

Development and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages

***Joel C. Walz
Editor***

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AAUSC
Development and Supervision of Teaching Assistants in Foreign Languages
Edited by Joel C. Waltz

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What TAs Need to Know to Teach According to the New Paradigm

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Teaching assistants (TAs) in the 1990s need to be able to (1) teach discourse strategies, (2) give personalized yet focused speaking and writing assignments, (3) set and guide partner work, (4) encourage interactive reading strategies, and (5) integrate authentic audio and video material into the language classroom. In short, they have to be able to operate within the “new paradigm in language learning,” as outlined by Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991). The “new paradigm” contains many different aspects, but in terms of learning materials and teaching techniques that apply directly to TA-taught classes, the authors (p. 12) list the following principles (the additions in brackets are mine):

- 1) Personalized language [should be developed in each learner.]
- 2) Authentic texts [should be used] as a basis for oral [and] written work as well as reading[.]
- 3) [G]rammar [must be] linked to meaning in a sentence as well as to meaning in paragraphs and discourse[.]
- 4) Grammar rules [should be] learned by students mainly as independent activity [primarily] outside of class[.]

- 5) Most of class time [should be] devoted to contextual practice cued by situational variables[.]
- 6) [The] distinction [should be made] between actively-used and comprehended words [, that is,] vocabulary understood and cued in L2 context.

On the surface, most TAs can readily espouse these principles; indeed, they sound self-evident. At the same time, a number of practical considerations need to be addressed in order to help TAs translate these principles into classroom activities.

TAs love to read. They also love to lecture. And talk. And question. And argue. And experiment. And above all, develop routines and maintain “satisfactory progress.” After all, they are still students themselves and have responsibilities for their own academic development that at times conflict with their duties as teachers. For this reason, I have compiled a bibliography of practical reference works that should help them along the way, starting with Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes’s first chapter of their volume *Reading for Meaning* (Swaffar, Arens & Byrnes, 1991), which sets forth the concept of the “new paradigm.” Other readings include Oxford’s (1990) *Language Learning Strategies*, which outlines the psycholinguistic aspects of language learning processes; Brown’s (1989) *A Practical Guide to Language Learning*, written from the perspective of language learners themselves; Altman, Ewing, Pusack, Bohde, Otto, and Shoemaker’s (1990) *PICS Videoguidelines* for the use of video material; Green and Grittner’s (1990) *German for Communication* and Legutke’s (1991) *German for the Learner-Centered Classroom* for practical suggestions from the frontline about conducting a proficiency-oriented German classroom; and Omaggio’s (1986) *Teaching Foreign Languages in Context*, still one of the most comprehensive sources for insights and practical tips for the classroom of the 1990s. In addition, the two volumes of the AAUSC series previously published, Magnan’s (1991) *Challenges in the 1990s for College Foreign Language Programs* and Teschner’s (1991) *Assessing Foreign Language Proficiency of Undergraduates*, should also be included in a list of readings for new TAs, the first for its overview of the profession at the postsecondary level, the second for its insights into the use of evaluation strategies for TA-taught courses.

All of this assumes, of course, that TAs take a methods course in which they can discuss each of these works in some detail. Not all TAs, however, take methods courses, and, most, being graduate students with a fixed program of study and often little time to complete it as scheduled anyway,

will avoid another course if at all possible. For this reason, I have developed a kind of toolkit that has proven helpful in working with TAs within the “new paradigm” over the years, even though the paradigm has been called “new” only recently. Each of these “Tools” can be summarized in one or two pages for quick review and discussed at length as needed.

The Tools are: (1) the Integrated Brain, (2) the Triangle, (3) P/Review-Prime-Practice-Presentation, (4) the *Stundenthema*, and (5) Partner Work. The Integrated Brain (Tool 1) emphasizes the psycholinguistic dynamics within learners. The Triangle (Tool 2) emphasizes the relationships between learners, the language, and language classroom activities. P/Review-Prime-Practice-Presentation (Tool 3) underscores the sequence within classroom activities. The *Stundenthema* (Tool 4) outlines the relationships among classroom activities. Partner Work (Tool 5) guides the nature of interaction among learners within a classroom setting. The Triangle is my own creation, presented here in print for the first time. The Integrated Brain in its present form is adapted from materials developed by Carol Ann Pesola (personal communication, 1992). P/Review-Prime-Practice-Presentation is based on the Overview-Prime-Drill-Check model developed by Constance K. Knop (1982). *Stundenthema* is based upon materials developed by Jens-Peter Green (Green & Grittner, 1990), though presented in its current form here for the first time. Finally, Partner Work is more or less universal in language courses.

