

**SPECIFIC PURPOSE, SPECIFIC FOCUS:
EFFECTIVE LANGUAGE PROGRAM DESIGN**

Ashley J. Hastings, Ph.D.
President, Global Language Education Services, Inc.
Professor Emeritus, TESOL, Shenandoah University
hastings@globallanguage.info
<http://globallanguage.info>

This is a slightly edited version of the keynote address delivered at the 18th International Conference on Korean Language Education, University of Seoul, Korea, August 9, 2008. A few paragraphs that were in the original manuscript but omitted from the address because of time factors have been included here.

Thank you for the kind introduction. I would also like to thank Dr. Heo Yung, President of the International Association for Korean Language Education, and Professor Kim Seon Jung, organizer of the conference, for inviting me to deliver this keynote address. It is an honor and a privilege.

Believe it or not, this is my first visit to Korea. I have never studied the Korean language. I may be the only person in this group of 600 or 700 people who has not understood one word of the welcoming speeches we have just heard. But I enjoyed listening to every word, just the same. You know, when you listen to a language that you cannot understand, you can focus all your attention on the music of the language. You are not distracted by the meaning. This experience reminds me why I became interested in linguistics and language study, when I was still in high school. It was the beauty and mystery of Language itself that attracted me.

The experience of listening to an hour of incomprehensible speeches also reminded me of what the first day of class must be like to a beginning language student, and how important it is for us to give them keys to understanding—a topic that I will return to soon.

I have had the pleasure, over the years, of having a number of students from Korea in my classes. I want to say a few words about one student in particular, a man who teaches English in a middle school in your country. He came to my university (Shenandoah University, in Winchester, Virginia) a few years ago to earn his masters degree in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). He was an excellent, hard-working student who often asked wonderful questions.

The best question he asked me was this: ***How can an American who has never been to Korea and who knows very little about Korea teach a Korean teacher how to teach English in Korea?***

The question was asked very politely, but I got the point.

I had to think about this, and finally I came up with this answer. I said to my student: ***I cannot teach you how to teach English in Korea. My job is to teach you what I know about teaching English in general. Your job is to teach English in Korea, using everything you know, including any useful ideas you get from me.***

So, I am not here to give you advice. How can I advise you? You teach Korean, a language I do not know, to students I have never met, in schools I have never seen, for purposes I can only guess.

What I will do instead is share with you some things that I do know about designing effective language programs. I will base my discussion on my own specific experiences, but I believe the ideas are general enough to be applied in a wide variety of environments. However, only you will be able to decide whether, and how, to use this information in your own language teaching environments.

Before going on, I must add one more thing. I do not know what theories and methods of language teaching are familiar to the members of this association. Therefore, I will try not to assume too much background knowledge in my remarks here today. If it turns out that I am telling you things you already know, then I apologize for that. I know you are professional educators, and I certainly do not mean to lecture to you as if you were my students.

I will begin with a short story. When I was a child, one of my favorite toys was actually not a toy at all, but a large magnifying glass my father kept on his desk. It was very interesting for me to look at small objects through this lens.

But it was even more fun to take the magnifying glass outside on a sunny day and use it to focus the sun's rays on a dry leaf or piece of paper. Very soon, there was smoke, and then fire! But I soon learned that on a cloudy day, this trick would not work. Even though the lens was powerful, it could not start a fire if the sunlight was too weak to provide the necessary energy.

Years passed. I started teaching English as a second language.

At first, I thought that I was supposed to be like the sun, shining on my students with lots of language-teaching energy. I thought my students were like lenses, and their job was to focus the energy of my teaching on the task of learning the language.

However, after getting some experience, I came to see things differently. I now believe that it is more correct to see the **students** as the source of language-**learning** energy. This energy comes from their motivation, their background knowledge, their existing competence in the language, and their innate ability to acquire language.

The **teacher**, I now believe, is more like a **lens**. The teacher's job is to focus the students' energy on the task of acquiring the language. In every case, the focus needs to be specific and accurate. The teacher uses specific teaching methods and materials to adjust the focus according to the specific purposes of the class, and according to the specific needs and abilities of the students.

