

PURPOSE AND PRINCIPLES OF THE PROGRAM

Teaching the English language to students from different language backgrounds is one of the most challenging, yet potentially rewarding, aspects of being a teacher. Seeing a student's eyes light up when they form a new sentence, or select a great new vocabulary word can be exciting for everyone.

The purpose of this handbook is to help teachers of the district's *Language Star* program to be able to provide an array of English-language teaching methods that are based on the district's philosophy of language teaching and learning. This philosophy is also supported by the latest research about how humans best and most rapidly learn a second language for academic purposes. The methods in this guide are called "high-intensity" because they shift the emphasis of the learning to the student, which is where it belongs. These methods require that students engage with English, try new things, and take risks. The same could be said for what these methods require of teachers. You won't find any cute games or time-filling activities in this manual. Instead, you will find research-based, interactive and engaging tasks that will spur your students on to new heights of sophistication in their English learning.

This handbook is designed to help teachers to reach the bold program goals established for both students and faculty members. Used in conjunction with professional development sessions, assistance from district coaches, and external consultants, this resource book should be a constant companion. The bulk of this manual—and the subsequent resources you will add to it—is dedicated to presenting high-intensity language teaching methods that have proved effective in countless classrooms. For each method, there is a short section that describes the theoretical foundation on which it is based. Perhaps more important, though, the emphasis in each section of this handbook is on describing and illustrating the use of several language-blasting methods that have a specific language development focus.

We are quick here to disagree with the notion that teaching *in* English is the same as teaching English. On the contrary, this program is situated firmly on the idea that the English language must be taught to English learners *as their foreign language*. Through this lens, we believe that language teaching is designed to specifically help students to understand how English is constructed and used. Departing from the on-going debate over "acquisition versus learning," we believe that students can both learn to use English at the same time they learn to understand its structure and construction. To separate these is to risk presenting to students a false view of the complexities of language, as well as to trivialize the importance of teachers' understanding in some depth how English works. In few words, the methods in this handbook are designed to help students to both use and learn about English.

So, if you're ready for your students to blast off in their English learning, turn the page and let's get started.

FIVE BASIC PRINCIPLES OF LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING

Pause for a moment and think about some of the most important relationships you have in your life. These may be with friends, a spouse, or with others at your church or social club. Whatever it is, chances are that your activities with those people or organizations are guided by some basic principles of conduct, belief, or attitude. It may be that the principles that guide your interactions are written down and frequently discussed and even reflected upon. Or it may be that they are rarely discussed, yet everyone knows of their existence and importance. Whatever the case, the point is that your actions with these people or organizations are based on some set of principles, and that you and others try to represent them in your actions.

Teaching a foreign language—English in this case—is very similar. We must have some basic principles to guide our methods. Without them, our methods are likely to be contradictory, counterproductive or just entirely random. In the worst case, we may have different principles which result in different methods. This is a recipe for confusing students and for teachers to unknowingly work at cross purposes. Indeed, it is common to see and work with students who have been exposed to so many different belief systems and methodological orientations that they are unsure of what it means to learn a new language and what they should do to accomplish that. Regrettably, many older English learners have become so confused by this methodological hodgepodge that they seem to adopt an attitude of passive resistance. Teachers, for their part, frequently lament the swinging pendulum of method and theory. The approach that will guide SLADI is much simpler, but incredibly powerful: we endorse five basic principles of language development upon which the methods in this handbook are based:

1. Students produce their way to higher levels of proficiency, and must therefore produce correctly at least half of the language during a language lesson.
2. Students must use complete, grammatically correct sentences at all times.
3. A clear language objective that students know they are learning must guide each language lesson.
4. Students must be grouped for language instruction by their language level.
5. Students must be pushed out of their linguistic comfort zone.

Let's look now a little more closely at each of these principles. As you can see, some of them may appear to contradict what you may have studied before about language learning. But we hope to convince you that these principles are precisely the same as those that would guide any other kind of instruction, whether it be math, science, learning to play the violin or how to cast a fly rod. It may help before investigating these principles to think about how young children typically learn their first language. It is easy to see daily examples of how parents and caretakers make regular use of these language learning principles, even though they may not know they are doing so.