Tool 1: The Integrated Brain

Many new TAs have difficulties realizing, first, that their students are not necessarily like themselves and, second, that there are different kinds of learning. For this reason it is necessary to discuss with TAs what the profession knows — or thinks it knows — about the workings of the human brain.

Language does not exist in any one special place in the brain. Thanks to neurophysiological research, however, we have some idea how the brain divides certain kinds of language function. It appears that language input is processed (studied, analyzed, stored, and retrieved) in the left hemisphere of the brain, but that the motivation to learn and use language resides in the right hemisphere (Brown, 1989, p. 40). This reflects our natural inclination (observed in our own experiences in dealing with our native language) to absorb lots of “raw input” and, only later, to analyze it. Language classes tend to operate in the opposite direction, teaching “all

the nuts and bolts at the beginning” and saving the “feel” for the language until later (Brown, 1989, p. 41). Understanding how humans function as integrated learning organisms is critical to becoming a good teacher, whether in the new paradigm or in any one of the old ones.

The Integrated Brain (see Tool 1, p. 144) attempts to illustrate how each of the brain hemispheres views the world. The left hemisphere views the world as an organized, paradigmatic, rule-governed system; it is orderly, as the Tool itself shows with its neat lines and left-to-right, top-to-bottom printing. The right hemisphere sees things as global, holistic, unique, experimental; it is chaotic, as the Tool itself demonstrates with ragged lines and goofy turns of phrase, some running down the right side of page, others with different kinds of type faces. The left brain seeks certainty, the right brain enjoys risk. The left approves orderliness, the right encourages innovation. However, little, especially language, can be learned unless the entire brain is engaged. While it may be necessary to memorize grammar rules and vocabulary lists (left), language still must be used in real-life situations (right). To emphasize the one without reference to the other is to deny long-term learning. In short, the left side of the brain may drive the car and read the map, but the right side tells us where to go and what to do when we get there.

Each of us has a brain that, in general, has a preference for operating on one side or the other. As a result, there are teachers and students who prefer to know the rules before proceeding with an activity. There are also teachers and students who prefer to try things out first before discussing the rules. Oxford, Ehrmann, and Lavine (1991, pp. 11–17) speak of Analytic (left-brain) Teachers and Global (right-brain) Teachers, whose teaching styles influence the classrooms they oversee. It is thus important for TAs to recognize their preferences and accept the reality of learning differences in their students.

Tool 2: The Triangle

The language-learning Triangle (see Tool 2, p. 148) is an equilateral triangle, which from an engineering and architectural viewpoint is one of the most stable of geometric figures. In the middle are the learners (L) of the target language. Above them is the Topic (To), which is any real-life communicative situation. Topic can mean, for example, asking for and receiving directions to a hotel in Berlin; extending, accepting, and reject-

ing an invitation to a party in Barcelona; ordering a meal in a Thai restaurant; describing the contents of a high school locker in Sun Prairie, Wisconsin; telling students that Professor James will not be in class today and that they should listen to you for five minutes as you give them the assignment for tomorrow; and so on. The statement of a Topic answers for learners the question, Why should they be involved in the learning enterprise at all?

A caveat: Topic does not mean grammar! The *imparfait* in French is not a Topic, nor is the *Dativ* in German, nor is the *niph'al* in Hebrew, nor is the honorific *o*-prefix in Japanese. Where, then, is grammar in the Triangle? Text (Tx) is grammar, as well as vocabulary and idiomatic expressions, labels on bottles, captions under photographs, letters from friends, editorials in newspapers, stage plays on television, novels on audiotape, and poems written on posters. Text in the context of the Triangle answers the question, What “raw language” — the words and phrases and idioms that one may hear or read when confronted with actual users of the language — should be learned?

