) a *conditions element*; and (3) a *standards element*, specifying how well students should perform.

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills

Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) are language skills necessary for social conversation and day-to-day communication purposes. **BICS** in the L2 are usually acquired in a time period between 6 months and 2-3 years.

Bottom-Up Processing

A learner uses *bottom-up processing* to decode the smallest elements (phonemes and graphemes) of a text first, and then uses these elements to decode and interpret words, clauses, sentences, building finally to whole texts. This is in contrast to *top-down processing*, in which a learner uses world knowledge and knowledge of text structures to build a big picture to assist in the interpretation of a text, working from general down to more specific details.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is a learning strategy. Used individually and in groups, brainstorming focuses on generating a number of ideas very quickly, without judging their worth as good or bad.

CALP

The term *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)* refers to formal language skills necessary for academic speaking, reading, and writing. It usually takes anywhere from 3 to 9 years to acquire academic competence in the L2.

Cloze

Cloze is a technique commonly used in teaching reading and listening and also in testing. Words are deleted from a text according to some predetermined ratio (for example, every seventh word), and students then fill in the blanks with a specific word (from a listening text) or a logically related word (for a reading text).

Collocations

A *collocation* refers to a meaningful co-occurrence of two words next to or near each other, a special kind of “word partnership.” Collocations of the word *hair* include *blond, long, and curly*; these words do not occur with *car, food, or toys*.

Communicative Competence

Communicative competence refers to the learner's ability to apply grammatical, discourse, and cultural knowledge to communicate effectively in particular contexts for particular purposes.

Communicative Language Teaching

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a term that covers a number of approaches. CLT focuses on helping learners to communicate meaningfully, both in the classroom and in real life. It generally encourages more learner talk for real communicative purposes and a facilitative role for the teacher.

Content-Based Instruction

Content-based instruction is a type of teaching that focuses on a specific content area (such as science, history, math, literature, or biology) and uses it as a vehicle for teaching both the subject itself and the target language to learners in a meaningful way.

Corpus

A **corpus** is a large collection of authentic spoken and/or written texts, usually stored on a computer (the plural is *corpora*). A screen display or printout shows a key word or phrase in many different contexts of use, and the key word or phrase focused upon is arranged in a vertical column in the center of the display along with the text that comes before and after it; this screen page or printout is called a *concordance*.

Deductive Learning

Deductive learning refers to the process of learning in which a learner begins with rules and principles and then applies those rules to particular examples and instances. *Deductive learning* is in contrast to *inductive learning*, in which a learner arrives at rules and principles by studying and analyzing examples and instances.

Dialog Journal

Teachers (and sometimes fellow learners) exchange thoughts in written diary form with a student, responding to the student's entries. The diary is known as a **dialog journal**. The evolving entries form a sort of "written conversation" taking place over a period of time.

English as a Second Language

English as a Second Language (ESL) refers to the teaching and learning of English in areas where English is the dominant language, and widely used for communication by the community at large.

English for Specific Purposes

English for Specific Purposes (ESP) refers to courses designed around the specific needs of particular groups of learners, for example, *English for pilots*, *English for the hotel industry*, *English for computer engineers*.

Facilitator

Facilitator is a term used to describe a teacher who assists or guides a group of students to find their own answers rather than providing the students with "right" answers. At different times during a communicative lesson a teacher may have various roles, one of the main ones being that of *facilitator*.

Feedback

Feedback refers to the provision of information to speakers or writers about the message they have conveyed. Evaluative *feedback* provides learners with information regarding certain performance criteria in their speaking and writing, and may come from the teacher or from peers.

Genre

The term **genre** refers to types of purposeful, oral, or written communicative texts under study by the learner. Examples of *genres* include a narrative, a poem, a casual conversation, a recipe, a lecture, a memo, and a persuasive essay.

Gist

Gist, a term used with in conjunction with listening and reading, refers to the main idea of a spoken or written message.

Inference

Inference is a learning strategy focusing on guessing or predicting meaning from the surrounding context, especially in reading and also in conversation. It is also defined as *guessing meaning from context*.

Information Gap

An **information gap** is a pair or group work task in which different learners have access to different information. In order to complete the task, the information must be exchanged between the learners. *Information gaps* are frequently used in communicative language teaching and are believed to promote negotiation of meaning and acquisition.

Integrated Skills

Integrated skills refers to materials and activities that combine the use of listening, speaking, reading, and writing in natural, meaningful ways.

Invented Spelling

Invented spelling is an attempt to use knowledge of sounds and/or visual patterns to spell a word when the standard spelling is unknown. *Invented spelling* is considered to play an important role in helping children learn how to write.