Principle #1: Students produce their way to higher levels of language proficiency, and must produce correctly half of the language during a language lesson.

Another way to phrase this principle is: students must produce English to advance in their English skills. In simple terms, we refer to this principle as the "50-50 rule", which holds that teachers and students should share about equally in the amount of language they contribute to the lesson. Though axiomatic, it is quite common for language lessons to require very little language production from the students. Some of this phenomenon can probably be traced to empirically untested theories about upsetting students if we require them to talk in a new language. Some extremists suggest that students should only begin using English when they are ready. Though perhaps well intentioned, these theories miss the big picture: producing new and more complex language structures is how humans become more competent language users! By similar logic, I become a better violin player by actually picking up the violin and trying to play it.

This principle is so important because in many classrooms the amount of time dedicated to teaching the English language is relatively small. When time is scarce for direct language teaching, it becomes even more important that students understand that they are expected to produce language. Imagine you were learning how to golf, but refused to swing the club. You would probably remain a very poor golfer. Unfortunately, this is analogous to the experience of many English learners. They have learned to avoid language production by smiling, waiting the teacher out, or acting disinterested. None of these avoidance strategies are acceptable. If you don't produce the new language—even imperfectly—you will never advance in that language. Put another way, you produce your way into higher levels of language competence. You don't observe your way to full proficiency!

The corollary to this principle is that teachers must get better at creating lessons that require language production. It is far too common to observe during language teaching that upwards of 90% of the talking and language production is done by the teacher. In the majority of cases, the teacher is already an accomplished speaker of English. By doing the language work that students should be required and encouraged to do, we inadvertently take the student out of the language learning process. They become a spectator instead of the athlete. It's hard to do, but as language teachers we must learn to talk less, avoid supplying the missing word quickly, stop finishing students' sentences for them, and refrain from quickly repairing students' utterances. All of this is language work, and that should be largely the domain of the student.

Principle #2: Students must use complete, grammatically correct sentences at all times.

Before you agree or disagree with this statement, think about this: how many times during your instruction yesterday did your English learners (or any student, for that matter) answer a question with only one or two words? Not surprisingly, the majority of student responses during most class time – including language teaching time – consists of one or two-word answers or short phrases. It is rare that an English learner produces

a complete sentence during school instruction. Think for a moment about the implications of such student behavior. Year after year, the student answers questions from the teacher with only a few words. The student hears other students answering in the same incomplete forms. Why, then, would we be surprised when the student ends up in sixth grade and cannot form a complete sentence, either orally or in writing? Sadly, that is all that we required of the student, and so that is all he/she produced.

The ability to form a grammatically correct sentence is the most important language skill that our English learners need. Known in linguistic terms as "syntax," forming a sentence that abides by all the rules of a given language is seen as one of the miracles of human learning. Most young children have established a good working knowledge of their first language syntax by the age of five. This is so important because linguistics shows us that syntax is the horizontal element of language. Put another way, syntax rules are like cars on a train; each has its proper place and function. When these cars roll along the track in the proper order, it allows for comprehension and for new vocabulary to be learned more quickly and better. When we have the words in the proper order, and we have a working vocabulary of a subject, the two critical elements for comprehension are in place.

All right, enough of the linguistics. Let's get back to the principle. Students must produce complete sentences at all times. This is a pretty bold statement, especially for students who are brand new to English. But if we agree that the ability to form a sentence with the words in the correct order is the building block of all subsequent language skills, then we must teach with intensity and focus on this skill. By understanding the critical importance of this principle we can move our strategies toward those that require students to form complete sentences and to think in complete sentences. There is a big difference between a student saying "It is a cat," than merely producing the isolated word "cat." For our students to be able to comprehend complex written and spoken text, as well as to be able to write high-level English text, the emphasis must be on helping them to produce and understand complete sentences.