Task (Ts) means the same as in everyday English, that is, something to do with what you know. Historically, the primary task of learners has been to sit, to listen, and to fill in blanks, while the primary task of teachers (Tr) has been to stand, and to talk, and to provide the blanks to be filled in. The classroom in the 1990s looks quite different. Teachers give directions, walk around the room, distribute cue cards, and answer questions — in other words, use a variety of teaching techniques and strategies to present and guide learning (Tc). Learners look at pictures and write captions for them, talk to neighbors and summarize what they learn from them, write short descriptive paragraphs and read them aloud to the rest of the group. Do teachers still lecture? Yes, but not every day. Do students still fill in worksheets and hand them in? Yes, quite often, in fact, but again not every day nor as the sole activity for a given period of time.

Tool 3: P/Review-Prime-Practice-Presentation

P/Review-Prime-Practice-Presentation (see Tool 3, p. 148) is based on a set of handouts given to new TAs during orientation sessions adapted from Knop's Overview-Prime-Drill-Check sequence (Knop, 1982) at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. During orientation TAs prepare single-activity microteaching lessons to practice before their peers. Once in the classroom,

however, lessons are expected to demonstrate the four stages presented in this model.

Although born during the 1970s, the sequence stands up well to scrutiny in the 1990s. In an attempt to update our understanding of teacher–learner behavior based upon Knop’s model, I have renamed three of the four steps as follows, keeping Prime the same:

P/Review • Prime • Practice • Presentation

Before students begin work they must be reminded of what they already know (Review, the “R” in P/Review) and be told what they are about to work with (Preview, the “P” in P/Review). Then they must be shown a sample of what they are about to do (Prime) in the form of simple instructions or a picture about which a story is to be told, or a brief rehearsal of the material they are to use. Practice is the point where learners take what the teacher has shown them and try it out on their own, either individually or, better yet, with one or more partners. The final phase, Presentation, is perhaps the most critical of all, since this is the opportunity for learners to have their performance compared with the TA’s and other learners’ expectations.

In any event, when superimposed on the Triangle, P/Review states the Topic. The Text is more or less already given as the content of the lesson. The remaining three steps, Prime-Practice-Presentation, represent Task. When things start to go wrong during instruction, it is often because the instructor has left out one or more of these four steps.

Tool 4: *Stundenthema*

Parallel to the P/Review-Prime-Practice-Presentation sequence is *Stundenthema* (see Tool 4, p. 150), presented in its current form at a number of workshops between 1987 and 1990 by Jens-Peter Green. Literally “hour topic,” the concept of *Stundenthema* is used in Germany as part of the training of language teachers for the secondary schools. It is a valuable concept for any teacher, since it focuses on what students should be doing in a given hour and what a teacher should be doing to help students do what they do. There may be more than one topic in a class hour, but if there is none, either explicitly stated (e.g., on the blackboard) or implicitly assumed (e.g., by the sequence of clearly interrelated activities), the hour can become quite “unparadigmatic,” that is, with no clear pattern or focus.

Stundenthema has six major components: (1) objectives for the hour, (2) productive and receptive vocabulary collocation (i.e., use of words in phrases and sentences), (3) anticipated learner difficulties and potential learning aids, (4) possibilities for either shortening or lengthening the activity, (5) planned sequence of activities in instruction, and (6) material for presentation on the blackboard. Note that different instructional steps can be followed, starting with presentation or simple statement of the task, and ending with an assignment prepared at home and presented in class. Note too that there are different kinds of learner–teacher interaction, such as lecture or demonstration as well as partner work or individual response. The key words presented under the columns “I(nstructional) Step,” “Planned T(eacher) Behavior,” “Expected S(tudent) Behavior,” and “Media” are by no means meant to be exhaustive. What is important are the four steps that precede the teaching sequence (step 5) for the particular hour (objectives for the hour in the various skill areas, vocabulary collocations, anticipated learning difficulties and learning aids, and possibilities for shortening or expanding the hour), plus the one step (step 6) after you prepare the sequence, namely, what you show students on the board or on the overhead. Recognition and implementation of these six parts of a typical class hour are essential to good teaching.