This view of matters is, I think, much more realistic than my original idea.

Language acquisition is, after all, a natural process involving a great deal of mental energy. One teacher cannot possibly provide all the energy needed by an entire classroom full of students. The students themselves must provide their own mental energy, which is a natural force that the teacher cannot create. The teacher can only focus this energy by manipulating the classroom activities, just as a person with a lens can focus the rays of the sun.

Or, to take another analogy, a sailor in a small sailboat does not provide the energy that moves the boat. That energy comes from the wind. The sailor only focuses the energy by manipulating the sails and rudder. And no doubt you can come up with your own examples showing how natural forces are made to do work when we focus them in the right way.

So, I am suggesting that language students provide the natural forces that make language acquisition work, while the teacher simply guides the process.

Now, just between you and me, I have known some language teachers who do not like this way of looking at things.

Some teachers, it seems, feel that they themselves must be the source of all light and wisdom. I have known teachers who think that if they have not taught their

students a particular fact about the language, then the students cannot possibly know it.

Such teachers do not see the students as actively **acquiring** the language, but rather they see them as passively **receiving** the language from their teacher. Such teachers think of themselves as the sun, and the students as the lens—as I myself used to think.

But many great minds would disagree with this view.

The Russian author Chukovsky once pointed out that children are “linguistic geniuses” who create unique expressions that they were never taught. This observation supports the idea that language development is active rather than passive, and innate rather than taught.

The famous linguist Noam Chomsky has often written of the “language acquisition device,” which he thinks of as an innate mental resource, or a “mental organ,” that actively develops a complete mental grammar of a language on the basis of mere exposure to the language. In particular, Chomsky has argued that the actual rules of language are too deep and abstract to be taught and learned at the conscious level.

Caleb Gattegno, the eccentric but brilliant educator who developed the “Silent Way,” insisted that the role of the language teacher was not to transmit knowledge about the language, but rather to help the students become aware of the language. His slogan, “Subordinate teaching to learning” is an excellent principle for all teachers to live by.

Robbins Burling, in his book ***Sounding Right***, argued that people acquire a language through exposure to it, so that they come to know how the language works without being taught its rules.

James Asher, a psychologist, created the “Total Physical Response” method of language teaching, in which students internalize a language by hearing and responding to the language itself; the teacher in this method **presents** the language but does not describe or explain it. Blaine Ray and Contee Seely have developed Asher’s ideas further in “TPR Storytelling.”

Stephen Krashen, in many books and articles, has made a strong case for the hypothesis that people acquire a language in only one way: by hearing or reading material that they can understand. This hypothesis is supported by a great deal of

evidence, and forms the basis for the “Natural Approach” to language teaching, which Krashen developed along with Tracy Terrell. In the Natural Approach, very little time is devoted to teaching grammar. Furthermore, speaking exercises are not used; students are allowed to remain silent until they themselves feel ready to speak.

What all these viewpoints have in common is the featured position of the language learner. The learner is viewed as innately equipped for language acquisition, and the teacher’s role is simply to provide an environment in which the learner’s innate equipment can do its work. The teacher’s role does not include the teaching of grammar rules or other descriptions of the language, nor does it include leading the students in drills or recitations that would only interfere with the natural processes of language acquisition.

In other words: the student is the source of the language-learning energy. The teacher is only the lens, focusing and directing the students’ language acquisition powers.

Now it’s time for another short story. Twenty-five years ago I was teaching English as a Second Language, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I had just started teaching ESL. Formerly I had always taught Linguistics courses, but the ESL program needed more teachers and the Linguistics Department agreed to let me try my hand at ESL.

Our program was a typical American university intensive ESL program. The students were international scholars who needed to improve their English in order to enter an American university. They came from many parts of the world. Most of the students were in class four hours a day, five days a week. The students were placed in levels, from beginning to advanced, and every level was divided into different classes: Grammar, Reading, Writing, and Oral Skills.

One of the first classes I taught was Intermediate Writing. I had about ten or twelve students in the class. Roughly half of them were young men from Arab countries, and the other half were young women from Asian countries.

