

It's Not a Simulation, It's Real!

Judy Kollar

The English section of the federal government's Advanced Language Training Program puts andragogy into action. One way is an authentic weekly review and planning meeting, in which francophone managers and professionals practise all

four language skills while participating in the management of their own learning.

This paper describes the meeting in terms of related andragogical and language learning aspects.

Over the past few years there has been a growing belief in the value of "authentic" situations and material in the communicative second language classroom. There has also been a greater commitment to learner input and self-direction in the learning process. The Advanced Language Training Program in Ottawa incorporates both these beliefs in its weekly review and planning meeting.

This meeting occurs every Friday afternoon when a class of advanced learners of English gets together with its teachers to discuss the week's business. The students and teachers are part of an intensive immersion program that involves seven and a half hours of classes and activities daily over a 16-week period. The students are francophone public servants, managers and professionals, from a wide range of fields and government departments. They share a common goal: to develop a high level of functional proficiency in their second "official" language. The program is based on andragogical principles in its orientation and approach and encourages the growth of self-reliance and autonomy. The teachers may guide and facilitate, but the students determine the direction of their learning. The program is based on the premise that to actively contribute to a training program is both a right and a responsibility of adult learners. The weekly meeting is a valuable tool for putting this belief into practice.

THE MEETING

As the name suggests, the review and planning meeting provides an opportunity to review the issues of the past week and plan the week(s) to come; it is a forum for sharing information, brainstorming ideas, making decisions and solving problems. It permits learners and teachers to work together as partners on a team.

Both students and teachers propose agenda items which can span a wide range of topics. Past meetings have included discussions on the heating problem in the classroom, an exchange on learning plateaus and class morale, student input and feedback on the course schedule, comments on the workload, information on community events, decisions on guest speakers and group socio-cultural activities, and many other topics. (See Appendix 1.)

The meeting allows learners and teachers to work closely together in a climate of trust and cooperation. All participants have a chance to listen and to be heard and, most important, they have the sense of being valued members of a team. Each student has the opportunity to assume the roles of chairperson, minutes secretary and meeting participant. In addition to participating in the meeting, one of the teachers is specifically assigned to work with the chairperson and secretary. The following section describes the steps followed by the chairperson, secretary and teacher before, during and after each meeting.

THE CHAIRPERSON

Pre-Meeting

A few days prior to the weekly meeting the chairperson and teacher confer to discuss the former's objectives. By asking fairly open-ended questions such as, "What aspects of spoken English are important to you at the moment," the teacher encourages the chairperson to specify current language learning needs. (Students are aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses from their daily experiences in the classroom.) The chairperson then ranks these needs, translates them into precise and realistic objectives for the meeting, and puts these objectives on paper. (See Appendix 2.) The teacher is careful not to impose any biases or preferences, but rather to guide the chairperson in the process. Chairpersons may plan to focus on standard expressions for opening a meeting, keeping it moving and adjourning it; they may wish to concentrate on appropriate tone and levels of formality; others may want to focus on pronunciation, intonation or grammar. Regardless of the decision, it is solely the chairperson's responsibility. Once the objectives are set, the teacher and chairperson discuss strategies for working towards them. The teacher may provide the student with a list of gambits appropriate to meetings together with suggestions of other materials.

During the Meeting

While keeping in mind the specified linguistic objectives, the chairperson must conduct the meeting, keep the discussion on track and give all participants a chance to speak. This is clearly a challenging task!

Meanwhile the teacher monitors the chairperson's language in terms of the stated objectives; both positive features and errors are noted.

Post-Meeting

Immediately after the meeting the chairperson and teacher get together to review the chairperson's language. Once again the chairperson is in a self-directing role. The teacher asks the chairperson to assess his/her own performance by asking one or more of the following questions: "How did you feel about your use of English during the meeting?" "What was easy?" "What was difficult?" A discussion takes place and the teacher shares observations with the chairperson. This generally evolves into a conversation on further ways to continue working towards the objectives.

From meeting to meeting the teacher keeps a log on each chairperson's objectives and performance. This offers structure and continuity over the 16-week period. It also documents each learner's progress in the target language while in the chairing role.

THE MINUTES SECRETARY

Pre-Meeting

Prior to each student's first time as minutes secretary, the student and teacher discuss various aspects of the role. Objectivity, accuracy, discretion and tone are usually considered. They look at samples of authentic minutes from past meetings and use them as models for vocabulary, structures and style. The secretary receives a comprehensive self-access module containing guidelines and exercises for writing minutes in English. The teacher encourages the secretary to determine needs related to writing minutes and to select appropriate material from the module in order to work on these needs.

During the Meeting

The secretary takes notes during the proceedings, using a form to help organize the details. (See Appendix 3.) This can be a demanding role for a language learner, even at the advanced level. The secretary must be able to grasp the main points of a discussion, take reliable notes and deal with a variety of accents and speaking styles. As in any meeting, the discussion can sometimes get carried away. This is not unlike "authentic" meetings in a student's workplace.