Tool 5: Partner Work

Partner Work (see Tool 5, p. 151) appears under a number of different terms, including small group activities (Omaggio, 1986, pp. 200–207) and peer tutoring (Scarcella & Oxford, 1992, p. 157). Whatever the term, if TAs learn to use only one tool from the new paradigm toolkit, this is the one. There are two reasons for its importance: (1) Partner Work is completely student-oriented, and (2) Partner Work operates extremely well in a classroom setting. There is also a third reason, namely, if you get it wrong, instruction turns into chaos, turning you and students off to partner work as a classroom technique. No textbook, no workbook, no worksheet, no quiz, no examination, no computer software, no videotape, no videodisc, no *501 German* (or *French* or *Spanish* or *Russian* or *Italian*) *Verbs* with all the trimmings can do what two people together can do with the language. Language is learned primarily through its interactions, not through its printed forms alone. Students can interact best in a target-language environment with others who are also learning to interact.

The main difficulty with Partner Work is that most people think it involves nothing more than giving students directions, allotting them a certain amount of time for the activity (10 minutes, perhaps), leaving the students alone, and then going on to something else entirely different once the time is used up. Many teachers see Partner Work as a kind of pedagogical babysitting, something to be assigned while the teacher does a silent mantra in hopes of receiving inspiration for the next fill-in-the-blank exercise. Thus, I have offered a one-page set of directions for setting up, conducting, and following through on Partner Work. The key is focus: focus on activity, focus on limits, focus on outcome. If the focus is clear, then Partner Work takes its proper place in the new paradigm, as an integral part of the arsenal of learning materials and teaching techniques, and especially as a way of personalizing language (Swaffar, Arens & Byrnes, 1991, p. 12).

Conclusion

According to *New Lexicon Webster's Dictionary of the English Language*, the term "paradigm" refers to "an example serving as a pattern," as well as to the traditional definition of "a conjugation or declension serving to demonstrate the inflection of a word" (1989, p. 727). The expression "new paradigm," as presented by Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991), might thus seem contradictory in the context of communicative language learning. Nothing is really "new" about what is presented in this chapter, except, perhaps, for our willingness to use it. Nothing is really "paradigmatic" about it either, especially if we use the term in the sense of the prescriptively formulaic.

Rather, the "new paradigm" refers to a set of guidelines for action to be taken when TAs interact with students in a language classroom as well as when students interact with the language itself. In a world of continually changing intellectual, professional, and economic needs, language teaching needs to become constantly "novelly paradigmatic." Teachers now believe, we hope, in the value of using authentic texts for oral and written work, connecting grammatical phenomena to the production of paragraph-length texts, asking students to work with grammar rules independently and then reporting back what they have learned and where they need assistance, spending class time doing simulations and partner work, and setting up activities that call for L2 contexts, all of which are recommended by Swaffar, Arens, and Byrnes (1991, p. 12). In the final analysis, then, if the expression "new paradigm," and the tools we develop to implement it, help us build a solid foundation under our language teaching, we can call it what we like.

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Appendix

The New Paradigm Toolkit

TOOL I

THE INTEGRATED BRAIN



The Integrated Brain...

- is a sophisticated PATTERN DETECTOR.
- processes stimuli MULTIMODALLY, SIMULTANEOUSLY.
- thrives on HIGH-VOLUME INPUT.
- requires COMMUNICATION to actualize its potential.
- needs REALITY-BASED FEEDBACK for optimal functioning.
- craves an atmosphere that encourages RISK.