On the first day of class, I handed out the syllabus and went over it, then started on the first day’s work. This included reading a few items from the textbook and then writing a short composition. I told the students what I wanted them to do and then I sat down to look over the rest of my lesson plan.

After a while I looked up. A few students were working on the assignment, but most of them were just sitting there looking uncomfortable. I stood up and explained the assignment again, but this time I went into more detail, and I also went through a couple of examples from the book. Everyone listened politely, but most of them still looked confused. I decided to dismiss class a little early and told them they could write the composition as homework.

On his way to the door, one of the Arab students stopped at my desk. "Teacher," he said, "I understand you, but I don't understand the book."

Then one of the Asian students approached my desk. "Teacher," she said, "I understand the book, but I don't understand you."

I immediately realized that I had a problem.

How could I focus on writing when half of the students couldn't understand me, and the other half couldn't understand the book? I felt like a person trying to focus the sun on a dry leaf, but half of the sun was in the east and the other half was in the west. Where could I point my lens?

Well, of course, a good teacher can find ways to cope with such situations. I could spend extra time discussing and explaining the assignments for the students whose listening was weak, and I could spend extra time discussing and explaining the book for the students whose reading was weak. But it should be obvious that this is not very efficient. It necessarily means that the class, as a whole, will progress rather slowly, since the teacher must cover everything twice (once for each group).

I discussed this problem with some of the other teachers in the program. They smiled and nodded. "Yes," they said, "this is the reality of teaching English as a Second Language. We all face this problem every day." And, since I was a new ESL teacher, they didn't take my concerns very seriously at first. But I persisted. "Why?" I asked. "Why do we have to live with this problem? Can't we fix it?"

This conversation continued for about four years.

Finally, one day, the director of the program said to me: "You are always complaining. Why don't you form a committee and study ways to improve the program?"

So I asked several teachers to work with me on the committee. We began to hold regular meetings to discuss our mutual problems.

As we considered the problems in our program, we started asking some basic questions. Why were we trying to teach writing to people who couldn't read well enough to understand the book? Why not help them improve their reading first? Why were we trying to teach **anything** to people who couldn't understand what we were saying to them? Why not help them improve their listening first?

We realized then that the problem was a matter of our program design. We had six levels, and each level was divided into four classes: Grammar, Writing, Reading, and Oral Skills. Students entering the program were given a grammar test. On the basis of that test, they were placed into one of the six levels.

But, as I found in my Writing class, this placement system could group students in ways that didn't work very well. The students grouped together in a single level by the grammar test might have different levels of ability in listening, reading, writing, and so forth. This caused serious problems when we tried to use specific materials and methods to focus on specific purposes.

As we continued to think about these issues, we realized that a language program should be set up so that the students are grouped correctly. Teachers need to be sure that the students who are sitting together in their classes really belong together. They need to be sure that the methods and materials they use to focus their students' energies will be in harmony with the actual purposes, needs, and abilities of their students.

We decided to rethink our entire program. This was challenging and even frightening, but we felt that we needed to take a fresh look at everything we were doing and possibly redesign the program completely.

So we began to examine very basic issues.

The specific purpose of the program was to prepare students for study in an English-speaking university. This meant giving them experience in the kinds of academic work they would be expected to do. We realized that the academic skills in English, such as lecture note-taking, critical reading, and research paper writing, could not be developed effectively unless the students already had good ability levels in the basic English language skills.

Therefore, we decided to create a set of tests that would measure the students' abilities in listening, reading, and writing. Only those students who met high standards in all three skill areas could go on to develop their academic skills.

We also realized that there was a logical order in the development of the major language skills. The order was: Listening first, then Reading, and then Writing.

Why was Listening first in this logical order? Well, all of our classes were taught in English. The teachers explained assignments in English; discussed the lessons in English; and in general, spoke only English in class, even if they knew one or more of the students' own languages.

Therefore, if a student could not understand spoken English very well, he or she could not get much benefit from anything the teachers might say in class. Good teachers can find ways to explain things, but this takes time, which reduces the efficiency of the class.