Remember, you may be the only person your students know who will insist that they use a complete sentence when producing language. Unfortunately for their syntax development, there seems to be an anti-syntax conspiracy all around them, from the television to their friends, and ultimately, to their classroom instruction.

Principle #3: A clear language objective that students know they are learning must guide each language lesson.

For many years, teachers were told to avoid language teaching objectives. Indeed, many schools, districts and even states didn't have any such "syllabus" of English language skills that were to be taught to English learners. If the lesson was comprehensible, the logic went, then students would just naturally "acquire" all of the elements of the English language, including sentence structure, sophisticated verb tenses and subtle shades of word meaning. We see now that this "anti-objective" language teaching theory was misguided and helped to create students who believed that as long as what they said could be understood, attention to rules and structure was optional. While there are few of us who enjoy diagramming a sentence, most students

must be shown why learning the constituent parts and rules of English are important. Concomitantly, for teachers, designing language lessons based on a measurable language outcome can be a beacon in what has typically been a dark tunnel. “Just teach them English” is a common exhortation to teachers, only to enter their classrooms and ask, “So, where do I start?” There is a clear need for language teaching to have a focus. Fortunately, many states have developed standards that can guide English language teaching, though in the majority of cases they lack the specificity necessary to plan a discrete language skill-based lesson. For that reason, the Institute will be developed around a set of discrete English language skills that are critical for school success. They look, sound and feel quite different from the CA ELD Standards, since they approach language teaching through the lens that English for our EL students is their foreign language.

For our purposes here, we will continually make the point that each of the strategies in this guide can be used to teach a variety of language objectives. It is up to the teacher using the strategy to execute it in a way that addresses a particular language objective. When discussing language objectives, we try to re-orient the concept away from the teacher and toward the student. Instead of designing a lesson to teach a certain language objective, we focus on using a strategy that will get kids to produce the language called for in the specific objective. Even though this is a subtle shift, it can help teachers to remember that student language production and experimentation is the goal of language teaching. When we keep the students in mind as language producers, it tends to make language teaching objectives take on a new life as the springboard for the utilization of a certain method or teaching strategy. This orientation will also help us to view the five principles as interrelated, as they should be viewed during all language instruction.

Principle #4: **Students must be grouped for language instruction by their language level.**

Anyone who has ever tried to learn a complex or difficult subject can probably remember how it felt when everyone seemed to be understanding, except for you. Feeling like you are the only one who doesn't “get it” can have some predictable reactions: passivity, being quiet, feeling anxious, looking at the clock, hoping you don't get called upon to answer a question, or acting busy in hopes of fooling the teacher. All of these behaviors are counter to learning. For language learning they are particularly toxic, since they reduce language production and impede a student's ability to understand what the lesson is about and how it relates to his/her current language competence.

By contrast, being in a group of learners who are more or less at your similar level can create several benefits, both for the learner and for the teacher. For too many years public schools have believed – consciously or not—that English learners of all levels can be taught together, including with native English speakers. This theory is based on some loose-knit idea about one lesson being appropriate for all students. Interestingly, virtually all language teaching programs except those in public education reject this mass grouping theory. University language programs, for example, group students largely by language proficiency level, both for their sake and that of the teacher. While it

is certainly beneficial for students to have practice opportunities with other students, direct English teaching calls for language ability grouping.

When students of a similar proficiency level are grouped together for specific language instruction, it allows the learning to be tailored to the students' needs. This means that the teacher can select the proper objective, and can adjust the degree of difficulty accordingly. It also allows the teacher to more effectively design instruction based on our five principles. A short list of the benefits of like-language proficiency grouping are listed in the table below.

Planning is easier	Lesson should be more understandable
More precise language objectives	More students understand the objective
Keep the group moving forward together	Feeling of group and individual progress
Able to focus on certain students	Less reliance on higher students
Consolidate support materials	Less likely to "hide" during the lesson
Assessing growth and progress easier	More security can lead to more production

For the first three language learning principles to be a reality in classrooms requires that students be grouped properly for English language instruction. When students of widely divergent English proficiency levels are mixed together in the same lesson, full implementation of the first three principles is seriously compromised, if not eliminated. In our experience, more frustration and lack of progress in learning English can be attributed to haphazard student grouping practices than any other factor.