Characteristically, the



LEFT BRAIN HEMISPHERE:

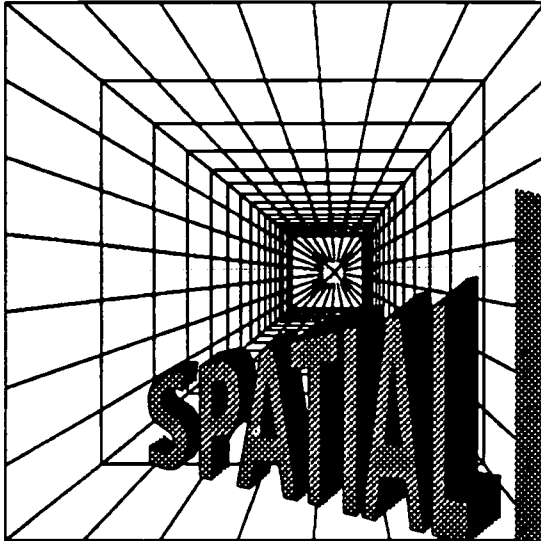
1. Is verbal.
2. Is logical.
3. Operates sequentially.
4. Reasons part to whole.
5. Exhibits strong time and schedule orientation.
6. Defends status quo, the familiar.
7. Resists change, risk-taking.
8. Finds faults, sees problems, reasons why an idea won't work.
9. Sets limits, acts as "gatekeeper."
10. Is defensive, may use sarcasm to ward off intruding ideas.

In contrast, the

RIGHT BRAIN HEMISPHERE

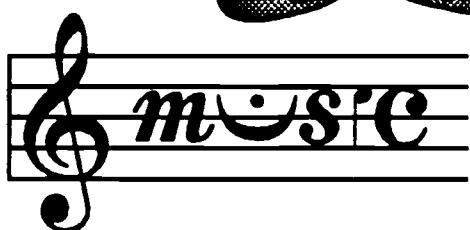


excels at



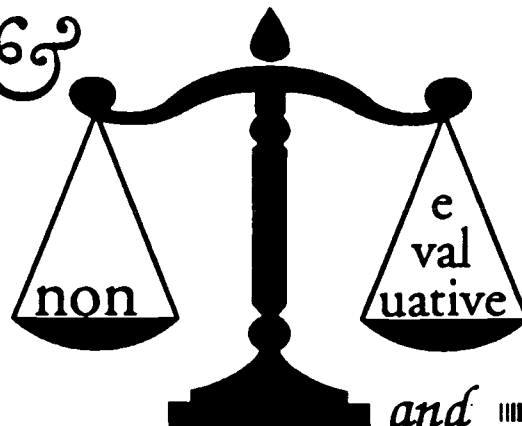
SPATIAL Relationships

COLOR!

A musical staff with a treble clef and the word "music" written in a cursive font across it.

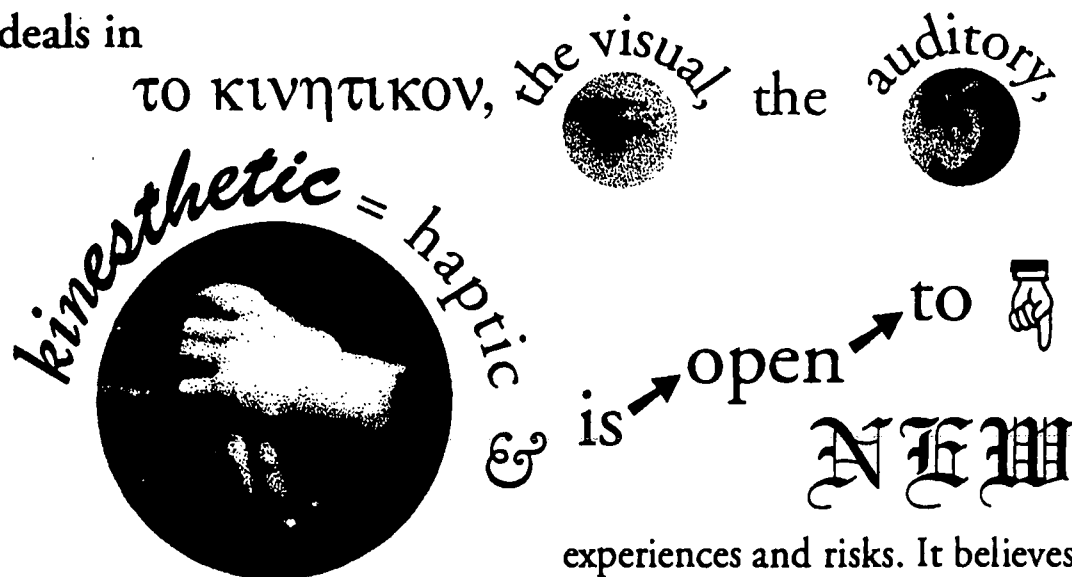
It is

nonsequential &



and 

deals in



experiences and risks. It believes anything — but *ANYTHING* — is possible! Time orientation is:



sort of approximate



kind of relative.

