Promoting successful language learning
(activity contributed by Cheryl Mackay)

I got the idea for this activity from Barry Jones, Homerton College, Cambridge. I have been using it for several years now, adapting the content to reflect what typically happens in the languages classrooms I visit. I like to use this activity to stimulate discussion (sometimes heated debate!) during the early stages of learning to teach. It helps the learning process by:

- Raising awareness of what it means to learn a language and what is possible in a languages lesson;
- Providing a context for articulating and discussing beliefs about language learning and images of teaching;
- Developing listening and other collaborative working skills.

Normally I would structure a whole session around this activity, as follows:

▪ Bridging in / setting the scene/ opening the file (5-10 minutes)

I normally do this by asking students to reflect on what it means to them to learn a language. This can be an opportunity to identify the different contexts within which students (all successfully) have learnt languages eg those who learnt languages formally (most of our students) and those who have acquired a language with or without formal instruction. It can also be an opportunity to start to explore the key differences between first language acquisition and learning Modern Foreign Languages (MFL) at school – what is different about learning a language at school?

This then leads into the key question: ***what sorts of classroom activity promote most successful language learning?***

▪ Individual preparation (5 minutes)

I ask students to work on their own first, identifying their own top ten from the list provided –this should be done quickly without agonising! Normally, this doesn't take more than 2-3 minutes. At this stage I find it is important to stress that there is no one correct answer/ hidden agenda.

▪ The group discussion (20-30 minutes)

Before organising students into groups of 3, I would stress that this is a group discussion task and it is the process of agreeing on the best possible solution that matters. It is therefore important that each person has the chance to articulate their thinking and to be listened to. In other words, each person needs to not only identify their chosen activities from the list, they also need to justify that choice – say why. Listeners should be listen carefully to the reasoning and be prepared to engage, e.g. if they hear something that either challenges or confirms their own thinking. I'm not normally so directive!!! - it's just that in the early stages I find it pays to be this explicit until helpful routines/ ways of working are formed (this might be a British thing?). Please note, some of the wording is deliberately 'vague' to encourage different interpretations and exchange/ discussion of these.

▪ Plenary: Feedback (10-15 minutes)

The plenary is a chance for groups to feed back what they came up with in the time available and to discuss further, especially any issues that their group discussion may have raised for them. You can do this in different ways:

- A very quick show of hands to establish how many 'votes' each of the listed activities got – tally kept on OHP. This can then be used to focus a plenary discussion e.g. inviting comment on any surprising outcomes/ what they notice etc.
- Go round each group in turn, asking the group to feedback one of their agreed top ten and why – invite comments from listening groups
- Ask groups to feedback on items where they had the greatest disagreement and why and how they resolved any disagreement.
- Ask individuals to reflect on what conclusions they've reached about promoting successful language learning.

I don't always do the follow-up questions in the session – but they are good questions for interested individuals to reflect upon further.

- **Plenary: Time for Reflection (10-15 minutes)**

Remind students of what skills the group task involved. De-brief questions might include…
- How did you find the group task?
- What did you find anything easy or difficult? What helped you? Did you use any strategies that you found helpful?

Encourage students to think about how they might transfer what they have learnt from this experience to a school classroom. Questions might include:
- Do you think you could transfer this sort of task to the languages classroom? What topic/context? Etc.
- What would be important for the teacher to do when setting up the activity? If you were the teacher, what would you want to know?

Conditions for successful language learning: further reading

King, L. (2003) **Improving the Quality of Language Learning in Schools** http://www.cilt.org.uk/key/approaches.htm   *In 2003, following the development of a National Languages Strategy, the then Director of CILT, Dr Lid King, wrote this article examining the question 'Can there be an agreed methodology for language teaching in order to raise standards and improve quality?'. You should find it a helpful summary of what is currently known about the conditions needed for successful language learning – clear, readable and not long! .*

Dörnyei, Z. and K. Csizér, (1998) 'Ten Commandments for motivating language learners: results of an empirical study', **Language Teaching Research,** 2:203-229.
One of the conditions for successful language learning which is uncontested (see King above) is motivation.   Some would go as far as to say that if you can motivate them, you're more than half way there. So this is an important text by a leading expert in the field of motivation and language learning. It is especially useful for novice teachers because it makes a lot of practical sense and the style is accessible (not too lofty).   Much of what is discussed might be considered good practice in any subject classroom.

Group Task[1]:

From observation, most language classes include some of the 40 activities which follow.

> - ***Which of these, in your opinion, promote most successful language learning?***
> - ***Agree on ten, and be prepared to explain what influenced your choice.***

1.   Role play
2.   Learning phrases by heart
3.   Answering the teacher's oral questions
4.   Use of the target language
5.   Doing exercises which everyone gets correct
6.   Making mistakes
7.   Working on your own
8.   Exploring a topic
9.   Imitating the teacher
10. Listening to grammatical explanations in English
11. Group work
12. Completing written exercises from a textbook
13. Responding to prompts on the OHP
14. Listening to tapes
15. The Internet
16. Using flashcards
17. Watching videos
18. PowerPoint presentations
19. Copying down vocabulary
20. Completing gap-fill exercises
21. Answering questions in English
22. Completing word searches
23. Translation work
24. Making up your own utterances
25. Correcting mistakes after a teacher has marked written work
26. Assessing your own work
27. Colouring in pictures
28. Drama
29. Learning lists of words
30. Reflecting on what you have learnt
31. Songs
32. Making up ways of remembering / memorising new language,
33. Matching pictures and captions
34. Learning grammar rules in English
35. Conducting surveys
36. Dancing
37. Discovering language patterns for yourself
38. Homework
39. Reading aloud
40. Playing language games

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[1] *based on an idea from Barry Jones, Homerton College, Cambridge*

Possible follow-up questions

> - *Which of these do not promote language learning but may have a place in a languages lesson? Explain the circumstances in which they could be justified.*
> - *Do any of these have no place in a languages lesson? Justify your answer.*
> - *Is there anything missing from this list that you think belongs there? Explain your answer.*