Principle #5: Students must be pushed out of their linguistic comfort zone.

Anyone who has worked with students learning English has probably observed that some students seem to get stuck in their language development. This can happen to students at lower levels of proficiency, as well as to those of higher levels. It seems to occur, however, with alarming frequency to students who are reaching the intermediate stage of language development. It's at this level that they may have gained sufficient conversational English skills to get along fine with friends, go to the store, and understand basic classroom procedures. For many students, their reticence to venture away from their common and habitual English language patterns can be extremely detrimental to their academic success. For the same reason that athletes need coaches to prod, push, motivate and stir them on to higher performance levels, so too do students learning English need to be pushed out of their comfort zone. Linguists have coined the term "fossilization" to describe this state of stalled language development.

This is one of the hardest principles to translate into practice and methodology, because it relies so strongly on the professional judgment of a teacher during the lesson. While there are some general guidelines and practices that characterize *PUSH!* (see chart below), it is more a knowingness of what a student is already proficient at producing and what would be the next level to which he/she should be prodded. Let's be very clear on this principle: we are suggesting that if students are not required to operate out of their comfort zone, their chance of gaining full mastery of English is seriously jeopardized. We believe it is the professional obligation of all language teachers to create situations

where students have to leave the comfort of their current language profile and venture out to try something different and new. Of course, these new language structures and uses come after direct instruction in those skills. On the teaching side, if we allow students to grow complacent in their use of familiar and unchallenging language constructions, we are contributing to their possible language "fossilization."

So what does PUSH! look like?

Understanding the *PUSH!* principle takes a little bit of introspection—or a tape recording of yourself teaching a language lesson. As you listen to the tape, or watch someone else teaching English, how many times do you see these non-*PUSH!* behaviors?

- Teacher is impatient, and has little wait time for students to produce
- Teacher's questions are low level, requiring only yes/no responses
- Teacher finishes students' sentences
- Teacher inserts a missing vocabulary word
- Teacher re-states a students' answer or response
- Teacher spells words for students that they know how to spell
- Teacher does all of the reading from the text
- Teacher does the bulk of the talking
- Teacher does all writing in silence without student assistance
- Teacher accepts the first answer, even if it is simplistic in structure
- Teacher answers his/her own questions
- Teacher does not ask students to repeat what others have said

For teachers who are proficient themselves in English, the behaviors listed above are natural. We probably do many of them without even realizing it. These have become subconscious aspects of our language skills. But all of these behaviors allow students to not reach higher, to not look into their language inventory and try to solve a language problem. Put another way, we can say that this principle requires teachers to refrain from doing for students what they can already do themselves. The logical corollary to this principle is that we should create situations where students have to try something new, something more complex, something that might be a little tricky. It is just this process of trying to produce a new word or sentence that accounts for much of humans' language growth.

Now look at this short list of teacher behaviors that would indicate to us that the teacher believes in the *PUSH!* principle.

- Silence... count to 8.
- Tell me another way to say that using our grammar rules.
- Tell me another way to write that.
- What other word can we use here?
- How is this word spelled?
- Where we can find that information on the wall?
- Please say that in a complete sentence.
- Give me two reasons for your answer.
- What grammar rule did you apply?

To summarize the *PUSH!* principle: if a student can say it, spell it, read it, or write it, teachers should not do it for them. The strategies that lie ahead in this book all present ripe opportunities to *PUSH!* your students to do new things, different things, exciting things with their new language. You may feel uncomfortable when you first try some of them and see your students struggling. Unfortunately, language learning—like any other big learning task—can be difficult and sometimes scary. But if we can help our students to see that by us pushing them they can become good at pushing themselves, it's quite likely that their English will be the better for it.