→→→→ It is trusting.

It is creative.



THE LEFT HEMISPHERE

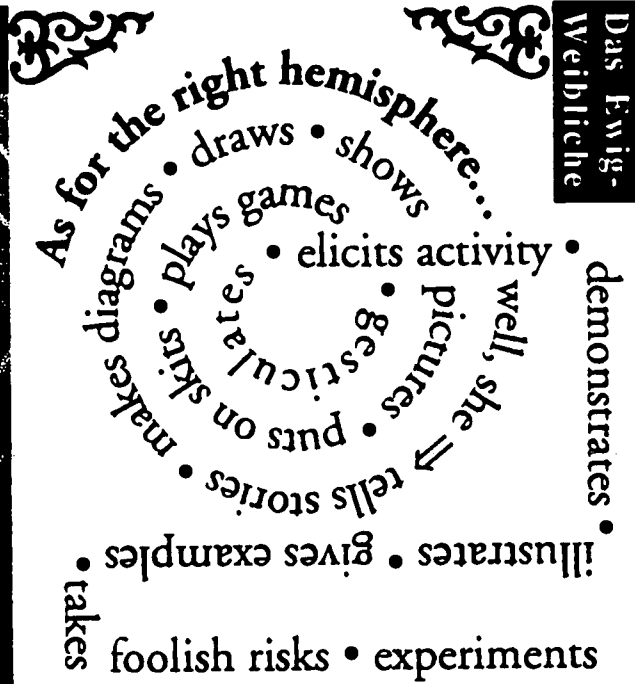
- ▼ lectures on familiar material
- ▼ explains new material in terms of old
- ▼ commands the individual to conform
- ▼ rationalizes inconsistencies
- ▼ discusses rationales
- ▼ argues specifics
- ▼ debates principles
- ▼ reasons things through before acting
- ▼ calculates optimum approaches
- ▼ reduces phenomena to rules
- ▼ organizes everything.



Left-brained students have to fill in verb paradigm charts.

Left-brained teachers have to explain adjective endings.

Bir varmış, bir yokmuş.
Allahın kulu çokmuş...



Das Ewig-
Weibliche

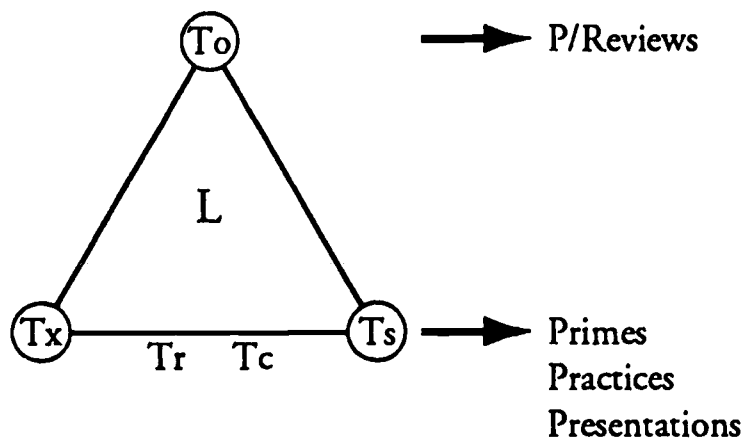
Ζωή μου, όσο αγαπώ

♦ ♦ ♦ Right-brained students love to sing songs by Udo
Lindenber. ♦ ♦ ♦ Right-brained teachers love
to read student rewrites of *Märchen*.