Why was Reading next in the order? Well, it seems impossible for anyone to learn to write a language any better than they can read that language. In fact, research by Krashen and others indicates that much of a person's writing ability develops automatically as a result of reading. If a student cannot read English well, then how can he or she learn to write English well?

So, here is the basic design that we came up with. (And here, let me give you a web address that contains a lot of this material: <http://globallanguage.info>.)

Students entering the program for the first time must take a test of listening comprehension. If their score is too low, they must enter the Listening Module. This is a full-time class that focuses on listening comprehension. After four weeks, they take another Listening test. If their score is still too low, they spend another four weeks in the Listening Module, and so forth.

As soon as a student has achieved a satisfactory score on the Listening test, he or she must then take a test of reading comprehension. If the score is too low, the student must enter the Reading Module, which focuses full-time on reading. After four weeks, there is another Reading test, and so forth.

After a student has passed both the Listening and the Reading tests, he or she takes a test of basic writing skills. If the score is too low, the student enters a full-time Writing Module, with the same four-week cycle of testing as in the previous two cases.

Finally, after passing all three tests (Listening, Reading, and Writing), the student enters the Advanced Module, where all the work is focused on academic language skills.

The student exits the program whenever he or she has satisfied the university entrance requirements.

Since this program is organized as a series of modules, each focused on a specific skill, we call this design “The FOCAL SKILLS Approach.”

When the committee presented these ideas to the entire ESL faculty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, back in 1987, there was a lively debate.

Three main questions emerged from the debate:

- (1) What about grammar?
- (2) What about speaking?
- (3) Won't it be boring for a student to focus on a single skill all day long?

These were all good questions. And the committee had good answers.

First, as to grammar, we pointed out that there was research showing that direct teaching of grammar rules is not very effective. Rather, people acquire the grammar of a language through exposure to the language—to comprehensible input, using Krashen's term. What we needed to do, then, was to make sure that our teaching methods provided lots of good comprehensible input.

Second, as to speaking, we pointed out that it is often counterproductive to require students to practice speaking in class. This takes a lot of time and seems to produce very little improvement in speaking. We also pointed to research by Asher, Krashen, and others, which found that students will spontaneously begin speaking a new language after an initial silent period, if you give them enough comprehensible input. So, what we needed to do was, again, provide a lot of input, and also make sure that students had opportunities to speak when they wanted to.

Third, as to the question of boredom, we pointed out that our students in the old program were already very bored because of the boring textbooks and boring exercises. So, what we needed to do was to provide interesting materials and activities.

Just to be on the safe side, though, we added a new component to the program design: the Elective. In FOCAL SKILLS programs, one hour a day is devoted to elective classes, separate from the modules, that the students choose individually. This helps break up the day and relieve any boredom they might feel. Also, some of

the electives can deal with grammar and speaking, in case individual students want special work focused on these areas.

Let us move on and take a closer look at FOCAL SKILLS teaching methods.

We have seen that the FOCAL SKILLS design uses specific tests, focused on specific skills, to place students into specific modules with specific purposes.

But if a language program is like a meal, then all we have done so far is set the table. Where is the food? What do the students and teachers do in class?

Let's start with the Listening Module. Recall that students are placed in Listening because their score on the Listening test is low. The specific purpose of the Listening Module is to help the students improve their listening comprehension. The module has no other purpose. Therefore, all the work in the class must focus on listening.

Also, nothing can be assumed about the students' abilities in other skills such as reading. Some of them may be good readers; others may not be able to read English at all. Therefore, the class activities must not involve reading in any way. Nor must the students be required to do any writing or speaking as part of the Listening Module. It is all listening.

How do we focus on listening for 3 hours every day?

Let us remember our guiding principles. We know that our students have a great ability to acquire a language if we give them input that they can understand.

So, the students in our Listening Module need to hear spoken English, and they need a way to understand what they hear.

One way to help language students understand is to draw them a picture. I'm sure every language teacher has done this from time to time.

But how many pictures can we draw in class? Not very many. The picture idea is good, but we need a practical way to use it.

Here's what we have developed for this purpose: The FOCAL SKILLS Movie Technique.