Language Acquisition

Language acquisition refers to a learner's "picking up" of a language by being exposed to it in natural, meaningful situations. This is in contrast to *language learning*, which involves the learner's conscious (usually classroom-based) knowledge of the language.

Learning Strategies

Learning strategies refers to a set of mental and communicative processes that learners use to help themselves learn a language, such as memorizing, visualizing, looking at titles, captions, and graphics that accompany a text, etc. Research supports the explicit teaching of *learning strategies* as a way to learn a language or subject more effectively.

Learning Styles

Learning styles describe students' orientations toward learning. For example, learners may be described in terms of the senses (visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic), or in terms of global or analytic styles. Effective materials focus on a number of *learning styles* through the activity types used.

Lexical Sets

Lexical sets refers to vocabulary words that go together to create a related set, such as words for furniture, words for emotions, words for chores, tools, and so on.

Metacognitive Strategies

Metacognitive strategies refers to learning strategies that encourage learners to focus on the mental processes underlying their learning, to "think about their thinking."

Methodology

Methodology refers to the subcomponent of the curriculum concerned with the selection and sequencing of classroom tasks and activities. *Methodologies* derive from sets of beliefs about the nature of language, teaching, and learning, and include, among others, audiolingualism, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, Community Language Learning, and communicative approaches.

Motivation

In language learning, **motivation** refers to the psychological factors determining the amount of effort a learner is prepared to put into learning a language. *Motivation* is often described as *integrative* (the learner wishes to identify with the target language community and culture) or *instrumental* (the learner's particular need to learn English, such as for college in the USA or for occupational purposes).

Negotiation of Meaning

The term **negotiation of meaning** refers to the interactional work done by speakers and listeners to ensure that they have a common understanding of the ongoing meanings in their conversation. Such communication strategies as asking for clarification and checking for comprehension promote *negotiation of meaning* in oral settings. In reading, the reader is described as entering into a negotiation of meaning with the written text.

Portfolio

A **portfolio** is a purposeful collection of student work that is intended to show progress over time. A *portfolio* usually includes samples of student work, collected by the student or by the student and the teacher to represent learning based on instructional objectives.

Process Writing

Process writing is a pedagogical approach to writing that focuses on the steps involved in drafting and redrafting a written text. Learners are taught to use such prewriting techniques as brainstorming and cubing, and how to produce, reflect on, discuss, and rework successive versions of a text until a final product is crafted.

Realia

Realia describes any objects and teaching "props" from the world outside the classroom that are brought in to be used in teaching and learning. Examples include pictures, household objects, menus, maps, advertisements, clothing, videos.

Receptive Skills

Traditionally, listening and reading are described as *receptive skills*, in contrast to speaking and writing, which are described as *productive skills*.

Recycling

In language teaching and learning, **recycling** refers to the strategic reintroduction of previously taught items so that learners further develop understanding of the items and better retain the information in long-term memory.

Role Play

A **role play** is a communicative activity in which learners interact with each other in different character roles. This is in contrast to a *simulation*, a type of *role play* in which the participants play themselves in a given situation.

Rubric

The term **rubric** refers to a set of specific descriptions used to assess a learner's progress in any of the skills in language learning. A *rubric* for writing includes such items as "focuses on a central idea," "uses a clear introduction," and "uses appropriate grammar."

Scanning

Scanning is a reading strategy that involves reading quickly to find specific details from a text, in contrast to **skimming**, in which a student reads quickly to find the main idea(s) or big picture.

Syllabus

The **syllabus** is that subcomponent of a curriculum that is concerned with the selection, sequencing, and justification of linguistic and experiential content. Types of *syllabi* include grammatical, functional, thematic, and task-based. With the development of task-based and process approaches to a curriculum, the boundaries between *syllabus* and *methodology* have become less distinct.

Total Physical Response

Total Physical Response (TPR) is a language teaching method developed by Asher in which learners listen to instructions in the target language and carry out a sequence of physical actions.

Diane Pinkley is former Director of the Teachers College TESOL Certificate Program in the TESOL Program, Department of Arts and Humanities, at Teachers College, Columbia University, in New York. A well-known teacher trainer and author in ESL/EFL, she has trained teachers and presented academic papers at conferences around the world. In addition, she has made major contributions to bestselling ESL and EFL series, among them *On Target* and *In Charge* for adults, *Backpack*, *Letters to Parents ESL*, and *Spin*, for children. Formerly Director of the Institute of North American Studies in Badalona, Spain, and Curriculum Coordinator at the Michigan Language Center in Ann Arbor, Michigan, she has taught all levels of ESL and EFL.