Note: The above tool is based upon a handout used by Carol Ann Pesola of Concordia College (Minnesota) during presentations at the Central States Conference and elsewhere. It is reprinted here with her permission.

TOOL 2
THE TRIANGLE



To = Topic, theme, interest — *Stundenthema* (WHY)

Tx = Text, words, visuals, etc., user “chunk” of language (WHAT)

Ts = Task, activity, learner “product” of language (HOW)

Tr = Teacher (WHO)

Tc = (Teaching) technique (HOW TO)

L = Learner (FOR WHOM)

TOOL 3

P/REVIEW-PRIME-PRACTICE-PRESENTATION

(Based on Knop [1982])

1) P/Review (cf. "Overview")

- a) State the purpose or topic of the activity.
- b) Relate it to known material.
- c) State the outcome of the activity.

Example: Teacher — "You have already learned to count from 1 to 10. Today you'll learn to count from 10 to 100. Then we'll do an inventory of the objects in the classroom."

2) Prime (cf. "Prime")

- a) Go through the material once. Use visuals to set the scene, role-play to show who is saying what, etc.
- b) Clarify procedures: are students to listen? repeat? imitate gestures? work with neighbor? work alone?
- c) Show how the activity is to be conducted. Give at least three examples of the kind of outcome you expect.

Example: Teacher — "Listen to the numbers from 10 to 20 (30, 40,...). Now repeat each one after me." Student — "10, 11, 12, 13, 21, 22,... 57, 58,...."

3) Practice (cf. "Drill")

- a) For each chunk of language, encourage students to use various techniques for developing their material, such as: (1) Gestures, (2) Objects, (3) Pictures, (4) Other members of the class, (5) Key words to frame the language to use, (6) Logical sequence, such as in a Gouin series.
- b) Give one or two examples.
- c) Set time limit.

Example: Teacher — “Here is a list of objects in the classroom. Go around the room and count the number of books, chairs, clocks,...that you see. You have three minutes.” Student — (takes worksheet with list of items and goes around classroom to do inventory).

4) Presentation (“Check”)

Call on individuals or groups of individuals to present their material.

Example: Teacher — “Tell us about various things in the classroom.”
Student — “Well, I count 32 chairs, 30 books, 20 pencils, and 16 jackets. And, of course, there are 22 students in the room!”

TOOL 4***STUDENTHEMA***

Step 1 → Objectives for the hour in

- Listening comprehension
- Reading comprehension
- Speaking
- Writing
- Culture

Step 2 → Productive/receptive vocabulary collocations

Step 3 → Anticipated difficulties/learning aids

Step 4 → Possibilities for shortening or expanding materials

Step 5 → Planned sequence of activities

Step 6 → Planned blackboard layout

I Step	Planned T Behavior	Expected S Behavior	Media
Lead-in* Introduction* Activation* Statement of the topic* Associogram Transition Presentation Evaluation† Reading Fill-in Homework† • giving • collecting Spot check† Calling on students†	Lecture Demonstration Directions	Individual work Partner work Group work	Blackboard Realia Film Slides Letters Cassettes Filmstrips Worksheets Other Students Photos Pictures Toys and other props

[I = instruction S = student T = teacher]

* = "P/Review"

† = "Presentation"

Everything else is either "Prime" or "Practice."

TOOL 5

PARTNER WORK

BEFORE

- 1) Set Task: "You will tell your partner what you did last weekend. Tell him or her at least three things you did, using at least three different verbs."
- 2) Set Outcome: "You will report to the class what your partner told you. You will then write up what you learned in 20 to 30 words for homework tomorrow."
- 3) Set Limits: "You have three minutes. Go!"

DURING

- 1) Move from group to group and *listen*.
- 2) Give guidance when requested, such as answering questions, suggesting alternatives, encouraging use of dictionary, etc.
- 3) Announce final minute ("You have one more minute!"). Allow extra time if students are still on task.

AFTER (at least three groups report)

- 1) Listen — do not interrupt — while students report.
- 2) Have students repeat what they just said, even if — especially if — it is already clear and distinct.
- 3) Encourage other students to react (correct, comment, ask questions, and so forth).