A movie contains many thousands of pictures. In FOCAL SKILLS, we show movies in our Listening classes. The students can't understand much of the dialog in the movie, but that isn't important. In our technique, the teacher **describes** what is happening in the movie.

For example: let's say that in the movie, a man wearing a red coat is riding on a white horse. The teacher points to this and says: "There is a man on a horse. It's a white horse. The man's coat is red. He is riding the horse. They are going very fast." And so forth.

Sometimes the dialog in the movie is important. In such cases, the teacher can give the students a simple paraphrase of the dialog.

For example: In the movie, a woman says: "You are responsible for your own problems. It's not my fault you're in trouble. I absolutely refuse to ruin my life just to clean up the mess you've made of yours." The teacher can simply tell the students: "The woman says 'No, I will not help you.'" This gives the students the information they need to make sense of the movie.

By using a variety of movies, a teacher can give students a rich mixture of vocabulary, idioms, sentence structures, and so forth. All of this language input is matched with the visible input of the movie. Furthermore, movies are interesting enough to keep the students' attention. And, the story provides a framework, or a scaffold, on which the students can build their own understanding.

Now, some people have objected to this technique. The objection usually goes something like this: "All the students are doing is sitting there passively while the teacher does all the work. The students aren't doing anything. They ought to be more active."

But this objection ignores a basic fact: when we are listening to a language we don't know well, and trying to understand as much as we can, we are actually working very hard. This is **mental** work. The brain is going full speed, processing input and pictures, finding relationships between them, and storing the results in memory. The students may not be moving on the outside, but inside their heads, it's a busy time!

Another question teachers sometimes ask is this: "How do you know if the students are understanding?"

A good question. But I think most experienced teachers already know the answer: we look at the students' faces, their eyes, their expressions. A good teacher can read the signs of understanding—or the signs of confusion—and can adjust the input accordingly.

Also, we can ask simple questions: "Is the man on the horse wearing a red coat?" All of the students can say "Yes" or "No." Or we can ask "What color is the man's coat?" A one-word answer is sufficient, and most of the students can do this.

As students become more confident, they can give longer answers, or even ask questions about the movie. So in fact, this technique allows for a lot of activity on the part of students. But we never require the students to speak. Voluntary speaking is valuable evidence of language acquisition, but forced speaking is generally a waste of time, in my experience.

There are other activities that can be used in the Listening Module, but the Movie Technique is the most important one.

Now, what about results? Here, the news is very encouraging. We have found that students in the Listening Module of FOCAL SKILLS programs make much faster progress in listening comprehension than similar students in more traditional programs. Not only that—the Listening students even make normal progress in the other skills, although they spend no class time on them!

Isn't that remarkable? By focusing on a specific skill, students actually make progress in other skills too! This shows that all of the language skills are related at some deeper level—which of course makes a lot of sense.

Let's move on to the Reading Module.

The specific purpose of the Reading Module is to help the students improve their reading. Remember that these students have all passed the Listening test, so they can understand the spoken language pretty well. Also, most of them can speak the language to some extent.

The main technique in the FOCAL SKILLS Reading Module is called "Interactive Reading." When I taught this module years ago, I used the newspaper **USA Today**, which is written in fairly simple English. Here are a few paragraphs from an article I wrote describing a typical hour in my Reading class:

I call the class to order and make sure everyone has a copy of *USA Today*. I ask everyone to skim through the news sections and look for an article for us to read together. I give them about three minutes and then ask for suggestions.

One of the students nominates an article about an important political event in his own country. He announces the page number and reads the headline aloud so everyone can locate the article. I then begin a cycle that I call "interactive reading." It consists of three stages: familiarization, clarification, and discussion.

Familiarization. First, I read the article aloud, all the way through, while the students read along silently. I use a rather careful, formal pronunciation, much like a newscaster on the radio, but not too fast for the students to follow. The students' task at this time is to listen, read, and understand as much as they can, but not to ask questions.

Clarification. After we've gone through the article, I go back to the beginning and read through it again, paragraph by paragraph. This time, the students are invited to ask me questions about anything they don't understand. This is the time to deal with vocabulary, collocations, or difficult sentence structures. Since *USA Today* is written at a middle-school level, the difficulty level is usually just about right for these students' *i+1*. The students set the agenda here, and I keep fielding their questions until they seem satisfied.