Post-Meeting

The secretary writes the first draft of the minutes and consults the

teacher, whose aim is to guide the secretary to self-edit as much as possible. The teacher encourages the learner to point out both good features and problem areas in the draft. (In the program's writing course, students have already grown aware of their strengths and weaknesses.) Through the questioning process the teacher guides the secretary to find solutions to each "problem", be it conciseness, word choice, grammar or tone. Throughout the entire process the secretary does the key revisions and the teacher acts as a coach or facilitator. The secretary writes a second draft and consults the teacher again. Together they decide on the final version of the minutes. This version is typed, distributed to all meeting participants, and then approved or amended at the next meeting.

CONCLUSION

As in any authentic meeting in the workplace, the chairperson and secretary face a number of authentic and demanding tasks. The meeting should take place within a reasonable length of time; all agenda items must be discussed and appropriate decisions made; the minutes have to be written, edited, finalized and typed for distribution. Furthermore, the chairperson's organizational skills, tact and appropriate level of language are crucial for the smooth functioning of the proceedings.

The students soon perceive that this meeting is not unlike their usual work experience, but with one important difference: in the meeting, they can focus on their second language in a supportive environment. By having input at two levels—one-on-one consultations with the teacher regarding their learning objectives, and involvement in the decisions of the meeting itself—the students gain an important sense of commitment and teamwork.

THE AUTHOR

Judy Kollar has taught ESL in Germany, Quebec and Ottawa to all levels of students. She is currently working with the Advanced Language Training Program of the Public Service Commission in Ottawa. She has a particular interest in work-related oral interaction courses.

APPENDIX I
Sample of Student-Written Minutes

ADVANCED LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM
MINUTES OF REVIEW AND PLANNING MEETING

Date and Time: Friday, September __, 19__ - 1:30 p.m.

Place: Room K-125

Secretary: André R. C. _____

Chairperson: Marie-Thérèse P. _____

Also Present:

Elizabeth B. _____

Francine D. _____

Judy K. _____

Jean-Pierre L. _____

Teresa O' _____

Jean-Guy P. _____

Denis P. _____

1. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING:

The minutes of the previous meeting were approved.

2. THE PAPAL VISIT:

Jean-Pierre pointed out that it would be very difficult to come to the school on September 19th and 20th. During the Papal Visit most of the bridges and streets in downtown Hull and Ottawa would be closed. Therefore, Jean-Pierre suggested modifying the daily class schedule. The matter was discussed and the teachers agreed to adapt the daily schedule to the circumstances.

3. CORRECTION:

Jean-Guy suggested that the students correct each other when speaking. He also asked the teachers to provide more correction in class. Following an interesting exchange among all present, it was decided that the teachers would correct the students in the classroom in conjunction with the grammar themes of the week; the students agreed to do the same thing, on a trial basis, but outside of the classroom.

4. USE OF THE WORD PROCESSOR:

Further to Marie-Thérèse's inquiry at the last meeting about student access to the word processor, Teresa informed the group that it would be available to interested students daily after 4 p.m. The Administration is looking into the possibility of a short training session for its use in the near future. She asked if anyone was interested in receiving such training; Marie-Thérèse, Francine, Denis, Elizabeth, Judy, and Teresa are interested.

5. PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION COURSES (P.O.C.):

Elizabeth mentioned that a photocopy of the _____ Management

Centre course calendar was available in the Resource Centre. She pointed out that on November 1 and 2, 19____ a course on "Work Distribution and Simplification" was available, and that on December 3, 4, 5, 19____, the Centre is offering a course on "Leadership and Management: A Program for Women".

She added that the P.O.C. was a regular activity within the Academic Phase and encouraged students to register in a course given in English as soon as possible.

6. ADJOURNMENT:

The meeting was adjourned at 2:30 p.m.

7. NEXT MEETING:

The next meeting will be held on September 21st. Jean-Pierre will be the secretary and Jean-Guy will act as chairperson.

André R. _____
Secretary

c.c.: Participants
Administration

APPENDIX 2
ADVANCED LANGUAGE TRAINING PROGRAM
REVIEW AND PLANNING MEETING

Name: Jean-Claude
Date of Meeting: Jan. 31, 1986

While chairing the Review and Planning Meeting I plan to focus on the following:

My Objectives:

1. *To use language that is businesslike, but polite*
2. *To use the following expressions as required:*
"Let's begin by approving the minutes of the
last meeting."
"Does anyone have any further comments
on this item?"
"Anything else?"
3. *To use the present perfect and past tenses
correctly*
4. *To pronounce my final consonants e.g.
"questions", "repeated"*

APPENDIX 3

Review and Planning Meeting, ALTP

Date: _____

NOTES FOR THE MINUTES

Agenda Item	Proposed by	Points Made in Discussion (Identify Speaker)	Decision