Discussion. The next step is to discuss the content of the article. This is when I get to ask the students questions. After reading through the entire piece twice, I'm ready to pose queries like "Why did the President of the Assembly call for new elections?" and so forth. Such questions call for scanning, inferencing, and other reading strategies, all contextualized and focused on the news article in front of us. We can also explore our opinions, speculate on future developments, etc., if the class seems interested in extending the discussion. At times, we may cycle back to the previous stage of meaning clarification if someone encounters a comprehension problem that interferes with the discussion.

At some point, it will become apparent that the article has been sucked dry. I then give the students a few minutes to skim other articles; I invite another student to nominate one; and the cycle is repeated. In a typical 50-minute hour, we may cover three to five articles, depending on their length and potential to generate discussion.

You may have noticed a couple of things about this kind of class. First, while the specific focus is on reading, the students' listening skill is also used in support of that focus. In this way, we take advantage of the fact that the student can understand the spoken language.

Second, you may have noticed that this technique uses authentic reading materials rather than textbooks. In this respect, it is similar to the Listening Module, which also uses authentic materials. Authentic materials have at least two advantages

over textbooks: they are plentiful, and they are interesting. I believe that the use of authentic materials is one of the major strengths of the FOCAL SKILLS approach.

As far as results are concerned, the students in the Reading Module generally make extremely fast progress in reading comprehension, while still experiencing good improvement in the other skills. Once again, the principle of focusing on a specific skill for hours at a time proves to be highly effective.

Now let's take a look at the Writing Module, where the specific purpose is, of course, to help the students become better writers. The main teaching technique used in the Writing Module is called the "Focused Rewrite Technique." Here, in brief, is how it works:

- (1) The student writes a composition, on any topic he or she wants to write on.
- (2) The teacher reads the composition and discusses it with the student to clarify any points that may be unclear.
- (3) The teacher chooses a part of the student's work and rewrites it in good English, but without changing the meaning in any way.
- (4) The teacher discusses the rewritten material with the student, making sure that the meaning has not been changed.
- (5) The student reads the rewritten work several times until he or she feels familiar with it.

The theory behind the Focused ReWrite Technique is quite simple. It is based on Krashen's idea of $i+1$, which refers to language items that are just a bit more advanced than a student's current level of acquisition.

When students write about topics they are familiar with, they will try to use the vocabulary and structures that they think will communicate their meanings. Some of these items are already well acquired, and will be used correctly. Other items in the language are only partially acquired ($i+1$), so they may contain errors. Items that the student has not even partially acquired will, naturally, not appear at all in his or her writing.

So, the errors in the writing automatically draw the teacher's attention to the elements of vocabulary and structures that the student is currently in the process of acquiring ($i+1$ items).

When the student reads the teacher's rewrite, he or she encounters correct versions of those $i+1$ items.

The student understands the material perfectly, since he or she is the one who wrote it in the first place.

Therefore, by reading the focused rewrite, the student is receiving very high-quality comprehensible input focused precisely on specific language items that he or she is currently ready to acquire.

If this theory is correct, then students who receive focused rewrites should make rapid progress in the language. Our research indicates that this is indeed what happens.

Notice that the Focused Rewrite technique is a way of teaching grammar on an individual basis. The structures in the rewrite are like a grammar lesson, but focused precisely on the actual needs of the individual student. This seems more efficient than the traditional grammar class, in which the same point is taught at the same time to all the students, without regard to individual differences.

It's time to close. There are many more things that I could say about FOCAL SKILLS, but I'd like to summarize the main ideas. The real energy in language education comes from the students. The teacher's job is to trust and focus that energy. Every class should have a specific purpose and focus. The most effective language programs are those that are designed so that there is a good fit between the focus that the teacher is attempting, and the actual abilities and needs of the students.

I believe these principles are true for any language, any country, any school. I believe the principles are universal. But how the principles are to be applied and worked out—that is a local matter. That is the work of professional educators like all of you. I wish you great success in your work. And thank you again for inviting me.